

“The Globalization of Humor: The Translation, Acculturation, and Reception of American Television Comedy in Four European Countries”

Research proposal for a Veni grant from the Innovative Research program of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO)

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Submitted: May 2003

Duration of the project: 1 Dec 2004-1 Dec 2008

Summary of research proposal

This is a proposal for a research project of the acculturation and reception of American television comedy in Europe. This project has a double objective: it aims to explain the appeal of American comedies to European audiences, and to develop a general explanatory model of the mechanisms involved in the import and acculturation of cultural goods. This model will incorporate four broad factors involved in the course and outcome of such acculturation processes: cultural factors, political and economical factors, relation with and perception of the United States, and characteristics of the product. The project consists of two separate studies: a quantitative study of the cultural flows of American television comedy to Europe, and a qualitative study in four European countries: France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland. In this second study, the entire acculturation process of 5 comedies will be tracked, from a comedy's acquisition, through its translation and adaptation, to its reception by local audiences. This project is innovative in four ways. First, it is an extension and cross-cultural validation of the model of social differences in sense of humor developed in Kuipers (2001). Second, this study is the first extensive study of the reception of television comedy. Third, this project is both theoretically and methodologically unique in its focus on the acculturation process of cultural imports, and the role of cultural mediators in this process. Fourth, this project will make a significant theoretical and empirical contribution to the study of globalization. The model of the acculturation of cultural imports will integrate insights from a variety of different disciplines and theoretical perspectives. The comparative approach of the project, making comparisons both across countries and across comedies, will provide the opportunity to continually evaluate, adapt, and refine the model of cultural acculturation in the course of the project.

Keywords: television comedy; globalization; humor; acculturation; reception

Research proposal

All over the world, people believe their humor to be authentically, untranslatibly, specifically their own. Despite this belief in the exclusivity of humor, many forms of humor transcend national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. A striking example of humor traveling from one culture to another is the American television comedy. Although comedies do not travel as well as other genres (Moretti 2001; Paterson 1995), many American comedies have proven successful outside of their native American habitat (Biltereyst 1992; Fuller 1992; Havens 2001).

The export of American cultural products has led to concerns about Americanization and cultural imperialism. However, a growing body of research of cultural globalization shows that transnational cultural flows do not necessarily lead to homogenization (Appadurai 1996, 2001; Biltereyst & Meers 2000; Crane 2002; Larkin 2002; Nederveen Pieterse 1995; Tomlinson 1999; Varan 1999; Zelizer 1999). Rather, imported American goods are 'localized': interpreted, appreciated, and given meaning in local cultural contexts. For instance, the two most extensive comparative studies of the export of American culture showed how Dallas was understood and appreciated differently in different cultures (Liebes & Katz 1993), and how Disney products have different meanings around the world (Wasko et al. 2001). This 'localization' of cultural imports is mediated by local actors (Nakano 2003).

Translation is often used as a metaphor for globalization (Clifford 1997), but globalization literally involves a considerable amount of translation (De Swaan 2001). Translators and other cultural mediators, such as dubbing actors and television executives, actively contribute to this acculturation process, in which a comedy is targeted, scheduled (Ellis 2000), translated and otherwise adapted to make it appealing to local audiences.

This research project investigates the acculturation and reception of American television comedy in Europe. The project consists of two studies: a quantitative study of the cultural flows of American television comedy to Europe, and a qualitative study in four European countries: France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland. In this second phase, the entire acculturation process will be tracked, from a comedy's acquisition, through its translation, to its reception by local audiences. Thus, this project has a double objective: it aims to explain the appeal of American comedies to European audiences, and to develop an explanatory model of the mechanisms involved in the import and acculturation of cultural goods – using the notoriously untranslatable genre of the comedy as a case study.

This model will incorporate four broad factors involved in the course and outcome of such acculturation processes:

1. Cultural factors. According to Biltereyst (1992), cultural similarity is the main factor in television import. In the case of television comedy, three cultural factors are especially important. First, the appreciation of television comedy is determined by humor style (Kuipers 2001). Second, representation and stereotyping of

social groups affects audience identification, and thus appreciation, of a comedy (Lusane 1999; Havens 2000). Thirdly, comedy appreciation is related to morality. Comedy is very conducive to moral messages: it shows what is right by laughing at digressions of the norm (Marc 1997; Powell 1993) The comparative reception study of Liebes & Katz (1993) showed how cultural differences in moral interpretations affected viewers' reception of Dallas. Cultural similarities in these three domains could be the result of recent cultural influence (the dreaded Americanization) or a longer shared history.

2. Political and economic factors. Local political and economic contexts may influence the import of cultural goods. National or EU policies could prevent or stimulate competition, innovation, local production, or cultural import (Papathanassopoulos 2002) Size and dynamics of the local market dictate the buying of cheap American fare or the production of expensive but more appealing local ones (de Bens 2003). Global developments in the media industry, as well as developments in the American market and media industry also influence the market for, and content of, American exports (Beale 2002).

3. Relationship with, and perception of, the United States. Not all European countries have the same position in the US-dominated 'cultural world system' (Heilbron 1999), and not all of them have been equally accommodating to this system. This may affect cultural flows either through audiences' view of the US, or through national. Cultural policies (Guyot 2001). Also, reception may be affected by a general perception of the quality, status, or nature of American goods (Yannis 1995; Lemish e.a. 1998).

4. Characteristics of the product. The cultural specificity or universality of the text, subject matter, images or music in a comedy affects its 'translatability'. Also, comedies may be more or less open to different interpretations or 'readings' (Fiske 1989), which may affect their cross-cultural appeal. Appadurai (1996) discerns 'hard' cultural forms that come prepackaged with meanings and interpretations, and 'soft' cultural forms, which are more open and thus easier to export. Moreover, a comedy might be speaking to an experience that is characteristic for a certain group or societal position all over the (western) world (Havens 2001). Finally, a comedy might travel well because it refers to the universally shared experience of the globalization process itself, which is how Cantor (2001) explains the worldwide appeal of the Simpsons.

Methodological approach

This study will use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. In the first, quantitative, phase, existing quantitative data will be analyzed by doing a factor analysis as well as a multilevel analysis (Hox 2002) of last year's 50 highest-rated fiction series in the US, the four selected countries, and at least ten other European countries. Also, import and exchange patterns between countries will be mapped. This

quantitative analysis will both provide a context for the qualitative data, and shed light on their external validity. Also, the results of the qualitative analysis will be used to select the comedies for the second phase. In the second phase, a detailed qualitative study will be done of the acculturation and reception of five American television comedies in four European countries: France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland. The comedies will be selected to fit the following criteria: 1) has mainstream audience in all 4 countries; 2) specific audience in all 4 countries; 3) works well in some countries, not in others; 4) has failed in Europe; 5) has a different audience in Europe than in US. For these sitcoms, a content analysis of humor style, representation, and morality will be made.

The countries have been selected to represent the variety in European societies and television traditions. In the Netherlands subtitled American fare has been very successful, although it is increasingly getting competition from local fare – a development that has been going on in many European countries (Johnson 2003)). France is the country that has resisted American cultural import most (Grantham 2000), although dubbed American sitcoms have significant audiences. Italy is chosen because it differs more from American culture than northwestern Europe, and because it is a large, unusually fragmented and competitive market (Mazzoleni 1994). Finally, Poland, as a former communist country, has not ‘grown up’ with American television like Western Europe. It is usually seen as ‘one of the great success stories of post-communist Central and East European broadcasting’ (Dziadul 2002).

I plan to visit these countries briefly in the beginning of the project, and to spend six weeks there in the second phase. In this period, I will interview translator(s) and television executives involved with the comedies about the show and its acculturation, as well as their perceptions of American and local television, culture, and humor. In each country, ten focus groups will be done, each group watching a different combination of two comedies. Using the methodology of Liebes and Katz (1993), informants will be asked to interpret and evaluate an episode of each series. In France and Italy, I plan to do focus groups with a local M.A. student. In Poland, an assistant will be trained to do the focus groups. All qualitative data will be analyzed with Atlas.ti software. The last nine months of the project will be devoted to the integration and analysis of the data. Also, the data of this study will be compared with the results of my current American reception study (Kuipers 2002).

Innovation

This project is innovative in a number of different ways. First, it is an extension of the model of social differences in sense of humor that I have developed in my dissertation (Kuipers 2001), and which I am currently expanding in a comparative study in the US (Kuipers 2002). This model, which integrates insights from cultural sociology with psychological and linguistic theories of humor, is the first conceptual model of humor styles. This project provides an opportunity for cross-cultural validation of this model, and in fact,

will be the first cross-cultural study of humor above a basic structural level (Ruch & Forabosco 1996). Moreover, the model will be extended further to develop a classification of humor for the content analysis in this study. Moreover, this study will be the first extensive study of the reception of television comedy. This very popular TV genre has gotten little scholarly attention, and existing studies have focused exclusively on issues of representation (e.g. Jhally & Lewis 1992; Coleman 1998). This study will be the first to explain the appeal of comedy from a wider perspective, looking at comedy's humorous and moral appeals along with representation issues. Thirdly, this project will be innovative in its focus on the acculturation of cultural imports and the role of cultural mediators in this process. The focus on mediators and acculturation is an attempt to link the macro-level of transnational flows with the micro-level of audience reception. Moreover, in looking specifically at translators, this approach draws attention to the pivotal role of language in globalization (de Swaan 2001), which has largely been ignored outside of the rather technical field of translations studies (e.g. Gambier & Gotlieb 2001). However, the most significant theoretical and empirical innovation of this project will be its contribution to current studies of, and debates about, globalization (Guillén 2001). The model of the course and outcome of acculturation processes, which this project aims to develop, will integrate insights into this issue from different disciplines and theoretical perspectives, ranging from semiotics/textual analysis to media economics and international relations – although the central theoretical notions come from media studies, sociology, and cultural anthropology. The comparative approach, making comparisons both across countries and across comedies, will provide the opportunity to continually evaluate, adapt, and refine the model of cultural acculturation in the course of the project.

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