


anglistica aion
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL



Anglistica AION
an interdisciplinary journal

A double blind peer-reviewed journal, published twice a year by the Università degli studi di Napoli
“L’Orientale”

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ISSN: 2035-8504

Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Napoli n. 63 del 5 novembre 2013



Vol. 22, issue 2 (2018)

Translating LSP in Literature through a Gender Perspective

Edited by Eleonora Federici, Federico Pio Gentile and Margaret Rogers





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Subtitling Gender and Humour in Douglas McGrath's *Emma*

Abstract: This paper aims to investigate gender and humour in McGrath's *Emma* by applying Vandaele's notions of incongruity and superiority, politeness theory as well as Díaz-Cintas's linguistics of subtitling. Among adaptations of *Emma*, the 1996 version created by Douglas McGrath remediated Austen's comedy of manners with great attention to gender roles resulting in verbally expressed humour. I intend to track through these references and look at the issues – female irony, violations of maxims of politeness, *Emma*'s incongruity and superiority, etc – which they raise. But my central purpose will be to re-read *Emma* from a subtitling perspective. I will analyse the linguistics of subtitling and text-reduction shifts in order to demonstrate that gender may be conceptualised in subtitling and that *Emma*'s speech acts are reproduced faithfully by audio-visual media. Through dialogues, I suggest, subtitling may be considered as a form of culture-bound translation giving voice to gender and humour with unexpected results.

Keywords: *subtitling, female irony, Emma, speech acts, text-reduction shifts*

1. *Emma*'s modalities of humour between incongruity and superiority

Rated by the *New York Times* as one of the best of Jane Austen movies, Douglas McGrath's *Emma* (1996), an Academy Award-Winning Film in the Original Music Score category, starring Gwyneth Paltrow, Jeremy Northam, and Ewan McGregor, is able to transpose from novel to screen Jane Austen's subtle irony "narrowing the gap between finely wrought social satire and daytime soap opera".¹ Austen's most accomplished and wittiest novel about a matchmaker doing all the wrong things for all the right reasons appears to Douglas McGrath, already known as a playwright, screenwriter and columnist for *The New Republic*, the perfect novel to be adapted for what he defines "the most beautiful language, the most articulate kind of prose, the wittiest kind of prose" (interview with Charlie Rose).

Emma is a mature and brilliant comedy of manners, or better to say a comedy of errors, containing various humorous sequences. The entire plot of the novel and the film hinges on tricking the reader/viewer into believing the clueless *Emma*'s wrong interpretation of events. She unsuccessfully tries to make a match between her plain, uncultured friend Harriet Smith and the local vicar Mr Elton, and later on she takes on the next project of marrying Harriet with Frank Churchill who is already secretly engaged with Jane Fairfax.

The aim of this essay is to investigate gender and humour in McGrath's *Emma* by applying Vandaele's notions of incongruity and superiority, politeness theory as well as Díaz-Cintas's linguistics of subtitling and text reduction shifts. Apart from dispersed articles in academic journals and occasional chapters focusing on gender and dubbing no study exists on such a topic as gender and humour in McGrath's *Emma*. Marcella De Marco's monograph on *Audiovisual Translation through a Gender Lens*² is a valuable survey of how references to gender and sexuality are manipulated in the dubbing transfer but it does not apply Vandaele's approach to humour nor speech act theory to female irony. Only through a combination of theoretical approaches is it possible to understand the extent to which gender and humour are culture-bound issues posing a wide range of translation problems.

¹ Janet Maslin, *The New York Times* (2 August 1996).

² Marcella De Marco, *Audiovisual Translation through a Gender Lens* (Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 2012).

Emma’s snobbery and perfect lack of self-awareness render her ideas of romance entertaining. Overtly asserting in the opening scene of the film that “The most beautiful thing in the world is a match well made, and a happy marriage” (00:02:30),³ Emma contradicts herself only 20 minutes later by revealing her friend Harriet Smith that “I have no inducements to marry. I lack neither fortune, nor position, and never could I be so important in a man’s eyes as I am in my father’s” (00:29:00). Ambiguities, misunderstandings, contradictions, obscurity of expressions characterise the dialogues of characters who, although merely obsessed with rank, class and manners, they end up violating Paul Grice’s maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner to comic effect. Notoriously, Emma is characterised by linguistic prolixity (violation of the maxim of quantity) aimed at giving irrelevant information (violation of the maxim of relevance) which are expressed with fake smiles (violation of the maxim of quality) and obscurity of expressions (violation of the maxim of manner).

For this reason, humour⁴ in *Emma*, which is extremely English in character, landscape, sensibility, and wit, poses a genuine challenge to the translator, and more particularly, to the subtitler who has to cope not only with a culturally connoted element which is hardly transferable from one culture to another, but also with this distinct female character: Emma’s verbal competitions with Mr Knightley and inner thoughts about Jane Fairfax, an accomplished musician lacking in fortune, about the rich and vulgar Mrs Elton and the Coles’ party provide the most hilarious scenes in the movie.

According to Patrick Zabalbeascoa,⁵ audiovisual humour can be classified into three categories: the universally funny or international humour which is not connected to any specific culture but it is universally recognised as funny no matter the viewers’ nationality or who they really are. This particular kind of humour should not cause major subtitling problems. In fact, space constraints permitting, a literal translation of the content and verbatim rendering of the referent is the most obvious solution. Another category is a humour linked to funny scenes or funny expressions of the body or of the face (the so called visual joke) that tend to be universal and should not be of concern to translators. And the last category is the humour linked to the “word” (commonly referred to as language-dependent jokes) representing the hardest problem of translation, aptly investigated by Delia Chiaro as ‘verbally expressed humour’.

Emma’s humour typically expresses her femininity and contradictory personality, thereby becoming a complex form of humour based on jokes that are the visually coded version of a linguistic joke making use of all or various of the film’s sign systems. In the Preface to *Women and Comedy: History, Theory, Practice*, Rebecca Barreca maintains that “humour is a powerful way for women to redress the balance”.⁶ In Barreca’s view, women’s humour is always aimed at attacking the powerful and dismantling barriers as in George Eliot, Elizabeth Bowen, Muriel Spark and many others. This is the case of Emma whose sarcastic humour is addressed to Mr Knightley, the father-like figure embodying Victorian morality and patriarchal society. In spite of cultural differences, there is a certain universality in her female gestures and body language aimed at expressing her relief, suffering, resignation or discomfort. See, for example, Emma’s fake smiles welcoming the unwelcome Mrs Elton, or the cold stares she gives to Mr Knightley when they quarrel on Harriet Smith’s refusing Robert Martin’s proposal, or even the childish knowing looks Emma and Harriet exchange at Mr Elton’s misunderstood expressions of appraisal.

³ These digital numbers are commonly known as timecode which is a sort of identity sign unique to each frame, making it very easy for any professional to identify a particular frame within the whole movie.

⁴ In his introduction to the *Special Issue of the Journal of Pragmatics: The Pragmatics of Humor*, Salvatore Attardo underlines the difference between humour, a psychological and a cognitive manifestation, and laughter, a neurophysiological phenomenon, explaining how humour, strictly connected with intelligence, is subjective and a relative concept, differing from individual to individual, from context to context and from one culture to another. Salvatore Attardo, “Introduction: The Pragmatics of Humor”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35.9 (September 2003), 1287-1294.

⁵ Patrick Zabalbeascoa, “Translating Jokes for Dubbed Television Situation Comedies”, *The Translator*, 2.2 (1996), 235-267.

⁶ Peter Dickinson et al., eds, *Women and Comedy: History, Theory, Practice* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson U.P., 2013), xi.

But the most typical expression of audiovisual humour in *Emma* is aptly summarised by Jeroen Vandaele who characterises the phenomenon on the basis of two concepts, allegedly present in all forms, albeit in different quantities or qualities: incongruity and superiority. *Emma*’s incongruity is an essential feature of irony which is strictly connected to speech act theory and that Pelsmaekers and Van Besien describe as “some kind of contrast or incongruity between what is said (the propositional content) and what can be inferred from the situation”.⁷ There are many examples of irony’s perlocutionary effects in the film deriving from incongruity where laughter is the effect most commonly associated with humour. Apart from the numerous times *Emma* expresses her good intentions by uttering such sentences as “Oh, it’s not my place to intrude!”, “I shall never do it again! Never!”, “I would never try to match anyone again”, and one second later she starts manipulating Harriet with rhetorical questions in order to convince her to refuse Mr Martin’s proposal, there is one scene revealing *Emma*’s subtle irony produced by her negative politeness which is aimed at minimizing her imposition on Mr Elton. The latter is constantly interrupting *Emma* from listening to Mr Weston’s reporting the words of Frank Churchill’s letter.

The humorous element in *Emma*’s speech acts is the effect of her uttering a negative polite request which is said to get rid of Mr Elton “I wondered if perhaps you might be so kind as to bring me some punch.” (00:35:39). But when he pre-announces he will try to do his best to come back as quickly as possible, she answers back by employing all politeness routines and markers (the key word ‘please’ is pronounced with a high pitch) albeit implying not to hurry: “Please! I could not enjoy it if I knew that you hurried!”.

Script	Subtitles (00:34:57)
1 Mr Weston: My son Frank has written and told us something most exciting.	Mio figlio Frank ci ha scritto una lettera Piena di particolari molto emozionanti
2 Mr Elton: Miss Woodhouse, are you warm enough?	Signorina Woodhouse, vi sentite Al caldo? - Sì, sì grazie.
3 Emma: Yes, thank you.	
4 Mr Weston: The letter arrived today, and on the opening, we had the most wonderful surprise. Frank said-	- Quando avete avuto sue notizie? -La lettera è arrivata oggi. E leggendola mia moglie Ed io abbiamo avuto La più bella delle sorprese, Frank ...
5 Mr Elton: Some of the other ladies were saying they were not warm enough.	Ho udito alcune signore che si lamentavano per il freddo.
6 Emma: I am quite comfortable, yes.	Io invece sto benissimo.
7 Mr Elton: Then I saw how close you were to the fire, and thought you might be too warm, and-	E poi ho notato Quanto fosse vicina al fuoco.
8 Emma: Mr Elton! I am in the perfect state of warmth.	Signor Elton, ritengo che la mia temperatura sia perfetta.
9 Mr Weston: At first I did not believe it, so I asked Mrs Weston to read the letter	Inizialmente non riuscivo a crederci,

⁷ Kaja Pelsmaekers and Fred van Besien, “Subtitling Irony: *Blackadder* in Dutch”, in Jeroen Vandaele, ed., *Translating Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 243.

- | | | |
|----|---|---|
| | herself, to make sure I was not dreaming. But indeed Frank said- | così ho chiesto alla signora Weston di rileggermi la lettera, Per essere certo di non averlo immaginato. Ma era vero, Frank... |
| 10 | Mr Elton: Miss Woodhouse, is there any effort I might make on behalf of your father's comfort? | Signorina Woodhouse, c'è nulla che io possa fare per mettere più a suo agio vostro padre? |
| 11 | Emma: You are very kind, but I can only imagine that he's quite comfortable. Thank you for being so thoughtful. | Siete molto gentile ma vi assicuro che mio padre gode di ogni conforto - Grazie per essere così premuroso. - No, grazie a voi, di considerarmi premuroso. |
| 12 | Mr Elton: No, thank you for thinking I am thoughtful. | |
| 13 | Emma: I wondered if perhaps you might be so kind as to bring me some punch. | Io mi stavo chiedendo Se potreste essere così gentile da andarmi a prendere un punch. |
| 14 | | |
| 15 | Mr Elton: I only hope I can complete the task quickly enough- | Spero solo di poterlo fare abbastanza celermente. |
| 16 | Emma: Please! I could not enjoy it if I knew that you hurried! | Vi prego. Non lo gradirei se sapessi che vi siete affrettato. |

Humour in interlingual subtitling, as suggested by Delabastita, involves shifts which fail to produce a counterpart such as the existence of alliteration at sub. no. 12 in which the “th” sound is not rendered in the target text. Substitutions and compensations, often cited as the best way out by Delia Chiaro, are not applicable in all cases, and, as a result, half-translations and semi-substitutions also occur, unfortunately not always with good results. Mr Elton’s illocutionary act (sub. no. 15) reveals his chivalric approach to women as exemplified by the lexical item “task” whose romantic allure and reference to courtly love’s tasks and tests that a knight should perform in order to prove his love are lost in the over-simplified translation “Spero solo di poterlo fare / abbastanza celermente”. The semantic, pragmatic and comic effects of the source text wordplay recall the knightly service to a lady but they lose their specificity due to the process of what David Katan calls ‘chunking up’, involving replacing the source text with a more general translation or what Delabastita calls *destractio*, where the translation results in a reduction of the verbal and non-verbal semiotics. This omission at word level undertranslating British humour may be ascribed to time and space constraints since dialogues must be condensed in order to fit into short captions. From this perspective, the comic effect is reduced in Italian subtitles favouring sense over irony. All evidence suggests that the segmentation and line breaks are aimed at reflecting the dialogue’s dynamics and in a way at rendering speech in writing. This is what Díaz-Cintas calls rhetorical segmentation which tries to take some of the meaningful features of spoken language into account: hesitations and pauses, or the playfulness of quick repartees. For instance, the two-line subtitle no. 16 which is segmented violating grammatical cohesion since the phrasal verb “se sapessi che” is split, seems to give emphasis and suspense to some climactic part of the speech act in order to increase its comic effect. This rhetorical segmentation strategy seems to confirm Luise von Flotow’s words according to which “language is not only a tool for communication but also a manipulative tool”.⁸

⁸ Luise von Flotow, *Translation and Gender: Translating in the ‘Era of Feminism’* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), 8.

As far as the concept of superiority is concerned, Vandaele defines it as a form of increased happiness related to a heightened self-esteem.⁹ Besides causing laughter, humour can also make all or some of the parties involved feel they are better than others. This feature envisions humour as a “very visible social functioning: being superior is always being superior-to-someone”.¹⁰ One can, of course, have different reasons for feeling superior; one might feel superior because one has understood an incongruity, but, as Vandaele points out, a feeling of superiority can also be related to a feeling of aggression, humour in the sense of ‘laughing at’. This then takes us back to Emma, obsessed with her own superiority and importance, and her ironic humour aimed at laughing at or trying to provoke laughter at the expense of Mr Knightley and the other members of the community of Highbury. At timecode 00:26:03, Emma asks Mr Elton to contribute a riddle for Harriet’s book but Mr Knightley, quite offended at not being invited to write a riddle, requires an explanation for this form of impoliteness. Emma sarcastically replies that “Your entire personality is a riddle, Mr Knightley” and she continues by ridiculing his superiority of mind: “I thought you were overqualified.”

Script	Subtitles (00:26:03)
1 Mr Knightley: Emma, you didn’t ask me to contribute a riddle.	Emma, non mi avete chiesto di partecipare.
2 Emma: Your entire personality is a riddle, Mr Knightley. I thought you were overqualified.	La vostra personalità è di per sé una sciarada. Siete di un livello troppo superiore.

In this careful segmentation of the information distributed in two-liners rather than one-liners, the subtitler aims at reinforcing incongruity and suspense. To attain this objective, subtitles are structured in such a way that they are not semantically and syntactically self-contained. The larger use of two-liners may be ascribed to the fact that, as suggested by Brondeel,¹¹ two-line subtitles are preferable to two successive one-liners since the overall reading time in two-liners seems to offer the viewer more reading comfort. It is not a case that Emma’s speech acts are distributed into two separate two-liners employing rhetorical segmentation, and eliminating (at sub. no. 2) the name of Mr Knightley in appellative construction. This omission at word level is necessary to reduce the number of characters in the Italian language whose prolixity forces the subtitler to use other omissions at sentence level (“I thought”). In this peculiar case, the Italian translation is aimed at increasing the sense of humour by applying Vandaele’s strategy of superiority as exemplified by the lexical choice (“overqualified” > “troppo superiore”) focusing on the semantic field of superiority rather than qualification. Likewise, at timecode 00: 29: 08, when talking about the upcoming Weston ball, Mr Knightley expresses his dislike of dancing asserting that he would rather fetch the dog stick. Emma’s ironic speech act is all the more amusing since she replies “I’ll try to remember to bring it to the ball” comparing Mr Knightley to a dog and thereby establishing her superior, master-like position in relation to him. In terms of comic effects, the sentence “I have no taste for it” has been omitted since it appears to be a “dispensable element”,¹² according to Irena Kovačič’s classification, which adds nothing to the subtitled information “Preferirei piuttosto rincorrere / quel bastone”.

⁹ Jeroen Vandaele, “Each Time We Laugh. Translated Humour in Screen Comedy”, in Jeroen Vandaele, ed., *Translation and the (Re)Location of Meaning: Selected Papers of the CETRA Research Seminars in Translation Studies 1994-1996* (Leuven: CETRA, 1999), 241.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Herman Brondeel, “Teaching Subtitling Routines”, *Meta*, 34.1 (1994), 28.

¹² According to Kovačič, there is a three-level hierarchy of discourse elements in subtitling: The indispensable elements (that must be translated); the partly dispensable elements (that can be condensed); the dispensable elements (that can be omitted).

	Script	Subtitles (00:29:08)
1	Emma: Well, then you shall have to dance yourself!	Beh, potreste ballare anche voi.
2	Mr Knightley: I have no taste for it. I’d rather fetch that stick.	Preferirei piuttosto rincorrere quel bastone.
3	Emma: I’ll try to remember to bring it to the ball.	Cercherò di ricordarmi di portarlo al ballo.

These morbid jokes follow Emma’s and Mr Knightley’s quarrel about Harriet Smith’s refusal of Robert Martin’s proposal in which Emma reveals her inferiority to Mr Knightley, older (sixteen years older than Emma) and morally superior to her. Guilty of influencing and flattering the uncultured Harriet, Emma, who is engaged in a bit of archery while arguing over Harriet, is accused by Mr Knightley of vanity and senselessness: “Vanity working on a weak mind produces every kind of mischief” (00:23:44) and “Better be without sense than misapply it as you do” (00:24:04). But Mr Knightley’s last joke is uttered with an amused smile: “Try not to kill my dogs” (McGrath 1996) confirming Vandaele’s ideas about what he calls ‘factors of humour’, i.e. superiority and incongruities, which are not sufficient conditions for creating humour. These deviations from the norm do not automatically provoke laughter. Humour does not function in isolation. It is not only rooted in its co-text (the dialogue sequence or scene/sequence in which it occurs, for instance), but also in socio-cultural, linguistic and even personal contexts. Without seeing Emma’s arrows ending up further and further from the target, as a result of her incapacity to defend herself from Mr Knightley’s accusations and without noticing that Mr Knightley’s dogs are lying close to the target, the viewer cannot grasp the essence of his joke. In this case, the Italian subtitler has transferred the perceived humour into the target text and reformulated it into a new utterance that will hopefully provoke an increased effect on the target viewer. “Try not to kill my dogs” has been subtitled with “Risparmiate almeno i cani” implying Emma’s bad influence and mischievous acts could affect his dogs as well. Deliberately inserting the adverb “almeno”, which is used to add a comic relief (positive comment) about a generally negative situation, the subtitler not only increases the number of characters allowed per line (39 is the maximum number of characters allowed per line), but he/she raises the degree of comic content associated with the superiority of Mr Knightley patronising Emma for her mistakes.

2. Emma’s voice as the semiotic fabric of the film

McGrath’s attempts to creatively reproduce the ambiguities of the voice in *Emma* (her free indirect speech), are enacted more specifically through the sound bridge, a purely cinematic device according to which the human voice stretches across one scene and begins over the images of the successive. Seen more as a disembodied voice which is heard talking outside the frame before the viewer actually sees the character, the sound bridge is, in my view, another way of expressing Emma’s disorienting personality and morbid irony, which is able to confuse rather than identify, to dislocate rather than locate. This editing technique is used many times to signify the importance of Emma’s narrative change upon Jane Fairfax’s arrival in Highbury, a woman that she finds impossible because as Mr K. ironically suggests, “she divides our attentions from you [Emma]!” (00:47:54). The sound bridge is also able to stress the ironic incongruities of Emma who, deeply offended for not receiving an invitation for a party at the Coles, employs the suspended modal negative construction “But I cannot” with a negative polarity (implying “I cannot accept that”) when desperately waiting for the invitation to arrive and then, in the following scene with a positive nuance in which she expresses her pleasure for joining the party: “I cannot tell you how delighted I am to have been invited, Mrs Cole!” (00:54:03).

But the most hilarious use of sound bridge as an aural joke is when Emma’s inner thoughts in voiceover form revealing her furious reaction toward the “vulgar, base, conceited and crass” Mrs Elton

who dares to call Mr Knightley simply Knightley are repeated loudly by Emma herself to Harriet with exactly the same words: “Never seen him before and she called him Knightley!” (01:05:58). If in the previous two examples, the voice bridge is visually rendered with continuation dots generally used as a bridge at the end of the first subtitle and the beginning of the following one to alert the viewer visually of this connection, then in the last example the same subtitle remains on screen when there is a shot change so that there are no dividing frontiers between scenes and subtitles. This unusual timing or cueing, consisting in the in and out times of subtitles, i.e. the exact moment when a subtitle should appear on screen and when it should disappear, does nothing but mirror Emma’s incongruities with comic effects.

If the opening scene of McGrath’s *Emma* is introduced by a disembodied female voice describing a “young woman, who knew how this world should be runned” then the BBC Miniseries *Emma* (2009) opens with a male voice-over narration sentimentalizing maternal mortality giving voice to the repressed absent mother plot. This male omniscient narrator creates further confusion in the storytelling and the central consciousness of the film is further obscured with the introduction of Emma’s own voice-over.

Unlike McGrath’s *Emma*, whose inner thoughts appear to be an interior monologue so interlaced with narration that the blend is indefinable, BBC *Emma*’s off-screen voice is indicated with the use of italics, also employed for putting emphasis on meaningful and comic words. As aptly summarised by Díaz-Cintas italics are useful to call attention to certain elements of the text. In particular, one of italics’ unique functions in subtitling is to represent voices from within, e.g. thoughts, voices that are in a character’s mind, interior monologues, voices that are heard in dreams, and the like.

The paraverbal features of BBC *Emma*’s speech (intonation, accent, voice quality rhythm, speed and pausing) contribute in delineating what Bosseaux defines as “the semiotic fabric of films”.¹³ As opposed to McGrath’s *Emma* who delivered speeches at a rather slow and sedate pace with a round, dry voice, and regular, imperceptible breathing, BBC *Emma*’s speech pattern is characterised by a very fast pace with hardly any variations aimed at summarising quickly her feelings and thoughts. With its inventive reworking of the recognizable *Emma*’s feminist tropes shedding light on minor events and untold stories, the 2009 BBC series distances itself from the slow-paced literariness of McGrath’s adaptation whose incomparable comic appeal derives from *Emma*’s central consciousness mirroring or keeping a journal, voicing her prayers and commenting on the members of Highbury community. One of the most hilarious scenes in the movie is at timecode 01: 38: 44 when *Emma* tries desperately not to think about Mr Knightley but, as a perfect example of female incongruity, she fails to respect her intentions with comic effects:

Ho provato
a non pensare a lui in giardino

dove per tre volte
ho interrogato i petali delle margherite

per conoscere i suoi sentimenti
per Harriet.

Penso che farò togliere
le margherite dal giardino.

Sono soltanto
dei piccoli fiori mercenari.

¹³ Charlotte Bosseaux, “Buffy the Vampire Slayer Characterization in the Musical Episode of the TV Series”, *The Translator*, 14.2 (2008), 345.

Emma’s use of irony explains the great pleasure viewers take in audiovisual adaptations of Austen’s novel. Not only is *Emma* a text that recounts pleasures – the pleasure of romance, the pleasure of courtship, the pleasure of matchmaking, the pleasure of plotting, and so forth – but it is also a text of pleasure in the humoristic sense. The pleasure viewers/readers find in *Emma*, extends to bliss, *into the pleasure deriving from laughter*. Humour – a psychological and a cognitive manifestation – and laughter – a neurophysiological phenomenon – are not always correlated but *Emma* appears to be a universally funny text which is able to amuse and entertain any individual no matter their cultural origin or contextual framework.

3. Conclusions

McGrath’s filmic adaptation of Austen’s *Emma* appears to be a paramount example of how gender and humour become the real protagonists of this comedy of manners. Though temporally-bound to the late eighteenth century, the filmic dialogues are first and foremost the quintessential representation of the battle of the sexes carried out with verbally expressed humour. Such strategies of humour as incongruity and superiority are aptly employed by male and female characters with different albeit similar intentions. Likewise, the violations of the maxims of politeness result in hilarious effects especially as regards Emma whose personality and linguistic verbosity produce unforgettable moments of female irony. Her negative politeness is of particular interest since she presents her statements in an ambiguous or indirect way resulting in a series of comic scenes.

From an interlingual subtitling perspective, McGrath’s *Emma* provides the most amusing examples of female irony as embodied by the protagonist herself whose speech acts, violations of politeness maxims, incongruity and superiority are expressions of femininity. In the verbal hilarious battles between Emma and Mr Knightley the viewer may find the quintessential opposition female wit vs male humour which sometimes appears to be over-translated in Italian subtitles. All text-reduction shifts are aimed at reproducing the verbal and non-verbal irony of characters whose gender roles are stereotyped with original and subtle audio-visual results.

Taking McGrath’s *Emma* as a case study is a useful approach to assess gender and humour in audiovisual translation. This period comedy film representing Emma’s false sense of class superiority in comic vein is a journey through the heroine’s romantic destiny. Emma’s female irony with her strengths and frailties is so appealing for the contemporary audience since she embodies the mind style of women constantly trying to attest their roles in a patriarchal society.