

# American Comics and Italian Cultural Identity in 1968: Translation Challenges in a Syncretic Text

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**Abstract.** Translation supports the construction of a national identity through the selection of foreign texts to be transferred to the target language. Within this framework, the effort made in the 1960s by Italian editors and translators in giving new dignity to comics proves emblematic. This paper aims to reconstruct the reception of American comic strips in Italy going through the issues of *Linus* published in 1967 and 1968: the selected cartoonists (e.g. Al Capp, Jules Feiffer, and Walt Kelly) participate in the cultural debate of the time discussing politics, war, and civil rights. The analysis of the translation strategies adopted will reveal the difficulty of reproducing the polysemy of metaphors, idioms and puns, trying to maintain consistency between the visual and the verbal code, but primarily the need to create a purely Italian cultural discourse.

**Keywords:** comics; translation; culture; visual code.

## [es] Cómics americanos e identidad cultural italiana en 1968: dificultades de traducción en un texto sincrético

**Resumen.** La traducción contribuye a crear la identidad cultural de un país, con la decisión de traducir o no un texto extranjero a la lengua meta. En este contexto es remarcable el intento de los editores y traductores italianos de los años sesenta de dar una nueva dignidad al cómic. Este artículo tiene como objetivo reconstruir la recepción de las tiras cómicas de prensa americanas en Italia, con particular atención a los años 1967 y 1968 de la revista *Linus*: los autores (Al Capp, Jules Feiffer, Walt Kelly) participaron en el debate cultural de la época discutiendo sobre política, guerra, y de derechos civiles. El análisis de las estrategias de traducción revelará la dificultad de reproducir la polisemia de metáforas, expresiones idiomáticas y juegos de palabras respetando la coherencia entre el código verbal y visual, y sobre todo la voluntad de construir un discurso cultural fundamentalmente italiano.

**Palabras clave:** cómics; traducción; cultura; código visual.

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### 1. Introduction

Translation participates “in the powerful acts that create knowledge and shape culture” (Gentzler & Tymoczko, 2002: XXI): through the conscious selection of texts, promoted by publishing policies, foreign influences may penetrate the target context.

In the 1960s, the efforts of editors and translators allowed for a re-evaluation of comics in Italy, acknowledging the ability of popular art forms to convey cultural values in mass society, as Umberto Eco pointed out in *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964). It is no coincidence that the semiotician conversed on the potential of graphic narratives with Elio Vittorini and Oreste Del Buono in the first issue of *Linus* magazine (April 1965). This periodical gathered together some intellectuals of the time, in connection with the bookshop and publishing house Milano Libri: Giovanni Gandini, the editor-in-chief, Ranieri Carano, Vittorio Spinazzola, Franco and Bruno Cavallone. Equipped with a legal and humanistic background and attentive to social and political events, they decided to select high-quality comics direct-

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ed at an adult readership. The published texts offered insights into the reality of the 1960s looking beyond national borders: it is worth noting that the first issue included only translated foreign works, namely *Peanuts*, *Krazy Kat*, *Popeye* and *Li'l Abner*, revealing the editors' interest in American comic strips. Conceived as a history of manners across the key stages of mass civilization, these strips responded to "the common man's urge to self-portraiture" (Politzer, 1963: 46)<sup>2</sup>.

The proposal formulated by *Linus* reflects the awareness that the transfer of a certain text into a different language, either challenging or accepting the ideas it expresses, supports the construction of a national identity. Translation is a cultural practice available to political parties, publishers, and the media –what Lefevere (1992: 15) calls "patronage"– in order to shape, with the help of professionals, an aesthetic and political discourse.

A source text may be chosen because the social situation in which it was produced is perceived as homologous to the target context (Venuti, 2005: 180) or since the themes it proposes prove to illuminate the crucial problems a country faces.

The *Linus* intellectuals selected comics where an ideological statement unfolds through the representation of local historical events that acquire a universal meaning, showing how translation entails a sort of mirroring: "the foreign text becomes intelligible when the reader recognizes himself or herself in the translation by identifying the domestic values that motivated the selection of that particular foreign text, and that are inscribed in it through a particular discursive strategy" (Venuti, 1998: 77).

This paper aims to reconstruct the value system underlying the translated texts and the strategies adopted in translation by going through the issues of *Linus* published in 1967 and 1968, an age of conflict and change, characterized by the student protests, opposition to the Vietnam War, and the challenge to expansionism.

The analysis reveals, in terms of quantity, the predominance of a few cartoonists who describe human and social contradictions. Charles Schulz draws the *Peanuts* characters, who represent the "reductions of all the neuroses of a modern citizen [...] passing through the filter of innocence" (Eco, 1994: 40-41), and Johnny Hart, in *B.C.*, shows that cavemen struggled with the same dissatisfactions of twentieth-century people. Society as a whole is targeted in Al Capp's strips, *Li'l Abner* and *Fearless Fosdick*, which criticize American myths as well as in Walt Kelly's *Pogo*, where a community of intellectual animals discuss political issues. Furthermore, one of the most interesting aspects arising from this research is the editors' decision to start regularly publishing the provocative American artist Jules Feiffer in 1967. Already known in Italy through Eco's translations edited by Bompiani<sup>3</sup>, he was the creator of the strip *Feiffer*, which appeared weekly in the *Village Voice* from the mid-1950s.

## 2. "In the interest of freedom [...] we have today bombed"<sup>4</sup>: Feiffer's comics in *Linus*

Giovanni Gandini introduced Jules Feiffer in the supplement *ProvoLinus*, issued in April 1967. The cover portrays a *Peanuts* character, Snoopy, pictured upside down in protest and specifies that the content is aimed at adults. The supplement is provocative not only in the name –a pun which evokes traditional dairy products<sup>5</sup> while referring to the Provo, the Dutch anti-establishment movement<sup>6</sup>– but also in the choice of texts, which are closely linked to contemporary reality.

Feiffer was published since he conveys his cultural message in the short form of the strip in an age of transition, at a time when the American sensibility was being redefined. Through monologues or dialogues, spanning from six to ten panels that best fit the format of the newsweekly, his characters discuss the topics of women, race, class, and politics while expressing their doubts and disillusion. The author himself grew up in the East Bronx from Jewish parents in a time of economic depression, and later witnessed the main social changes of the 1950s and 1960s –the tumult of the Cold War, the sexual revolution, and the civil rights struggles: "For a New York Jewish boy growing up in the Depression, politics was everywhere" (Feiffer, 2010: 206). The comic effect of his cartoons is situation-based, arising from the analysis of social mores in an attempt to reveal the hypocrisy of the people in power, from parents to presidents.

When the *London Observer* started to publish his strips in 1957, Feiffer envisaged that people in different cultures could identify with his subject matter: in every country, the rising middle class was presumably feeling the same doubts and anxiety and, in general, citizens were frightened by the prospect of war, which might exploit the potential

<sup>2</sup> The editors' intent to redefine the canon is clear, in an attempt to oppose skepticism towards the new medium in Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century (Morgana, 2003: 171), which culminated in fascist censorship on "morally and politically undesirable behavior. The objections voiced were not so much against the medium, or against American comics per se, but against the themes represented, especially crime and violence, based on the assumption that comics were popular literature for children. Publishers 'collaborated' under threat of publication requisition, negotiating with the regime what could and could not be published, and increasingly reducing the number of foreign stories, while discussions concerned whether to put a limit on the publication of foreign material at 20%, 30% or 50%. Finally, in 1938 a Ministerial circular banned foreign comics completely, as well as all stories 'inspired by foreign production', famously with the exception of Disney's material" (Zanettin, 2018: 872).

<sup>3</sup> *Il complesso facile* (1962) and *Passionella e altre storie* (1963).

<sup>4</sup> Feiffer, 1982: 115.

<sup>5</sup> *Provola* or *provolina* is a common type of cheese in Southern and Insular Italy.

<sup>6</sup> It is significant that the issue includes a sort of snakes and ladders board game, whose pieces are the main characters of the strips competing in a motorbike race: ProvoPogo, ProvoKat, B.C. Provo and ProvoLinus.

of the atomic bomb. The author's experience in the army in 1951, perceived as something that deprives the individual of his soul, was the inspiration for *Munro*, the story of a four-year-old soldier: conceived as a rebuke on the incoherence of the military system, it contributed to the development of his anti-militarism, which will permeate his view on the Vietnam War in the following decades.

It comes as no surprise that *Linus* showed interest in Feiffer's stories, distant in space but complementary as to ideology<sup>7</sup>. The 1968 protest movement –from the Battle of Valle Giulia in Rome to the May events in France– first aimed at a dramatic change in an academic context, would acquire a mass and international dimension, where the anti-authoritarian perspective turned into criticism against capitalist interests and imperialism in general, grounded on a reference to Vietnam and its liberation (Voza, 2009: 22).

Within this context, the policy of *Linus* becomes clearer, showing how translation can be a partisan art (Gentzler & Tymoczko, 2002: XVIII) and it is significant that the editors chose to publish Feiffer's caricatural strips on Lyndon B. Johnson, the elected president of the United States in 1963, who used military force in Southeast Asia following the events of the Gulf of Tonkin. Perceived in his early days in office as “a brilliant political strategist, the nation's number one civil rights leader” (Feiffer, 1982: 79), Johnson revealed how the government's stance could be ambiguous, promoting fair domestic measures –The Voting Rights Act, The War on Poverty, and Medicare– in contrast to an aggressive foreign policy. The initial difficulty the cartoonist faced when drawing an honest president quickly vanished with the leader's cynical involvement in Vietnam: “As a political satirist –Feiffer declares–, my pen only works where it can hurt. So Johnson was good for the country but killing my business. Until he started bombing North Vietnam” (Feiffer, 1982: 79).

In a 1966 strip, the cartoonist portrays the President explaining this political decision (Fig. 1a-b). On a stage of borderless panels and spare backgrounds, Feiffer's characters reveal themselves through their private thoughts and conversations or address readers directly “in need of someone who could take their attempts to rationalize and justify themselves seriously” (Kercher, 2006: 147). Lyndon Johnson is shown concealing the act of striking Vietnam under the guise of peace, “in order to get Hanoi to the negotiating table” (Feiffer, 1982: 93). The author ridicules the futility of this action, which proves successful as a violent operation but not in terms of conciliation. Nevertheless, the plan is reiterated by the President with increasing intensity, bombing Hanoi and Haifong, provoking China, and threatening Moscow. This ironical contrast is further enhanced in the translation of the strip published in *ProvoLinus* through the rhetorical device of repetition: in the source text, the strategy is defined, in turn, as “successful”, “effective” and “fruitful” (Feiffer, 1982: 93) whereas the Italian sentence “La mossa ebbe successo sotto molti aspetti. Ma non spinse Hanoi a negoziare”<sup>8</sup> appears in all occurrences as a refrain (*ProvoLinus*: 66). Furthermore, irony results from the reluctance shown by Johnson in attacking Vietnam, underlined by the idiom “with heavy heart”, which is rendered as “a malincuore” through a substitution (Malone, 1988: 20) and by the expression “with the agony of power”, translated as “con la morte nel cuore”. The Italian phrase, which indicates a deep feeling of sorrow, omits any reference to the role of power, but emphasizes the hypocrisy of Johnson's pain, as shown by the final cutting remark: “La mia pazienza non è inesauribile”<sup>9</sup>.

A comparison between the source and the target text reveals the publishers' inclination to domesticate the format (Rota, 2008: 86), replacing the original horizontal sequence with a vertical layout in a transition from the newspaper to the magazine. Published daily or weekly, American comic strips appear as fragments of a broken *continuum* and thus follow a specific narrative structure based on variation and repetition as shown in the example above, made up of a series of panels that create the presupposition for humour until the final punch line (Attardo, 2001).

In a syncretic text, where “the simultaneity of the visual and verbal languages generates the diegesis” (Celotti, 2008: 34), translation will work if a variety of factors are taken into account: whether a story published in a foreign country will produce a similar humorous response depends not only on the translator's ability to blend words and pictures so as to preserve the effect of the original text, but also on the target readers' awareness of verbal and visual cultural references (Zanettin, 2010: 46). It is clear that an additional effort is required for the audience in order to recognize American public figures; in this context, caricatures, which respond to the need for conciseness that connotes comics (Barbieri, 1991: 71), seem to facilitate the identification process.

A 1967 strip by Jules Feiffer (Fig. 2) refers to Lyndon Johnson's official portrait commissioned from Peter Hurd; when the President viewed the finished painting, he commented that it was “the ugliest thing I ever saw”. The cartoonist imagines drawing Johnson's outline progressively in a way that reflects his qualities –popularity, honesty, and empathy– conveyed by warm and sympathetic eyes, responsive ears, a firm mouth that tell things frankly, and a forthright nose. The Italian translation of this phrase, “naso diritto”<sup>10</sup> (*Linus* 30: 8), produces a humorous effect, but cannot preserve the connotations of the English adjective, “direct and outspoken” (“Forthright”: 602). The strip results in a portrait that emphasizes and distorts the President's best-known physical characteristics: small eyes, big ears, and a

<sup>7</sup> In line with Van Dijk's definition, the term transcends a “purely political sense to encompass the knowledge, beliefs and value systems of the individual and the society in which he or she operates” (Munday, 2007: 196).

<sup>8</sup> The decision to condense the concept of “negotiating table” by adopting the verb “negoziare” is ascribable to the space constraints a comic strip imposes.

<sup>9</sup> “My patience is not inexhaustible” (my translation). The source text reads: “My restraint is not inexhaustible”. The use of the term “pazienza” instead of the plain equivalent “autocontrollo” shows the intent to create a more frequent noun-adjective collocation in Italian.

<sup>10</sup> “straight nose”.

long nose, “the ugliest thing I ever saw” (Feiffer, 1982: 116). When the opposition of scripts that determines a humorous outcome “is one between visual and verbal signs, making the incongruity work in translation seems to be the main priority in order for humour to be present” (Zanettin, 2010: 40).

A further difficulty an Italian translator may encounter dealing with stories that provide political commentary in the years of the Vietnam War concerns the way of rendering one of the key notions of the time, the escalation process. The word indicates “an increase or development by successive stages” (“Escalation”: 384), often associated with armaments, prices, or wages.

In a 1966 strip, Johnson comments on the fluctuating nature of political consensus (Fig. 3a-b). The panels develop through a symmetrical verbal structure marked by the alternation of positive and negative polls that leads the President to adjust his approach to the war. Whenever he feels he is losing votes, he decides to adopt a more aggressive policy and repeats: “I escalate” (Feiffer, 1982: 119). The Italian translator preserves this iteration but replaces the verb in the first person with the noun “escalation” (*ProvoLinus*: 69), which entered the target language as a loan in order to compensate a lexical vacuum: the term—as specified in *Vocabolario Treccani*—spread after the United States intervention in Vietnam in 1964, and was initially construed as the way of conducting military operations with a gradual increase in troops and weapons; the definition was later extended to other contexts as well, indicating any sort of progression<sup>11</sup>.

A similar difficulty occurs in the translation of a 1968 strip, where a citizen is ironical about freedom of choice in American society. In view of the new elections, the man can vote for either Johnson or Nixon to solve serious, contemporary problems, which are listed as nouns preceded by a participial adjective: “rising poverty”, “rising racism”, and “an escalating war” (Feiffer, 1982: 120). The translation of the last noun phrase is challenging since Italian lacks the equivalent of the adjective; the best solution is borrowing the word from English: “una guerra in escalation” (*Linus* 36: 46). The examples above show how translators have to solve the lexical problems associated with the assimilation of new realities in a certain culture and have to introduce new vocabulary to represent them.

It is no coincidence that the title of the article that Ranieri Carano dedicates to the cartoonist in *Linus* 30 is “L’escalation di Jules Feiffer”, alluding to the progression of his career. Speaking to a large audience in Wisconsin in 1964—the magazine editor recalls—Feiffer defines himself as a ‘court subversive’, integrated into American society, declaring that satire is now inherent in our way of life and acts as a “new outlet for our aggressions”<sup>12</sup> since it gives us the ability to downplay serious situations. Carano questions the idea that Feiffer’s criticism comes from within the establishment and underlines the political twist of his art especially after the appearance of emerging realities, such as the escalation in Vietnam or the youth protests, as the cartoonist’s sharp attacks on Lyndon Johnson would make it clear.

Feiffer seemed pessimistic about the effectiveness of his weapon, but his potential as a satirist to raise public consciousness was clearly perceived by critics and intellectuals in the 1960s, as the words of Umberto Eco show:

The satire of this author, so accurate, catching with such precision the ills of a modern industrial society, translates them into exemplary types, and displays in the revelation of these types so much humanity ( nastiness and pity at the same time) that, in whatever newspaper these stories appear, however successful they may be [...], their success in no way lessens their power. A Feiffer’s story, once published, cannot then be exorcised; once read, it sticks in the mind and silently works there (Eco, 1994: 39).

The power of words to shape reality and people’s views is particularly evident when Feiffer addresses the issue of segregation: in a 1967 strip, he shows how ethnic designations have long been associated with the development of racial attitudes (Fig. 4a-b). Black people claim to be called “blacks”, a term introduced when the first Europeans discovered Africa maximizing through language the perceived difference (Fairchild, 1985: 47) and replaced in history by various names, more or less neutral: “They were not called ‘African Americans’ or ‘blacks’ in the fifties. They were ‘Negroes’. The term Afro-American was coming up on the outside, but never to become part of mainstream usage” (Feiffer, 2010: 283).

The impartiality of “Afro-Americans”, which carries a geographical connotation, is in contrast with offensive words like “negroes” and “darkies” (Feiffer, 1982: 108). Rendering these two negative labels into Italian in the *Linus* strip is challenging since they both have their plainest equivalent in the term “negri”: hence, faced with the need to find a further noun that could express contempt while translating “darkies”, the target text opts for “zulù” (*Linus* 34: 38), which indicates not only a race living in South Africa, but also a rude and ignorant person<sup>13</sup>.

It is clear that differences in language carry ideological distinctions by providing expressions that assign “different semantic roles to the members of different groups, thus discriminating among them and, by imbalance, assisting the practice of allocating power and opportunity unequally among them” (Fowler, 1991: 120).

Nevertheless, in Feiffer’s strips blacks often appear not as helpless victims but as rational operators, conscious of their power to frighten whites with a well-timed word. In a 1965 strip, a black man addresses a group of white people

<sup>11</sup> See also Cortelazzo and Zolli, *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*, Bologna: Zanichelli 1999.

<sup>12</sup> The words pronounced at the conference are quoted in *Vassar Miscellany News*, Vol. XLIX, 10(2) December 1964 and *Rinascita* 25 (1965).

<sup>13</sup> See *Vocabolario Treccani Online*.



as “whitey” (Feiffer, 1982: 108), which does not have an immediate equivalent with derogatory connotations in Italian. The translator forms the word “biancuzzi” (*ProvoLinus*: 67) using the suffix “-uzzo” in its pejorative meaning.

It is significant that in a 1968 strip, published and translated in *Linus* 40, a black and a white citizen kill each other after pledging allegiance to the flag of the United States and justify their act in the name of a unique and “indivisible” homeland. Feiffer depicts American society in its contradictions and dilemmas: the US involvement in a foreign conflict that proves savage and violent is part of this ambiguity. In 1968, the cartoonist compared the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia with American intervention in Vietnam showing that whoever opposes a policy of “aggression” is considered as an anarchist to be imprisoned.

### 3. “Peace is always shorter”<sup>14</sup>: American politics in Walt Kelly’s *Pogo*

Safe in the knowledge that the news of the day represents a gold mine from which to extract comic effects, the cartoonist Walt Kelly makes his characters act within the context of the American political debate. The adventures of the opossum Pogo and his friends first appeared in the *New York Star* in 1948: “When that paper failed, the author joined the staff of the *New York Post* and took *Pogo* with him. The strip was first syndicated in the *Post* in 1949 and in just over a year it had been picked up by 126 newspapers across the United States” (Jarvis, 2003: 1).

The Okefenokee Swamp, between Florida and Georgia, is the primeval scenery of the story, a remote and secluded homeland which, however far from urbanism, turns into a microcosm that illuminates the characteristics of mankind. Through the description of these Southern animal inhabitants, which represent the archetype of rural sociology, Kelly proposes the image of an idyllic community fighting against intolerance, hypocrisy and corruption. Since the characters possess a surplus of leisure time, they can devote themselves to a wide range of social activities: “celebrating holidays, having poetry contests, looking for lost children, playing baseball, getting involved in civic controversies [...], and running elections for president” (Denney, 1954: 17). Gathered around the protagonist, the animals discuss a variety of issues in search of the “right answers to questions of politics, art, science, medicine” (Denney, 1954: 17), making the comic strip “a medium of delivery for sharp and unblinking commentary on contemporary [...] problems” (Black, 2015: 13). Their philosophical dialogues develop through a complex language that reflects human-like, unstable relations and is connoted by semantic and phonetic confusion. Walt Kelly invents an artificial American dialect, a “comic version of rural Southern syntax, vocabulary, and pronunciation” (Denney, 1954: 20) – and adopts polyglottism as the main verbal device: the characters create new words, speak in verse, and use Latin or foreign languages.

The comic strip appeared in *Linus* translated by Bruno Cavallone: he introduced *Pogo* to his readership in July 1965 and highlighted the difficulties encountered in reproducing the linguistic complexity of the dialogues, which seem to be more important than the pictures. The polysemous nature of puns, the paratextual elements that enrich the panels, and the literary quotations contained in the strips represent a challenge to the translation process. In order to make the text transparent and intelligible to the target reader, Cavallone (2009: 51) chooses a “fluent” language, as the analysis of the strips will show, and desists from exactly reproducing the sounds and rhythm of the original. He is aware that translation always entails a process of negotiation (Eco, 2003: 6) characterized by losses and compensations that contribute to preserve the intention of the source text, bound to the cultural framework in which it was born. Indeed, the adoption of a domesticating strategy (Venuti, 1995) is part of Cavallone’s effort to act as a cultural mediator: he adapts the dialogues to the Italian audience and, at the same time, he helps his readers to catch the unfamiliar allusions to foreign traditions, publicly known personalities, and historical events that are inherent in *Pogo* narration.

In particular, Kelly’s work is innovative in the introduction of figures all along the political spectrum as temporary swamp inhabitants: Nikita Khrushchev has a pig’s face and Senator Joseph McCarthy becomes a wildcat named Simple J. Malarkey. During the 1950s and 1960s, censorship was used to control the author’s satire on the themes that he explored from time to time: McCarthyism, Communism, Southern racial segregation, and the Vietnam War<sup>15</sup>. By 1968, when the presidential elections gained considerable attention by virtue of the debate on the progression of the Vietnam War, Walt Kelly had the opportunity to exploit the satirical potential of this issue.

*Linus* gives a sample of such political discourse, translating the *Pogo* strips distributed by the Post-Hall Syndicate in February 1968. The selected story features the dialogue between the protagonist and Ol’ Mouse, who is portrayed with a bowler hat, a cane and a cigar. He has been hired as “advance man” (Kelly, 1967-1968: 31) for an unknown political candidate by the entrepreneur P.T. Bridgeport, a bear that usually visits the swamp during the presidential election years<sup>16</sup>. The Italian translator describes the mouse’s role through the term “galoppino” (*Linus* 39: 63), which has a negative connotation in general language, but in the election context indicates a person who tries to get votes, as specified in *Vocabolario Treccani*, in line with the English word: “An agent of a political candidate or other public figure who travels in advance to the candidate to organize publicity, arrange meetings and make security checks”

<sup>14</sup> Walt Kelly, *Pogo*, 02-16-1968.

<sup>15</sup> The editors may alter certain aspects such as changing dialogues and characters’ faces or dropping *Pogo* entirely for a time. Politically inspired strips were sometimes moved out of the comics section and into the editorial pages. Furthermore, the author introduced alternate “bunny rabbit strips”, populated by regular swamp animals, to replace the most controversial sequences (See Jarvis, 2003: 2-9).

<sup>16</sup> His name contains a reference to the American showman Phineas Taylor Barnum (Cavallone, 2009: 50) who founded the Barnum & Bailey Circus.

(“Advance man”: 21). The first assignment the mouse takes on is to find an expert of peace advocacy who could possibly achieve the Nobel Prize. The most suitable candidate seems to be Congersman Moop, a frog who is preparing his campaign, as the reader has learnt in the previous strips. The ironical component inherent in the frog’s political action is indicated by the spelling mistakes on the wooden plate that introduces him to the public: “Froggy Bottom campane”, then corrected into “Froggy Bottom campain” (Kelly, 1967-1968: 32). Such nonsense terms, homophonous with “campaign”, evoke the sufferings and difficulties connected to governing. Cavallone tries to create a similar pun in the paratextual element using the Italian words “campana” and “capanna”, which contribute to degrade the character’s campaign program, accordingly defined as clamorous and poor<sup>17</sup>.

The duplicity of the frog becomes clear when he enthusiastically accepts the mouse’s proposal, declaring to deserve the Prize since he “fought tooth an’ claw against that Tompkins Gulf resolution in ‘sixty-four” (Kelly, 1967-1968: 33). The Italian translation avoids the equivalent idiom – “combattere con le unghie e con i denti” – and changes the words of the original panel: “fin dal millenovecentosessantaquattro ho detto che bisognava trattare” (*Linus* 39: 64), making the character’s position more conciliatory<sup>18</sup>. The reader finds out that Congersman Moop actually voted for the war and changed his mind *a posteriori*, acknowledging to have been cheated by an ambiguous political system: “I was hoodwinked, soft-soaped and laundered” (Kelly, 1967-1968: 34). Kelly’s ability to create humorous effects thanks to the potential of language is shown through the use of verbs which express the notion of deceit in various nuances: “hoodwink” (to trick), “soft-soap” (to flatter) and “launder”. The latter has a double meaning since it indicates the act of washing and ironing, already evoked by the word “soap” and, in an informal register, it expresses the attempt to make something appear more acceptable especially with reference to money obtained illegally.

The Italian translation, “Ma ora cambio coraggiosamente idea, e dico eroicamente di essere stato truffato”<sup>19</sup> (*Linus* 39: 65), condenses the concept into a single verb, “truffare”, probably due to the difficulty of reproducing the pun in such a small space. In the original text, the bravery of the frog in changing his mind and overtly declaring his view is highlighted by the alliterative phrase “sparkling spunk” that does not appear in *Linus*. The panel is here reconstructed and irony is enhanced thanks to the sentence: “Ecco quel che ci vuole: un po’ di coerenza” (*Linus* 39: 65), which questions the frog’s consistency. Within this context, the Italian name of the character, Onorevole Intrallazzi, proves to be eloquent since it contains a reference to political intrigues. This is why the frog deserves a particularly special award, different from the distinguished Swedish one, the IG Noble Prize, given by the mouse’s cousin, Ignatz. The wordplay here is clear both in the source and in the target language. Ignatz runs a grocery and offers a turkey every year “for the best counterbution to peace” (Kelly, 1967-1968: 34). The distortion of the word “contribution” by means of the prefix “counter”, which indicates an opposition or reaction to something, is emblematic. The Italian text does not recreate the pun, but alters the words contained in the balloon as follows: “Mio cugino Ignazio della salumeria Nobel ogni anno regala un tacchino al cliente più pacifico”<sup>20</sup> (*Linus* 39: 65). Pogo shows his skepticism: “E Intrallazzi è pacifico?” (*Linus* 39: 65), hinting at the paradoxical nature of the nomination.

Meanwhile, P.T. Bridgeport is arranging his travelling circus which is headed towards New Hampshire, satirizing the atmosphere of American political campaigns. He arrives at the swamp selling his wind-up toys, which resemble candidates in the 1968 elections. The Presidential campaign is represented as a real race whose participants are the members of both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. The first to be introduced is George Romney, who does not seem to be a good runner: the puppet barely moves, until the bear winds it up and then, it quickly makes its exit. In the Italian strip we read: “Non ho mai visto un ritiro più veloce”<sup>21</sup> (*Linus* 39: 67), alluding to Romney’s actual withdrawal from the race on February 28. The original strip, which the author was forced to rewrite to comply with syndication requirements, added a further element: the politician was portrayed as “putting his foot in mouth” (Kelly, 1967-1968: 37). The idiom – which means “to say or do something that you should not have, especially something that embarrasses someone else” (“Put your foot in your mouth”) – refers to Romney’s inappropriate statement that contributed to undermine his campaign: in 1967, he admitted to having been brainwashed about the Vietnam War<sup>22</sup>.

Next, P.T. Bridgeport opens a box showing Pogo a new puppet that does not need to be wound up but “runs at the drop of a hat” (Kelly, 1967-1968: 38): Bruno Cavallone does not maintain the idiom but translates the sentence as “Corre solo a guardarlo” (*Linus* 39: 67). The new puppet resembles the incumbent Democratic president, Lyndon B. Johnson: Kelly introduced the character in the swamp in March 1968 depicted as a Texas longhorn. The steer had vision problems and had to undergo a series of eye tests: this description may be interpreted as a mild criticism towards Johnson’s blind war policies and his inability to decode reality. The other characters laugh at his “visibility gap” (Kelly, 1967-1968: 58), an expression that echoes the “Credibility Gap”, widely used by contemporaries to question the truthfulness of his statements about the Vietnam War.

In a strip distributed on March 11, Walt Kelly portrays Johnson’s head stuck in the Mount Rushmore’s cutout board due to the length of his horns. The words he utters, “Once I stick my head in, don’t seem like I gets out easy”

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, “campana” refers to a bell and “capanna” is the Italian word for “hut”.

<sup>18</sup> The sentence in the target language shows the frog’s desire to negotiate.

<sup>19</sup> “Now I courageously change my mind and bravely say I was cheated” (my translation).

<sup>20</sup> The target text suggests that the mouse’s cousin offers a turkey to his most peaceable customer.

<sup>21</sup> “I have never seen a faster withdrawal” (my translation).

<sup>22</sup> In a footnote that opens the volume *Equal Time for Pogo* (1967-1968), Kelly praises the nobility and honesty of Romney’s act.

(Kelly, 1967-1968: 40), are meaningful, especially in the Italian translation, “Mi spiace, amico, ma una volta dentro, è difficile uscirne” (*Linus* 39: 68), which alludes to the difficulty of getting out of trouble.

The steer’s impossibility to move hints at the problems connected to the New Hampshire primary. Initially confident of a win, Johnson was not on the ballot<sup>23</sup>: “The old bull didn’t go either” (Kelly, 1967-1968: 40), Bridgeport says, wondering if someone has noted this absence. The animal replies in verse: “Underneath the jolly tree stood a photograph of Me, and a Bust, the very essence, Of the Absent Xmas presence” (Kelly, 1967-1968: 41). Faced with the difficulty of reproducing the homophonic pun that involves the words “present” –as a gift–and “presence”, the translator modifies the Christmas song through a substitution (Malone, 1988) but keeps the rhyme scheme: “Sotto il pino di Natale – in grandezza naturale – c’era un busto sorridente – dell’amato Presidente ...” (*Linus* 39: 68).

Verbal humour plays an important role in *Pogo*, in terms of “puns, jokes, proper names, spoonerisms” (Zanettin, 2010: 44), and often requires considerable modifications in the translation process. Cavallone shows his ability to interpret the pictures and change the balloon dialogues producing innovative effects that put “the Italian reader in the same situation as the original English one” (Eco, 2003: 5).

#### 4. “We can prevent the world from being dominated by any other power-mad bunch of bums”<sup>24</sup>: Al Capp and the war

The representation of conflict is at the core of American popular art, as shown in the *Li’l Abner* strips published between February and March 1968. The hilly community of Dogpatch, home to the Yokum family, is the framework of a story that both entertains and instructs the audience. Evoking the atmosphere of the Cold War, the author, Al Capp, creates the fictional land of Bottumala, an island strategically located between Russia and China, which attracts international interests: in fact, it is said that any country able to join it will rule the world.

The distinctive feature of its inhabitants concerns their food habits since they only eat roasted rump. The author exploits the polysemy of the word to create a comic effect: it may refer to good quality meat, i.e. “the hindquarters of a mammal, not including the legs; [...] a cut of beef from behind the loin and above the round” (“Rump”: 1346), but it is also a synonym for “backside”<sup>25</sup>. It is significant that the translator, Ranieri Carano, chooses a literary term, “terga” (*Linus* 39: 48), as the equivalent of “rump” with a touch of irony, but uses a more colloquial prefix to render the name of the Prime Minister Rumpelmyer into Italian, Kulmyer<sup>26</sup>. He is defined as a “roast-rump-relishing (*Li’l Abner*, 02-15-1968) “tergarrostofilo”<sup>27</sup> (*Linus* 39: 50): therefore, the various powers in the world invite him to dinner to offer their best meat in an effort to woo him. The leaders of the time –Kosygin, De Gaulle, and Mao– are mentioned in their fruitless endeavors: “I can’t stomach any Mao of this” (*Li’l Abner*, 02-14-1968), the Prime Minister complains. The Italian translation of the sentence, “Di’ al Presidente di darla al Mio Mao” (*Linus* 39: 49)<sup>28</sup>, is particularly effective since a cat’s call and the Chinese leader’s name are homographs.

The White House is more determined and directly involves its intelligence services, the F. B. I. and C. I. A., to find the rarest rump. Their action is justified on the grounds that it “can prevent the world from being dominated by any other power-mad bunch of bums” (*Li’l Abner*, 02-15-1968), showing how the United States tend to shroud conflict under the guise of international defense. The plain Italian translation reflects this inclination: “impediremo che il mondo venga dominato da un altro branco di pezzenti assetati di potere!!” (*Linus* 39: 50).

The source text is dotted with references to the image of the backside and achieves a high degree of cohesion: the protagonists, Li’l Abner Yokum and Daesy Mae, are alarmed, as shown by their expressions “Our future is behind us” and “Has we hit bottom” (*Li’l Abner*, 02-12-1968). The latter, which means “to reach the lowest point, state, or condition” (“Hit bottom”), has a possible equivalent in Italian in the idiom “toccare il fondo”. However, the translator does not maintain the metaphor and simply writes “Il futuro è tristo”, “Dove che finirem noialtri?” (*Linus* 39: 49), underlining the characters’ despair in view of a gloomy future. Ranieri Carano chooses to adopt a dialect of Northern Italy, as he specifies in *Linus* 1 (1965), to render the language of the rural community of Dogpatch, which is originally obtained through an orthographic deformation of common English that reproduces a regional pronunciation. Indeed, he acknowledges that the use of standard Italian would have caused the loss of ethnical nuances conferred by the American author.

<sup>23</sup> See: Mc Ardle, T., “Eugene McCarthy vs. LBJ: The New Hampshire primary showdown that changed everything 50 years ago”, *Washington Post*, 12 March 2018.

[www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/03/12/eugene-mccarthy-vs-lbj-the-new-hampshire-primary-showdown-that-changed-everything/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/03/12/eugene-mccarthy-vs-lbj-the-new-hampshire-primary-showdown-that-changed-everything/) [Accessed 4 March 2020]. Johnson’s staff was running a write-in campaign. On March 12, Eugene McCarthy received 42 percent of the vote while Johnson got 50 percent. On March 31, the incumbent President will decide to withdraw from the competition.

<sup>24</sup> Al Capp, *Li’l Abner*, 02-15-1968. Al Capp’s strips will be quoted hereafter indicating the publication date in American newspapers. In particular, I consulted *Bridgeport Post*, February-March 1968.

<sup>25</sup> The name of the island, Bottumala, has the same connotation since it evokes the word “bottom”. However, this reference is missing in the Italian strips.

<sup>26</sup> In the target language “culo” is a vulgar word meaning “backside”.

<sup>27</sup> The translator uses a neologism in the target text.

<sup>28</sup> “Tell the President to feed the cat with it” (my translation).



An attentive reader knows that the Yokums are worried since they own the last female of hammus alabammus, a delicious species of pig, Salomey, whose Biblical name actually recalls “salami”. The Israeli Ambassador passes this piece of information on to Lyndon B. Johnson since the Jewish, who are not allowed to eat pig meat, cannot benefit from it.

In the short introductory note to the story, the *Linus* editors had explained the subtle cultural references in the strips that an Italian reader might miss; however, in most cases, it is easy to recognize contemporary politicians, whose striking physical characteristics are exaggerated through a caricature: big ears connote the US President, who never faces the public, and a fair quiff is the main trait of Senator Robert Kennedy<sup>29</sup>.

Following the Yokums’ refusal to hand the pig over, Lyndon Johnson addresses General Hershey and an allusion to the Vietnam War starts to emerge. Salomey receives a letter from the Department of Defense and decides to burn it: “Oh Mah Goodniss!! It’s a draft-card!!” (*Li’l Abner*, 02-27-1968). Carano chooses to explain the function of the notice: “Oh, Santa Polenta!! Era una chiamata a le armi!”<sup>30</sup> (*Linus* 39: 52). Draft-card burning was a symbol of protest performed by American men taking part in the opposition to the United States involvement in the Vietnam War.

Mammy Yokum tries to persuade the pig to make the supreme sacrifice, using both indirect and direct marketing strategies, but Salomey runs away to Canada. As specified in the *Linus* introductory note, Canada is the place in which draft dodgers took shelter. The pig here becomes a valuable asset the White House will claim: “All youre Presy-dunt wants fum yo’ is yore backin’” (*Li’l Abner*, 03-14-1968) – Mammy Yokum states. The pun based on the twofold interpretation of the word “backing”, which indicates support but also evokes someone’s back, makes the text cohesive. It is challenging to create a similar wordplay in the target language, where a loss is inevitable: “Il tuo Presidente vuol da te che il tuo sostegno”<sup>31</sup> (*Linus* 39: 55).

Finally, Salomey agrees to sacrifice her life for the sake of the United States, defined as “th’ land o’ th’ free an’ th’ home o’ th’ brave” (*Li’l Abner*, 03-16-1968) – “Il paese de la libertà e la patria dei forti” (*Linus* 39: 56): both the source and the target text ridicule the myth of American fairness and grandeur by quoting the US national anthem. In particular, Al Capp’s irony here is directed at Lyndon Johnson’s program: indeed, the story contains references to the Great Society, a series of domestic initiatives he promoted in order to eliminate poverty and racial injustice. The President’s reforms seem to be full of promises: in the context of the Great Society, Rumpelmyer is offered the possibility of eating a hammus alabammus and showing the event to Bottumala natives via “two-way T.V.” (*Li’l Abner*, 03-27-1968). This term indicates an early form of videotelephony that allowed people at different locations to communicate through audio-video signals in real-time; the Italian translation “TV per satellite” (*Linus* 39: 58) refers to a service that started to spread at the beginning of the 1960s and conveys the image of the United States as a country at the cutting edge of communications. This advanced technology will lead to the paradoxical denouement of the story: when Abner is reluctantly ready to cook Salomey, everyone is shown by television that a tsunami puts an end to the country of Bottumala. The pig is now safe and this parable reveals how young US soldiers perceived the disasters of the war, in contrast with the view the political establishment had on Vietnam.

However, American comics were not exempt from the representation of the initial optimism that accompanied the military campaign in the United States: the strip *Tales of the Green Beret* by Robin Moore and Joe Kubert, launched in 1965, praised the American Special Forces involved in the conflict. The first episode, *Viet Cong Cowboy*, appeared in *Linus* in 1967. The opening high-sounding lines revealed clear propaganda purposes: “Il soldato che porta il berretto verde è un soldato di nobili ideali, di coraggio e di fantasia. Abilmente addestrato per servire con onore il suo Paese [...] contro le aggressioni e le sommosse, per la continuità della pace e della democrazia” (*Linus* 29: 63)<sup>32</sup>.

The *Linus* editors felt the urge to justify their decision to publish the strip: in the introductory note, signed by Oreste Del Buono, they admitted to siding with the Vietnamese community that fought for freedom, despite the grief over the deaths of so many American soldiers. The story was translated in order to represent the disillusion and futilities that characterize any war: “Presentiamo queste strisce come documenti dell’illusione sempre uguale, della stupidità sempre uguale, dell’inutilità sempre uguale delle guerre...” (*Linus* 29: 62)<sup>33</sup>.

The examples provided show that translation is not neutral but involves intervention: it may alternately augment the ideology of the original or be in conflict with it.

## 5. Concluding remarks

As a step in the historical analysis of *Linus* publishing policy, this study has focused on the strips drawn by three cartoonists, Jules Feiffer, Walt Kelly and Al Capp, whose stories recurred in the Italian magazine in the time span

<sup>29</sup> The senator had already been portrayed in *Li’l Abner* in 1967 as a moderator in the “Great Debate” between the two candidates for the presidency –Dilly O’ the Valley and Mammy Yokum. *Linus* published the story after Kennedy’s death and deleted the strips where he appeared, deemed as unpleasant and detrimental to the author (*Linus* 43): this decision shows how translation is derived from a selection process that may entail silence and exclusion.

<sup>30</sup> “Chiamata alle armi” is the common Italian phrase that indicates the order to join the armed forces.

<sup>31</sup> “Sostegno” is a univocal word that means “support”.

<sup>32</sup> “The soldier wearing the green beret has noble ideals, courage and imagination. He is well trained to serve his country honourably [...] against attacks and uprisings in order to ensure continuity of peace and democracy” (my translation).

<sup>33</sup> “These strips are proof of the unvarying illusion, stupidity and uselessness of any war” (my translation).



considered. The texts have been examined from both a linguistic and a cultural perspective, which are intimately connected in the translation process.

The choices made by the translators at the lexico-grammatical level reveal their efforts to deal with semantic and syntactic discrepancies between the source and the target language. Indeed, Italian constructions cannot easily mirror the language of American comics, whose conciseness is enhanced by the space constraints the balloons impose. Furthermore, a significant challenge is posed by the need to preserve the humorous effect intrinsic to the nature of the strip, which results from the iterative structure, the interplay of words and images, and the use of puns based on an association between form and meaning that may or may not be paralleled in the target language (Attardo, 2002: 189-190). Thus, all these aspects should be reconstructed in translation for a different readership so that the pragmatic goals of the source text are fulfilled. This explains the substantial changes introduced to *Pogo* strips by Bruno Cavallone: he departed from the letter of the original in order to ensure an adequate communicative response in his audience (Hatim and Mason, 1990: 18), aware that “only by being *literally unfaithful* can a translator succeed in being truly faithful” to the intention of what is written (Eco 2003: 5).

Indeed, translation not only concerns the relationships between two linguistic systems at sentence or word level, but “is a process that takes place between two texts produced at a given historical moment in a given cultural milieu” (Eco, 2003: 25-26). American comics are embedded in the context of the country in which they were born, hence translators working at *Linus* had to develop a method for bridging the gap in the knowledge of the Italian readers: cultural differences motivate frequent recourse to substitution to render expressions that lack an equational counterpart (Malone, 1988), or justify the addition of background information in the paratext. When tackling translation problems, adherence to an absolute rule is not realistic (Cavallone, 2009), but the best solution has to be negotiated each time. The strategies adopted by Bruno Cavallone and Ranieri Carano reveal that translation may respectively conform to standard language in the target context or resist it by recovering a marginal language variety.

As for the selection of the strips, the editors’ intent to discuss key historical events and offer a domestic representation of foreign reality through translation (Venuti, 1998: 68) is clear. The decision to transpose a text to the target context emerges in response to cultural and political factors: the echoes of the Second World War rhetoric, the themes of freedom and equality, and the protests of 1968 permeate the intellectual debate in Italy. Answering his readers’ letters in August 1968, Giovanni Gandini clarifies that *Linus* does not have a revolutionary or radical nature, but tries to entertain by satirizing social structures and manners. However, the editors’ choices, which prove to be consistent as to the topics covered in the selected issues, reveal the need to construct a purely Italian cultural discourse based on peace and integration.

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### Illustrations<sup>34</sup>:

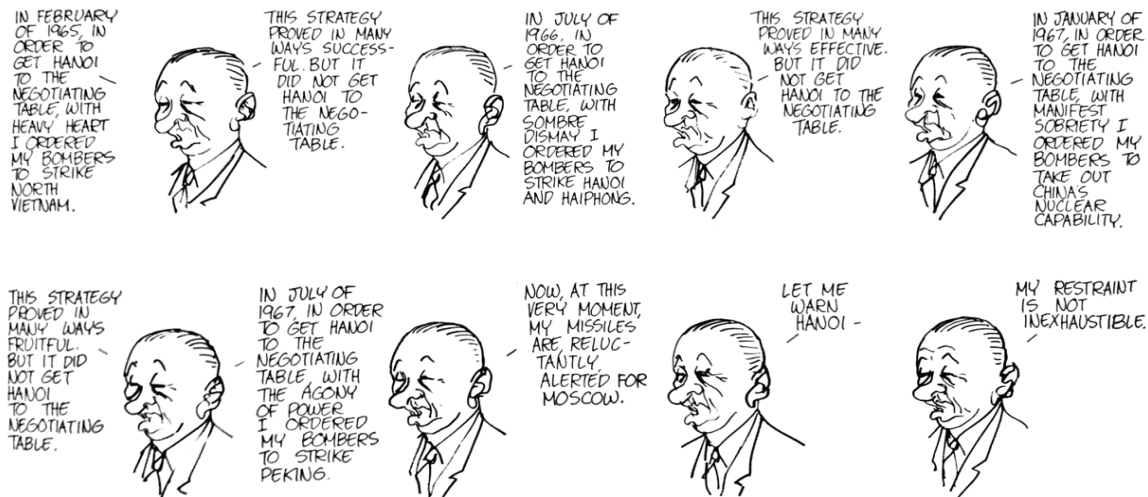


Fig. 1a. a 1966 strip (*Jules Feiffer's America*, p. 93).

<sup>34</sup> While every effort has been made by the author, it has not been possible to identify the owners of the images used. We believe this constitutes a fair use of any such copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law.

Fig. 1b. *ProvoLinus*, 1967, p. 66.

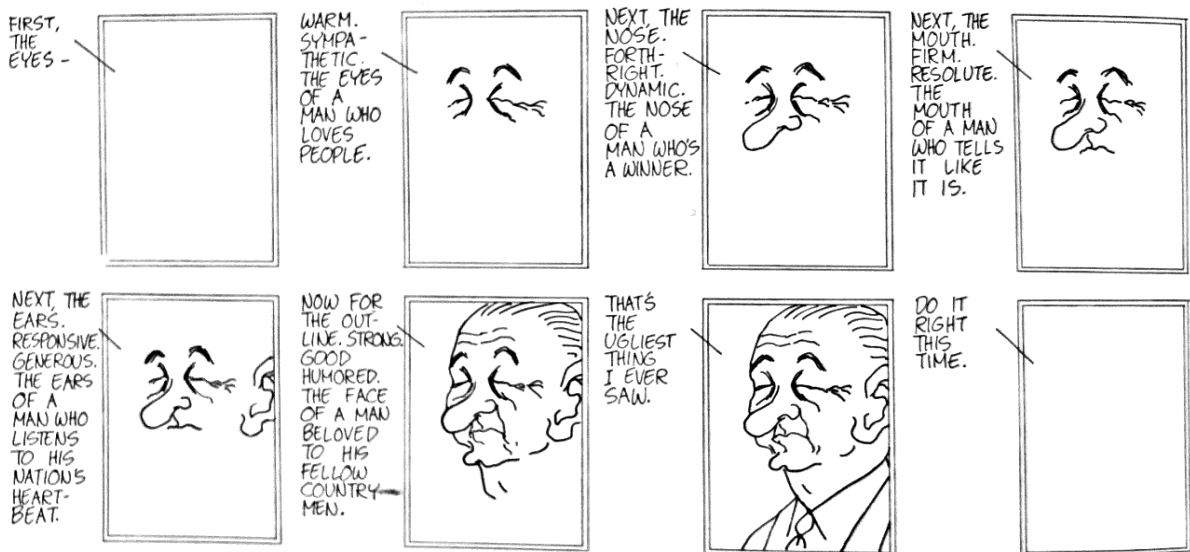
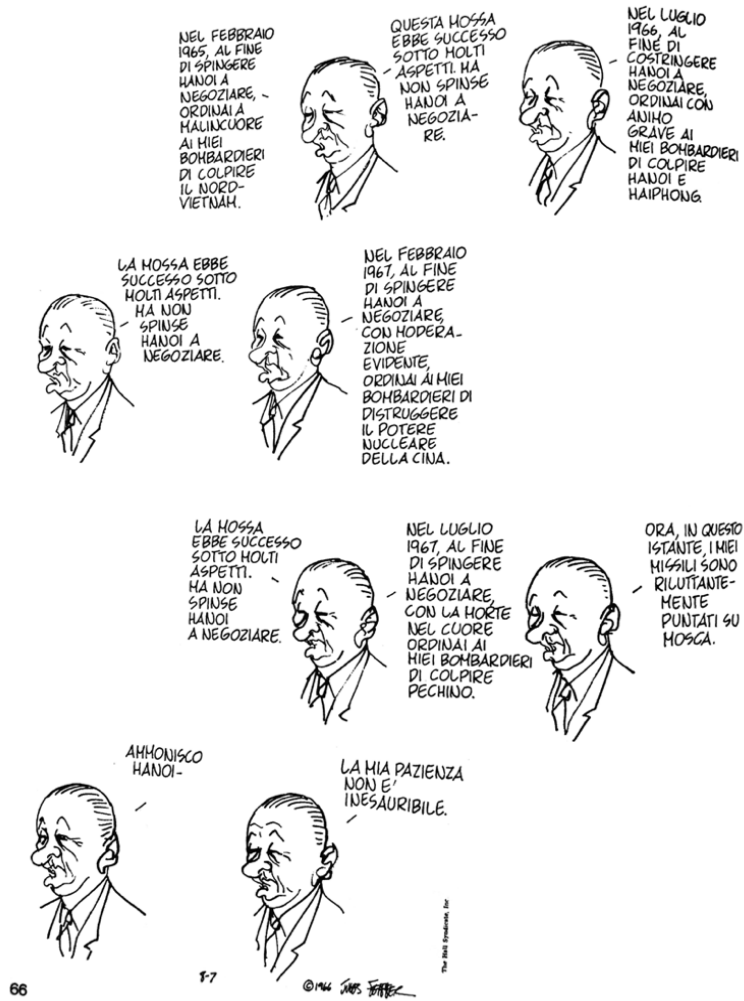


Fig. 2. a 1967 strip (*Jules Feiffer's America*, p. 116).

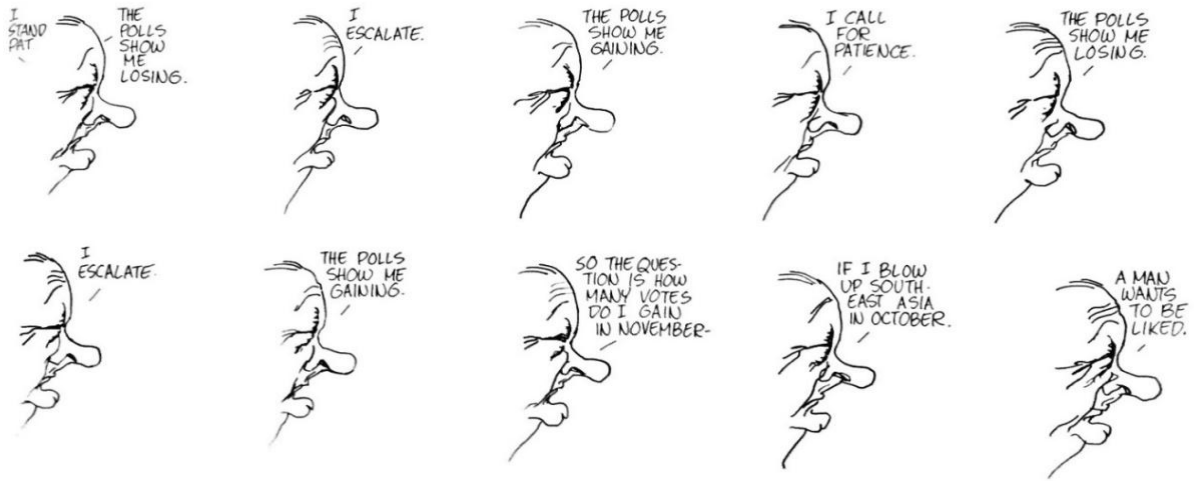


Fig. 3a. a 1966 strip (*Jules Feiffer's America*, p. 119).

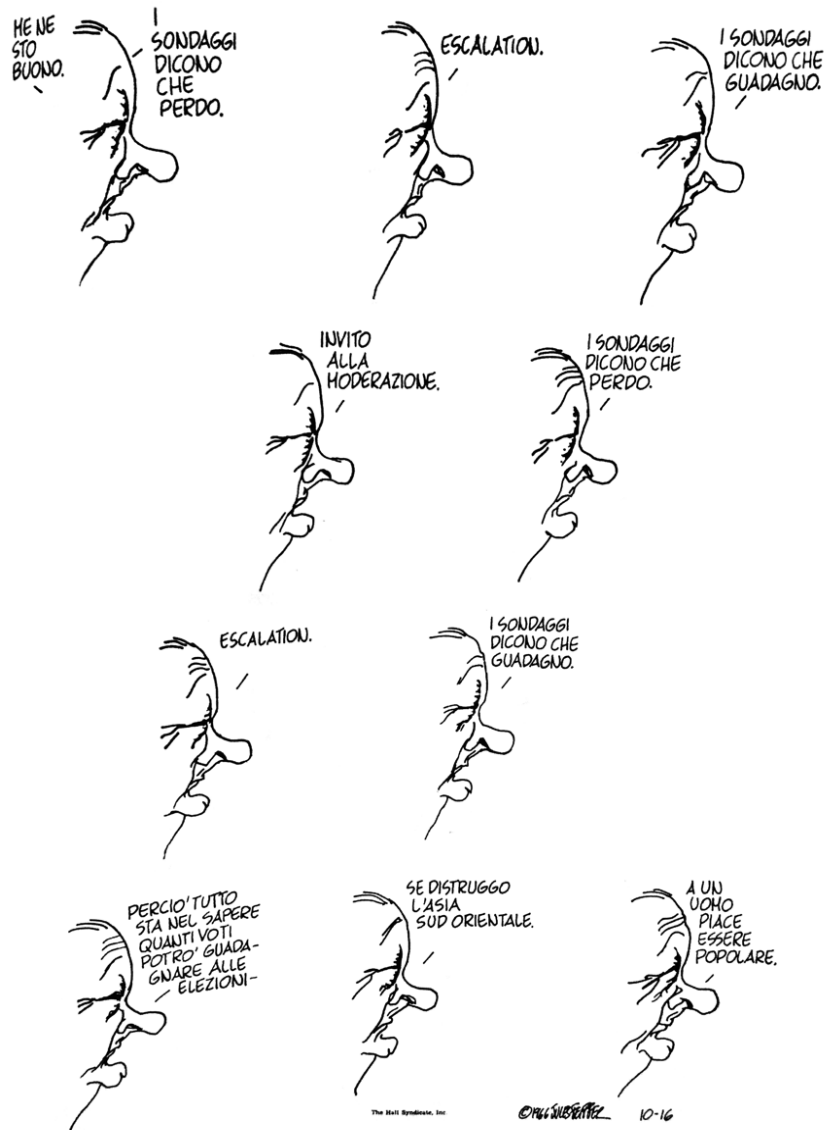


Fig. 3b. *ProvoLinus*, 1967, p. 69.





Fig. 4a. a 1967 strip (*Jules Feiffer's America*, p. 108).

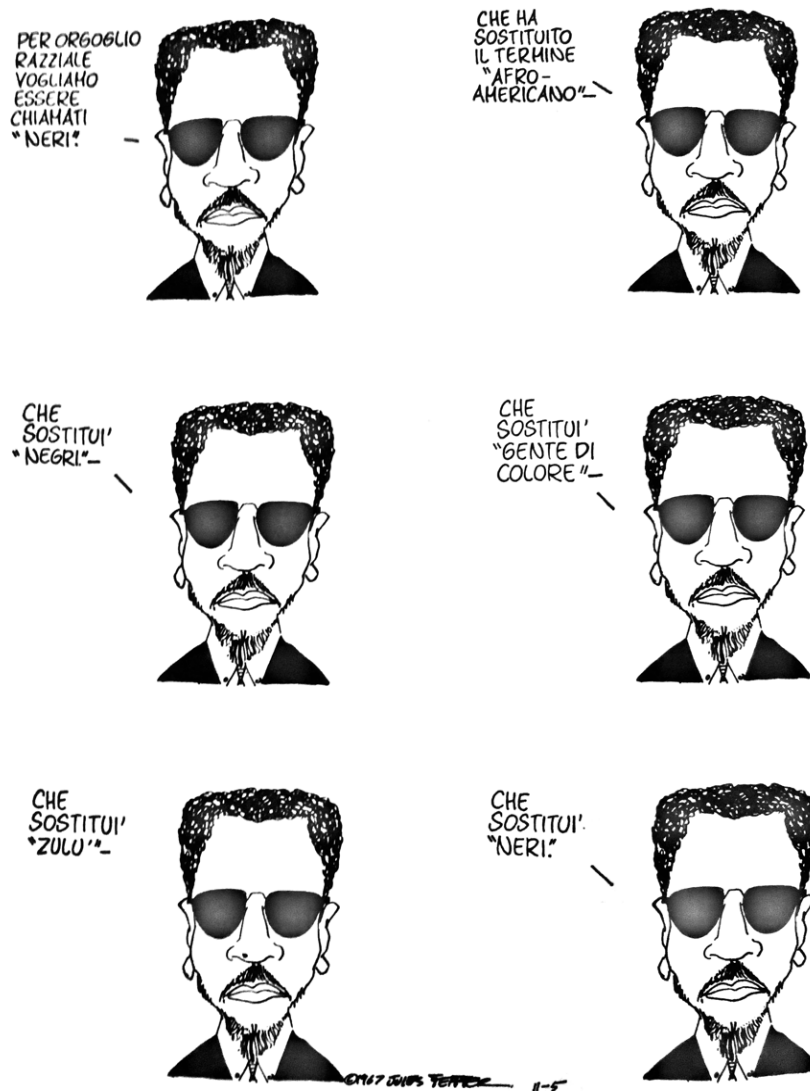


Fig. 4b. *Linus* 34, 1968, p. 38.