BOOK REVIEW

TECHNICAL FUNNIES

Bárbara Oliveira[*]
FCSH-NOVA Lisbon/CETAPS
Lusíada University of Lisbon

The Other Kind of Funnies: Comics in Technical Communication, Han Yu, Oxon & New York, Routledge, 2017, 280pp, £120,00 (hardcover) ISBN 978-0-89503-839-5 £59,99 (e-book) ISBN 978-1-31523-126-6

Han Yu's *The Other Kind of Funnies: Comics in Technical Communication* is the perfect introduction to the many uses and potentialities of comics in the field of technical communication. It is also a very useful book for those interested in intersemiotic translation, especially within (but not limited to) the field of technical communication. Han Yu is a professor at Kansas State University, where she teaches technical and visual communication. She is also a researcher in the field of popular science communication, intercultural technical communication, information design and visual rhetoric. A successful author, she has published a number of books and articles on these subjects.

The first of its kind, this book explores and dissects the theory and applications of comics as a multimodal medium, rich in potential to engage, educate, communicate, and persuade. Her comprehensive theoretical framework draws on visual rhetoric and multimodal studies, theories of language and text-based literacy, as well as intercultural technical communication theories. This framework is presented in a clear and accessible manner, allowing the reader to quickly catch up on the main theories surrounding comics and their use in technical communication. In addition, Yu analyses a large number of examples in detail, which further helps the reader to solidify the theory as well as to understand the real-world applications of the concepts in question. Central to this book is the idea that comics are not an inferior medium or something for children only, but an extremely rich multimodal medium that is well suited to the purposes of technical communication.

The first four chapters cover the general theoretical concepts around comics and their use in technical communication. The first chapter focuses on the definitions, types and multimodal nature of comics. It outlines the basics of comics as an art form and a rich communication medium, resorting to Scott McCloud's and Will Eisner's definitions of comics and sequential art, Marshall McLuhan's concept of hot and cool mediums (comics being considered a cool medium that invites the reader to actively participate and "fill in the gaps"), and Dale Jacobs' theory of multimodality (comics include multiple modes of

[*] b.oliveira@mailfence.com

communication, with a linguistic, audio, visual, gestural and spatial mode). The second chapter, entitled "Brief history of comics", provides the reader with a succinct history of comics in different parts of the world. It focuses mostly on the history of comics in the U.S., Japan, France and Belgium, explaining how these three regions developed such different relationships to the comic industry, before moving on to Africa, other Asian countries and Latin America. This historical overview is indeed brief, especially in regions where there is greater regional cultural variance, such as Africa and Asia, and it serves more as a quick introduction to the most important aspects of the history of comics, which will prove useful in later chapters.

Chapters three and four are the most important chapters in the book, especially for translators. Chapter three gives a detailed description of all the factors that make comics so relevant in technical communication. Yu explores how certain elements, such as entertainment value, participatory reading, reader identification, dialogic discourses, covert persuasion, multimodality and cross-cultural appeal, lead to greater reader engagement and thus better assimilation and comprehension of the information. This chapter also addresses translation and localization, and recognises that even pictorial representations are not universal and need to be translated in order to be correctly interpreted in the target culture. For example, Yu explains that, "Icons have meanings only when an observer understands the association between the icon and the object it denotes. While most people will recognize a cartoony representation of a human being, some may not recognize that the  icon means mail, e-mail, or contact information if they use other styles of mailboxes in their environments" (p. 62).

Chapter four addresses the challenges and limitations of using comics in technical communication and how to overcome these. A whole range of factors need to be considered in order to create more effective comics; some of these are, for instance, target audience, type of document use (is it a book to be read from beginning to end or a manual where readers just look up what they need?), design (what is the best way to create an efficient word-picture balance?), the balance between fantasy and reality, safety (how to include safety warnings clearly?), the emotional facet that comics bring into technical communication (as opposed to the tradition in technical communication to only include "objective, emotion-free graphics"), and distasteful stereotypes. This last one is especially important when we think about the history of comics and their caricatural potential as an art form. Yu addresses the issues of stereotypes, racism, sexism and ethics in comics, and urges artists and technical communicators to continuously and actively "educate themselves, their colleagues and their readers" (p. 91) on these issues.

Chapters five, six, seven and eight, focus on the more specialised types of comics: instructional comics, development comics, educational comics and propaganda comics. Each of these chapters reviews the relevant theory and analyses several examples of each type and sub-type of comics, as well as the problems and challenges that are specific to each type. The fact that information is repeated in these chapters makes it easier for the

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reader to understand better each chapter without having to go back and look up certain concepts.

Chapter nine, entitled “Where do we go from here?” reads more like Yu’s personal address to the reader. She highlights the value of comics and argues against the suspicious and often condescending attitudes that many people have towards this medium. She reminds us of their many qualities and of how important they can be when used in technical communication:

> All these merits make comics an appropriate, useful, and one might even say, ideal, medium for technical communication. Technical communicators are, or should be, concerned with diverse mass audiences: what they need and want; what engages them; what helps them follow instructions, make decisions, and learn new information; and what persuades them to follow advice. It is also an ethical and social responsibility for technical communicators to be concerned with those groups and communities that are hitherto marginalized: those who are foreign, poor, young, old, semiliterate, illiterate, unhealthy—those who are "different." For these audiences, the conventional technical communication discourses —the white papers, formal studies, websites, government forms, and medical explanations—are too often unavailable, inaccessible, or alienating. Comics offer a viable bridge to reach these audiences precisely because they are designed for the masses—for everyone regardless of their "differences (p. 251).

However, Yu also recognises that using comics in technical communication may come at a cost:

> [it] complicate[s] the process of technical communication production, whether it is in added steps, added personnel (not all technical communicators will be adept sequential artists), added consultation and collaboration, added page counts, added deliberation on appropriate visual choices—and bottom line, added cost. None of these, I suspect, is particularly appealing to project clients and managers” (p. 252).

And yet, she argues, just as other aspects of technical communication were not particularly “appealing” at first, but their value and effectiveness made them worth the extra effort (and cost), so the use of comics in the appropriate contexts will ultimately prevail. She also acknowledges that not all comics are suitable for all types and audiences of technical communication. The choice of including comics and how to include them needs to be assessed based on the audience, the purpose of the communication piece and the context in which it is created.

Like Han Yu, I believe that we haven’t yet even begun to scratch the surface of the potential that comics have in a myriad of areas and settings, but especially in technical communication. A great example of the use of comics in this field is the “comic contract”, a concept introduced by Robert de Rooy, where a legally binding contract (in this case an employment contract) is created in the form of a comic strip. This allows readers to sign a

document that they fully understand.[1] But this may be just the beginning. Comics allow information to be processed in different ways, which makes it easier for those who are illiterate or semi-literate, have cognitive disabilities or reading difficulties, to understand information. It is also important to consider that, as Yu puts it, "today's audience, especially young audiences who are raised on multimodal communication (from the more traditional TV and film to online videos and social media), increasingly expect similar representations in technical communication" (p. 8). Thus, it is essential that we, as translators, take this factor into account and aim to educate ourselves, our colleagues and our readers in the potential and uses of comics in technical translation.

About the author: Bárbara Oliveira is a Master's student in Translation at Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade Nova de Lisboa and a member of CETAPS.

[1] On this subject, see 'Democratizing access to justice: The comic contract as intersemiotic translation', Eliisa Pitkäsalo and Laura Kalliomaa-Puha, Translation Matters 1/2, pp. 30-42.