

Book review

Santana López, B. (2012) *Lachen – Humor – Komik. Eine systematische Interkulturalitätsanalyse Deutsch und Spanisch*. Berlin: Frank & Timme, 156 pp

There are various pitfalls and hurdles to successful humorous communication between different cultures. Belén Santana López's book on *Laughter – Humour – Comic* is a welcome contribution to the improvement of the cross-cultural exchange of humour between German and Spanish. In fact, it is difficult to imagine Spaniards and Germans joking together about financial hardship "in these hard times" ("*in diesen schwierigen Zeiten*", see introduction p. ix) in which cultural differences are intensified by political and financial strains.

The subtitle of the book promises "a systematic intercultural analysis between German and Spanish". More particularly, it is a contribution to translation studies in which the translation and terminology of humour has remained a contentious issue (pp. 3–4). On the one hand, Santana López examines the specific terminological field of "humour" in Spanish and German, and discusses the differences between various terms such as (and among many others) *Heiterkeit*, *alégría*, *Spott*, *burla* or *sainete*. On the other hand, Santana López's approach also provides a systematic view on the translation problems of different forms of humour. We all know that wordplay is difficult to translate, but she also emphasizes the cultural and specific place of parody which can also pose serious problems in translations.

The results that are presented in this book are not particularly new. Belén Santana López has (mostly without changes) re-used her theoretical and terminological analyses in her 2006 dissertation *Wie wird das Komische übersetzt?* Here she has replaced the extensive case study parts with a short summary, and she has extended the bibliographical section with recent articles and books.

I welcome this compact re-publication of the major findings of Belén Santana López's 2006 thesis (even if the partial identity of both books could have been more clearly signalled, see pp. xi, 141). After all, this book is one of the rare studies that continues the work on the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural analysis of humour terminology that began with Schmidt-Hidding's (1963) classical book on 'wit and humour'. As a consequence, her considerable terminological contribution receives finally a more visible place.

Belén Santana López's terminological study relies on the so-called "word-field theory" (resp. lexical field theory). This is more an approach than a theory; nevertheless, the concept of the word-field provides a useful way of investigating the various expressions used to refer to phenomena that are related to humour. In fact, it should be kept in mind that, although "humour" is considered by many English speaking humour researchers to be an umbrella term for anything that is laughable or amusing, the word-field of humour is structured in a different way in Spanish and in German. Santana López's focus on the Spanish concept of *gracia*, as a culturally based general term for "humour", draws attention to deep rooted conceptual differences between the languages. Such differences might be lost if one starts with a problematic equation of German *Humor* and Spanish *humor* without considering the broader terminological field.

In addition, the world-field approach gives an interdisciplinary touch to this study. The introduction makes this clear with its typological division of the "research on humour and translation" into "cultural studies", "rhetoric", "translation studies", "literary studies" and

“linguistics” (p. 4). However, this division seems a little arbitrary: on the one hand, the position of “humour studies” (pp. 15–19) remains rather unclear; on the other hand, the demarcation of “literary studies” against “cultural studies” is not convincing in this context. Moreover, it seems that the actual relevance of literary studies for the present book is not confined to literary analyses of humorous texts. In fact, literary studies appear much more as a knowledge resource about humorous genres.

This study of the word-fields of humour is not exactly about actual usage, rather it focuses on terminological differences; hence, the importance of dictionaries. Belén Santana López’s choice of German literary dictionaries is, in my opinion, not beyond doubt (p. 50). Besides the rather uncontroversial choice of thesauri, Claus Träger’s *Wörterbuch der Literaturwissenschaft* (1989), which she relies heavily on, has fallen out of favour since the fall of the GDR. At the same time, dictionaries which I would recommend first to students (e.g. Burdorf et al. 2007 or Weimar et al. 1997–2003), have not been consulted.

Nevertheless, Santana López’s book provides a comprehensive overview on Spanish and German terms that are connected to humour. Her explanation of particular genres and forms of humour is mostly descriptive. However, not all terms are treated with the same descriptive rigour. First of all, the compactness of the book goes together with some rather short summaries of handbook-knowledge on humorous genres. For instance, a one-page summary on the genre *Komödie* (‘comedy’) will hardly be deemed sufficient by any literary scholar (p. 64). Moreover, occasionally Belén Santana López leaves the descriptive stance, as she feels the need to take terminological decisions (e.g. p. 98 on *humor* in Spanish). An approach which treats different uses of the same expression independently could have been more useful. This becomes particularly apparent when Spanish *farsa* is discussed as a form of comedy, and as a Bakhtinian property of Carnavalesque literature (pp. 110f.).

In summary, Belén Santana López’s book is a compact re-publication of the major terminological findings of her 2006 thesis. It is of particular interest to all those who are unsatisfied with an indiscriminating equation of similar terms in different languages. More particularly, this book will help you to differentiate between *Lächerlichkeit*, *ridiculez*, *Lachen* and *risa*; between *humor* in German and Spanish, but also between *Witz* and *chiste*.

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