

## Dealing with Pedophilia in *Family Guy*. A Translational Approach

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### *Abstract*

*Family Guy* is an American animated sitcom that tells us about the daily life of the Griffin family. This show displays a type of humor that, at some points, does seem to go beyond accepted limits or standards of behavior, while satirizing American culture. In this article, attention is paid to the use of a pedophile disorder – incarnated in the character of John Herbert – to generate humor. Our purpose is to provide an exploratory description of how a highly sensitive – even offensive – topic such as pedophilia is treated in this adult animation show and to reflect on how translation – English > European Spanish – might or might not affect the way that the said topic is presented in the two cultures involved. After considering the presence of pedophilia in the chapter “The Courtship of Stewie’s Father,” we cautiously conclude that no sign of (self)censorship is spotted and that both versions keep the same potential humor for an adult audience.

*Keywords:* audiovisual translation, taboo, (self)censorship, pedophilia, humor, *Family Guy*

### **Introduction**

*Family Guy* is an American adult animated sitcom created by Seth MacFarlane, who is also the person behind similar shows such as *American Dad* (2005) and *The Cleveland Show* (2009) (a spin-off of the former). He has also written, directed, and starred in some feature films such as *Ted* (2012), *Ted 2* (2015), and *A Million Ways to Die in the West* (2014).

*Family Guy* tells us about the daily life of the Griffin family, and it is set in the imaginary city of Quahog (Rhode Island, USA). The series displays a type of humor that, at some points, does seem to go beyond accepted limits or standards of behavior, while satirizing American society. Thus, allusions to sex (including sexual intercourse between a dog and a woman), death (impersonated by the character of Grim Reaper), drug addiction and alcoholism (Peter Griffin is often inebriated), sickness and disabilities (Joe Swanson, a paraplegic police officer), religion (Jesus is a recurrent character in the show), scatology (gags involving vomit and flatulence are common) and others of the like are frequent. This article focuses on the character of John Herbert, an elderly neighbor of the Griffin family who is portrayed as a pedophile, although almost everybody seems to remain oblivious to this fact. He is especially fascinated by fifteen-year-old Chris Griffin, and we often witness his (unsuccessful) attempts to be intimate with the youngster. In the “The Courtship of Stewie’s Father” episode<sup>1</sup>, Herbert’s wish becomes true in his imagination. He fantasizes about a family in which he and Chris are married and have two children. Different illustrative segments from the source version of the aforementioned episode, in which samples of this pedophile fascination are shown, will be identified. A comparison with the European Spanish dubbed version will follow. Our purpose is twofold: firstly, to provide a descriptive, yet exploratory<sup>2</sup> account of how a highly sensitive – even offensive – topic is dealt with in an adult animation product and, secondly, to reflect – and, hopefully, to foster future reflection –

on how that topic is presented to the two cultures involved (American, in the case of the source version, and Spanish, in the case of the target version), paying special attention to possible instances of censorship – if any – in the case of the Spanish dubbed version.

Some working terms will be defined first: pedophilia, ideology, and taboo. It is not our intention to offer an extensive account of these concepts but to set the scene for the discussion that follows. In turn, this discussion is aimed to be an initial point towards additional future reflections on the selected topic. After that, some details on the *Family Guy*'s characters involved in the examples shown will be given for contextualization purposes. Then, some examples will be considered to illustrate from a nonjudgmental perspective how some particularly sensitive content appears in the source version of the analyzed TV show and the Spanish dubbed version. Some final words will close this article.

### **Working terms: pedophilia, ideology, and taboo**

As suggested above, *Family Guy* is a show that seeks to produce humor by pushing the limits of what seems to be accepted by the mainstream<sup>3</sup>. However, depending on viewers' different degrees of tolerance towards certain topics, the line between acceptance – and hence, enjoyment – and refusal can become thin. One person may argue that jokes involving passing gas or vomiting are funny, while another person could find them a sign of bad taste. Some people would agree that making fun of religion is acceptable, while others might find it unacceptable, even blasphemous. Nevertheless, what would happen when the object of a joke is a type of conduct that can be found not only morally condemnable but even legally punishable, at least in Western countries? We are referring to pedophilia (or paedophilia), “also called pedophilic disorder, in conventional usage, a psychosexual disorder, generally affecting adults, characterized by sexual interest in prepubescent children or attempts to engage in sexual acts with prepubescent children” (Britannica 2020: online). In both the USA and Spain, child pornography or sexual abuse is illegal and punishable by a fine or even imprisonment. In any case, Herbert would fit in this category of behavior, since he is an old man who is sexually attracted to young boys like Chris.

On the other hand, in general terms, in the field of audiovisual translation, ideology is usually restricted to the following four areas (Chaume 2012: 151-154):

- censorship, directly related to the institutional control of translation. Spheres such as politics, religion, sex, and physiological functions are especially sensitive to this practice. Political correctness may also be included under the ambit of censorship when, for instance, it seeks to conceal misnomers or taboo words. Indeed, censorship is certainly more notable under totalitarian regimes, but the truth is that not even the most democratic systems can evade censorship. The fact that the translator may censor himself/herself is equally remarkable and of particular relevance here
- standardization (normalization), an inevitable process in all languages since they would become chaotic without it. However, if we talk about linguistic censorship, we are now touching the subject of imposition
- gender-related matters, for example, sexist language
- patronage, deals with a concept introduced by Lefevere (1992: 15) to refer to “the powers [...] that can further or hinder the reading, writing or rewriting of a literature”

As indicated above, aspects such as (self)censorship<sup>4</sup> will be of interest here, leaving other elements such as standardization, gender, and patronage for future research.

Finally, Allan and Burrige (2006: 11) state that “taboo refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons, at a specifiable time, in specifiable contexts.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly, many of the topics dealt with in *Family Guy* may fall under the umbrella of *taboo*.

But before we move on to deal with those concepts concerning the said TV show, let us pay some attention to some of the different characters in it – the ones that appear in the examples provided – so that the reader is offered some contextualization.

### ***Family Guy*: Relevant Characters**

*Family Guy* portrays the adventures and misfortunes of numerous groups of the inhabitants of Quahog, including the Griffins, their neighbors and friends, and some other more or less recurring characters. However, as explained above and for space limitations, we will briefly consider only those characters that have a line in the examples that have been chosen to illustrate our point and are, therefore, relevant for our purposes. The data that follow have been sourced from *The Family Guy Wiki* and *tvtropes* websites.

Peter Griffin is a man in his forties who loves watching TV, the rock band KISS, and the singer Barry Manilow. He is an immature, dim-witted, outspoken, and eccentric alcoholic. He is married to Lois, also in her forties, who was brought up in a wealthy family. She is a full-time-mother and teaches piano lessons to children, although she hides some dark aspects. Chris is their middle child. Like his father, he has a learning disability. He is introverted and relatively honest. He is also somehow prone to suffer emotional outbursts. Physically, he is overweight. The fourth character relevant to our purposes is Herbert, who was already depicted above.

Let us see some examples next.

### **Pedophilia in *Family Guy*: an illustration**

(1) Chris is playing baseball, and by accident, he hits and breaks one of Herbert’s windows. The old man visits the Griffins to report on that broken window.

00:06:19 (doorbell rings)	
<b>LOUISE:</b> Oh, hi, Herbert. What brings you here?	<b>LOUISE:</b> Hola, Herbert. ¿Qué te trae por aquí?
<b>HERBERT:</b> It seems your son’s baseball broke one of my windows the other day.	<b>HERBERT:</b> Una de las <b>pelotitas</b> de su hijo me ha roto una ventana.
<b>LOUISE:</b> Oh, my God, I am so sorry. Chris, this is gonna come out of your allowance.	<b>LOUISE:</b> ¿De verdad? No sabe cuánto lo siento. Chris, esto va a salir de tu paga.
<b>HERBERT:</b> Perhaps we could work something out. I could use <b>a strapping young man</b> to do some chores around my house.	<b>HERBERT:</b> Podemos llegar a un acuerdo. No me vendría mal <b>un muchacho fornido</b> que me ayudara con algunas cosas.
<b>PETER:</b> That seems fair to me. Chris, you have damaged this man’s property, and until you pay off the debt, <b>you’ll do whatever job he wants you to do</b> . And at the end of the day, if you’re exhausted and <b>your face is dripping wet</b> , well, that just means <b>you did a good job</b> .	<b>PETER:</b> A mí me parece bien. Chris, le has roto a este hombre una ventana y hasta que pagues la deuda harás <b>todo lo que él te pida</b> . Y si al final del día estás agotado y <b>empapado en sudor</b> , significará que has hecho <b>un buen trabajo</b> .
<b>HERBERT:</b> That sounds fine.	<b>HERBERT:</b> Me parece bien.
<b>CHRIS:</b> I don’t want to spend my weekend doing	<b>CHRIS:</b> No quiero pasarme el fin de semana

chores.	trabajando.
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In this first example, we would like to pay special attention to Peter's words. Let us not forget the context; the information that we already have about Herbert and his disorder – previous knowledge of the world also plays a role.<sup>6</sup> He does not refer to just a *boy*, but to a *strapping young man*, that is, a man who is tall, well-muscled, handsome... (notice the sexual innuendo here). The reality is that Chris is just the opposite. In any case, this meaning is kept in the dubbed version (*muchacho fornido*, Back Translation *a well-built young man*). Besides, curiously enough, in the dubbed version, we see the term *pelotillas* (BT *little balls*) instead of *baseball*. In Spanish, just as it happens in English, the term *pelotas* (BT *balls*) may refer to the testicles. Perhaps the translator was trying to compensate for certain losses, adding an extra sexual double meaning here. But possibly the most interesting aspect is found in Peter's lines, where we see a clear double meaning in his words. He talks about *getting your face dripping wet after doing a job*, which – apart from sweat – clearly may connect with the idea of doing a *blowjob* and getting drips of the ejaculated semen over the face. These double meanings are somehow retained in the dubbed version. *Trabajo* (BT *job*) may refer to oral sex, although *empapado en sudor* (BT *soaked with sweat*) does not refer to the face specifically nor to semen. Still, in an attempt to reproduce the sexual insinuation, the expression *you'll do whatever job he wants you to do* has been translated as *harás todo lo que él te pida* (BT [you] will do anything he asks for). Note that, even though the personal pronoun *él* (BT *he*) could be omitted in Spanish (and would most likely be so in a merely referential message), it has been maintained, probably to emphasize the sexual reading.

(2) Here is a new example. Chris has started to help Herbert with some chores. The teenager is working in the old man's garden.

00:11:39	
<b>HERBERT:</b> Well, hello there, young man. I was starting to think you weren't coming.	<b>HERBERT:</b> Hola, jovencito. Empezaba a pensar que no vendrías.
<b>CHRIS:</b> Sorry I'm late, Mr. Herbert. Well, I guess I'll get started.	<b>CHRIS:</b> Siento llegar tarde, Sr. Herbert. Bueno, será mejor que empiece.
<b>HERBERT:</b> You know, if you get sweaty and want to <b>take your shirt off</b> , that'd be just fine. Or <b>tie it in a knot</b> . Your choice.	<b>HERBERT:</b> Oye, si sudas y quieres <b>quitarte la camisa</b> , puedes hacerlo. O <b>átatela con un nudo</b> , si quieres.

Herbert suggests that Chris take his shirt off if he gets all sweaty, or perhaps to tie it in a knot. We could wonder whether he is just considerate. Probably not, and what he expects is some sort of – for him – sexy view. In any case, the translated version is literal.

(3) A new example comes from the very end of the episode. Chris has finished working for Herbert, so he is wondering how he can spend his evenings from now on. Suddenly, the answer is given on television since a children's sports league is being broadcast.

00:25:31	
<b>HERBERT:</b> Well, Jesse, I guess we've got to find some other way to spend our evenings.	<b>HERBERT:</b> Bueno, Jese. Vamos a tener que encontrar otra manera de pasar la tarde.
<b>MAN (on TV):</b> And now back to ESPN's exclusive coverage of the <b>Little League</b> World Series.	<b>MAN (on TV):</b> Y ahora continuamos con los partidos de la <b>liga infantil</b> de baseball.

HERBERT: Oh, jackpot!

HERBERT: Ajá, ¡bingo!

Herbert becomes excited (*jackpot!*) when he knows that some children's sport is being televised. Once again, given a literal translation, it seems safe to assume on this occasion that the implicit meaning can be achieved in the two versions.

However, an audiovisual text is a multimodal text.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, and simply put, information is carried via words, paralinguistic features, sounds, and images. So, let us consider those other elements beyond words.<sup>8</sup>

(4) In the following example, Chris just broke Herbert's window. The ball falls into the old man's living room. When he sees it, he says, "Well, looks like the Good Lord just sent me a conversation starter," and asks his dog to pick up the ball. Once the dog has done it, they both begin sighing with dreamy eyes. Apart from being glad to find *a conversation starter*, there is a clear paralinguistic element working here, implying excitement, desire...; in other words, Herbert looks forward to meeting the boy and who knows what comes to his mind in *romantic* terms. In the dubbed version, obviously, the dreamy eyes (image) are there, and this paralinguistic element has been kept, evidently not thanks to the translator, but the dubbing actor. This instance is a clear example of the importance of approaching dubbing as a process, in which different agents collaborate to generate the best result possible. See Figure 1 for a representation of how the different elements function in unison – see Chaume's (2004) discussion of the *signifying codes*. In this same vein, in Example 3, Herbert's face lights up with joy (visual element), and the tone of his voice (paralinguistic element) denotes enthusiasm when he says, "Oh, jackpot!"

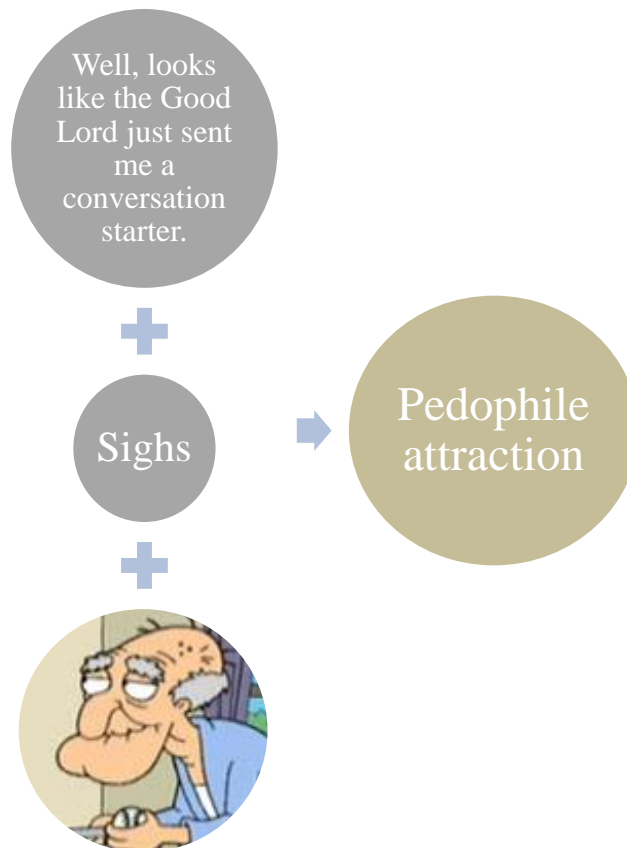


Figure 1 Representation of a multimodal text<sup>9</sup>

(5) In this next example, sounds, and especially images, are crucial since they activate an intertextual mechanism that gives Herbert’s obsession a romantic air: a scene from the film, *Little Shop of Horrors* (Frank Oz 1986) where Audrie (Ellen Greene) sings *Somewhere that’s green*. In that song, she fantasizes and shares her dream of marrying Seymour (Rick Moranis), leaving the town where they live, and moving to a nice house in a suburb to enjoy the middle-class luxuries together. In this fragment of the episode, Herbert invites Chris to dinner to thank him for his hard work. They have taken a souvenir picture together, and Herbert imagines that they are married and live happily in a nice house. Herbert takes the role of Audrie and sings the same romantic, cheesy song, just changing a few words – see Table 1. The whole original scene is reproduced – see Figure 2 –, with Herbert and Chris taking the role of Audrie and Seymour, respectively. Finally, we see that Herbert has fallen asleep and dreams of this – for him – dream life.

Original version	Dubbed version
He rakes and trims the grass / He loves to mow and weed / I cook like Betty Crocker / And I look like Donna Reed / There’s plastic on the furniture / To keep it neat and clean / In the Pine-Sol scented air / Somewhere that’s green / Between our frozen dinner / And our bedtime, nine-fifteen / We snuggle watching Lucy / On our big, enormous twelve-inch screen / I’m his December Bride / <b>He’s Father</b> , he Knows Best / <b>Our</b> kids play Howdy Doody / As the sun sets in the west / A picture out of Better Homes and Gardens magazine / <b>Far from Skid Row</b> / <b>I dream we’ll go</b> / Somewhere that’s green.	He rakes and trims the grass / He loves to mow and weed / I cook like Betty Crocker / And I look like Donna Reed / There’s plastic on my furniture / To keep it neat and clean / In the Pine-Sol scented air / Somewhere that’s green / Between our frozen dinners / And our bedtime, nine-fifteen / We snuggle watching Lucy / On a big, enormous twelve-inch screen / And I’m his December bride / <b>Chris Griffin</b> , he knows best / <b>The</b> kids play Howdy Doody / As the sun sets in the west / A picture out of Better Homes and Gardens magazine / <b>Someday I know</b> / <b>We, too, will go</b> / Somewhere that’s Green.

Table 1 Lyrics to *Somewhere that’s green*

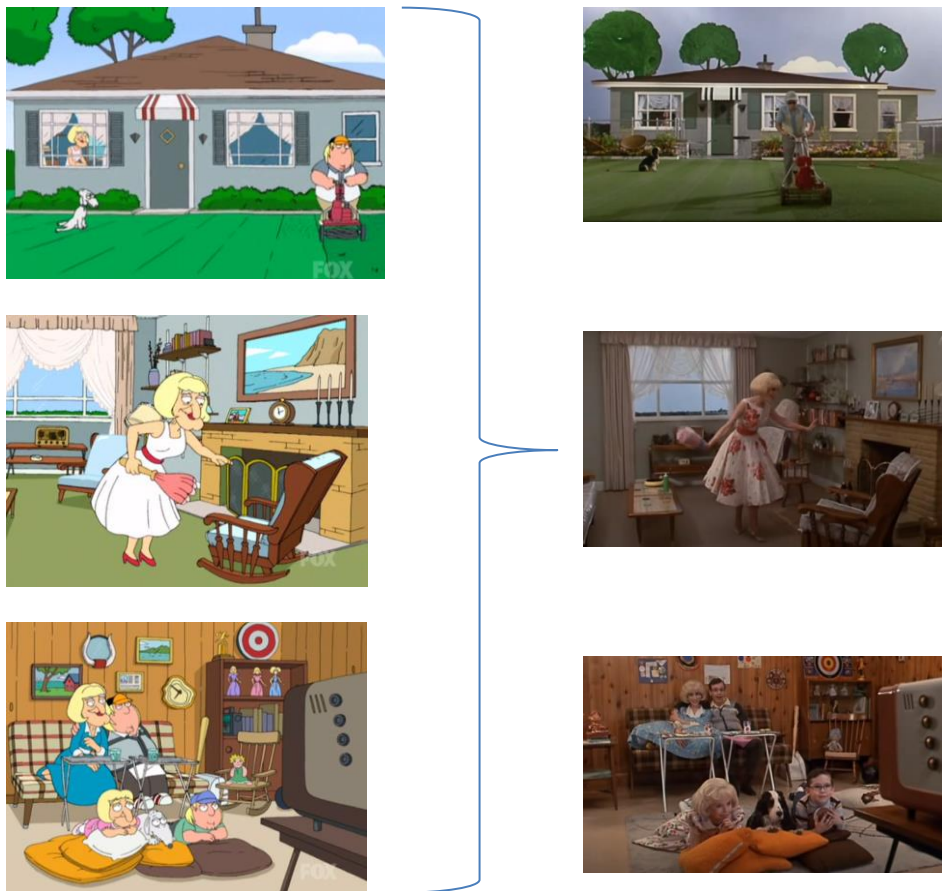


Figure 2 Audrie's and Herbert's fantasies<sup>10</sup>

This example is particularly thought-provoking since Herbert's attraction to Chris ceases to be portrayed as sexual and is depicted as romantic – a reception study would be of special interest here to report on the effect on the viewer of this change in the nature of Herbert's fascination towards the young boy. What was originally depicted as carnal is now reworked as romantic in an attempt, we believe, to push the situation to the limit. In the dubbed version of the episode, the lyrics to the song are not dubbed but subtitled, giving access to the viewer – along with the images and sounds – to the same scenario that the source viewer faces.

(6) We would like to offer one last example to show that, in this TV series, pedophilia references are not limited to Herbert's character. Peter and Stewie (his baby son) are at Disney World watching a Michael Jackson 3D film. The singer is dancing while the audience, wearing 3D viewing glasses, follows his performance. One child is sitting the first row in the audience and, fascinated by the alleged 3D effects, exclaims, "Wow, it looks like Michael Jackson is coming right at me!" At that point, the singer jumps out of the screen, takes the child in his arms, and runs away with him. Obviously, this allusion refers to Jackson's child molestation scandal.

## Questions to be answered

As Toury indicates, there are two main sources to obtain information in a descriptive study: textual and extratextual (1995: 65). Even though our investigation is partially descriptive (since a thorough account of instances is not carried out), our wish was also to have access to some extratextual sources such as the translator who translated the episode that is being analyzed. However, we did contact her, but she refused to answer our questions. The list of queries to which we thought would be of interest to hear her voice were questions such as:

- In the case of humor, should there be a limit?
- How do you feel when you have to deal with a product that offers some content that might go beyond what the mainstream could consider acceptable?
- How do you proceed in a case like this one, when humor is made from a pedophilic disorder? Do you try to soften things or just reproduce it as it is? Is compensation a common technique in these cases?
- In this sort of potentially highly offensive material, do you make all decisions, or is there someone else who has a say in the process? If so, who (the dubbing studio, the TV channel...)?

We feel our approximation to the selected topic would have greatly benefited from the answers to those questions, since they would certainly shed light on several of the issues mentioned here, such as (self)censorship and patronage. Still, there is room for some conjectures to wrap up our discussion.

## Final words

As has been shown, *Family Guy* is a TV program in which a certainly despicable, taboo conduct is used to generate humor. We may wonder if the limits of humor – if any – are crossed, but the truth is that this series enjoys a large viewing audience and has aired for over twenty years now. As per the audience demographics, IMDb (2020: online) reveals that the largest group is males from 30 to 44 years of age. A sociological study would help understand if that is one group predisposed, for whatever the reason, to enjoy this type of humor based on assorted taboo topics.

As mentioned in the introduction, our purpose was, on the one hand, to provide an exploratory description of how a highly sensitive – even offensive – topic such as pedophilia is treated in the adult animation show *Family Guy* and, on the other hand, to reflect on how translation might or might not affect in the way that topic is presented to the two cultures involved.

Even if not numerous and certainly not representative in statistical terms, the different examples provided are illustrative enough to portray how pedophilic disorder is handled in the selected sitcom. Evident moments of pedophilic behavior are easy to find in this TV series, especially in an episode where one of the subplots deals with Herbert's feelings towards Chris.

In this brief approach to this topic, the impression is that Herbert's character or idiosyncrasy is not softened or altered in the dubbed version. On the contrary, his attraction to



children is not mitigated whatsoever. The only modifications that we have found are due to the typical audiovisual translation restrictions, just as it could happen when dealing with any other topic.

As we said, the (taboo) topic of pedophilia is not toned down, nor does it show evidence of (self) censorship. This last aspect involves mere conjecture on our part. Let us not forget that dubbing is a process in which different agents collaborate (translators, dialogue writers, actors/actresses, directors...). Our wish was to have the translator give her opinion on this particular, delicate issue and how she handled it. However, as explained above, her contribution was not possible for reasons beyond our control.

We know that *Family Guy* is a show that is meant for an adult – mainly male – audience. Still, is it acceptable that they resort to all types of taboos – pedophilia in particular – to provoke humor? Is everything valid in humor production? Is there offensive humor or offended people? Furthermore, what should the translator do? Perhaps this paper poses more questions than it provides answers, but we feel it is worthy of proposing some food for thought even if for the sake of discussion. Of course, further research is needed since we aimed to open and explore more in-depth discussions on this topic.

### Notes:

1 Even though the analyzed show was first aired in 2005, the topic and the character on which we focus are still relevant since they are present – to different degrees – in the following seasons of the series and the chosen episode is often rerun.

2 In the sense Hernández Sampieri *et al.* (2010: 91) define them: Exploratory studies are carried out when the objective is to examine a poorly studied topic or research problem, about which there are many doubts or has not been addressed before. Depending on the scope of the study, hypotheses may be absent.

3 In this sense, see the work of Pickering and Lockyer (2005).

4 We do not wish to elaborate on the issue of censorship. We will just recommend the reader some works that deal with this topic (some studies also with censorship and translation) such as Gubern (1981), Santoyo (1996), Rabadán (2000), Ballester (2001), and Suárez Menéndez (2016). For further information on ideology and translation, see, for example, Richart Maset (2012).

5 The concept of taboo has been addressed using an array of terms, such as emotionally charged language (Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007), obscene speech or profane speech (Jay 1980), foul language or swearing (Wajnryb 2004), offensive and taboo language (Ávila-Cabrera 2014) or bad language (McEnery 2005). For practical reasons, in this article, we will stick to the label *taboo*. Taboo and all its related aspects have been addressed from assorted perspectives in many works such as not comprehensively, Sagarin (1968), Jay (1999 and 2009), Karjalainen (2002), Freud (2004), McEnery (2005), Allan and Burrige (2006), Hughes (2006), Chamizo Domínguez (2008), Marsden (2009), Calvo Shadid (2011), Fuentes-Luque (2015), Mancera Cestero (2015), Living (2017) and Hunter (2018). Similarly, the translation of taboo has also been the subject of numerous studies such as, again not extensively, Fernández Fernández (2009), Soler Pardo (2011), Fernández Huertas (2012), Ávila-Cabrera (2014 and 2016), Álvarez Dato (2016), Martínez Sierra (2016), Fethke (2017), Pérez Gómez (2017), Ávila-Cabrera and Rodríguez Arancón (2019), and Poyatos Cosano (2020).

6 See Sperber and Wilson (1986).

7 As Gambier (2006: 6) puts it, “[n]o text is, strictly speaking, monomodal. Traditional texts, hypertexts, screen texts combine different semiotic resources. Films and TV programs co-deploy gesture, gaze, movement, visual images, sound, colors, proxemics, oral and written language, and so on.”

8 In an attempt to avoid Gambier's criticism that "[a]lthough many kinds of texts with different types of signs are dealt with in Translation Studies (AV, advertising, theatre, songs, comics), the focus tends to be limited to their linguistic features" (2006: 6-7).

9 Screenshot from *Family Guy*, "The Courtship of Stewie's Father (Seth MacFarlane 2005).

10 Screenshots from *Family Guy*, "The Courtship of Stewie's Father (Seth MacFarlane 2005) and *Little Shop of Horrors* (Frank Oz 1986).

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