




# Mexican Children and American Cartoons: Foreign References in Animation

Niños mexicanos y dibujos animados norteamericanos: referencias extranjeras en series animadas

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## ABSTRACT

This audience study explores how a group of children from Southeast Mexico, perceive the animated cartoon «Dexter's Laboratory». The objective is to observe the ways in which a young local audience, still in the process of building its cultural identity, perceives an American television program. A qualitative approach was applied: 44 children between 8 and 11 years old participated in a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which took place in a provincial city in Mexico (Villahermosa, Tabasco). In each session, the participants watched an episode of the cartoon dubbed into Latin Spanish. Afterwards, it was assessed if they were able to notice cultural elements present in the series (texts in English, traditions, ways of life, symbols, etc.), which are different from their own culture. It was also observed if age, gender and social background had any impact on the degree of awareness. The results showed that most of the participants were aware of the fact that they were watching a foreign program, that they could recognize elements of American culture and that they applied diverse strategies to make sense of these foreign narratives. Older children, and those studying English as a second language, were able to make more sophisticated comparisons between the cultures of Mexico and the United States.

## RESUMEN

Este estudio sobre audiencias explora cómo un grupo de niños del sureste de México perciben los dibujos animados de «El laboratorio de Dexter». El objetivo primordial es conocer la manera en que un programa norteamericano distribuido internacionalmente es entendido por una audiencia local, especialmente por una conformada por individuos que aún están construyendo su identidad cultural. Se utilizó un enfoque cualitativo: un total de 44 niños en edades entre los 8 y 11 años participaron en una serie de entrevistas semi-estructuradas y grupos de discusión, que se llevaron a cabo en una ciudad de la provincia mexicana (Villahermosa, Tabasco). En cada sesión se observó un episodio de la serie animada doblada al español latino. Posteriormente, se evaluó si los participantes sabían que los dibujos animados eran norteamericanos y si notaban la presencia de elementos culturales diferentes respecto a su propia cultura (textos escritos en inglés, referencias a tradiciones, estilo de vida, símbolos, etc.). Asimismo, se indagó si la edad, el género y estrato social de proveniencia influían en esta percepción. Los resultados muestran que la mayoría de los participantes eran conscientes de estar viendo un programa extranjero, reconocían elementos de la cultura norteamericana y aplicaban diversas estrategias para crear sentido a estas narrativas. Niños mayores, y aquellos que estudian el idioma inglés, fueron capaces de realizar comparaciones más sofisticadas entre las culturas de México y Estados Unidos.

## KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Television studies, audience studies, intercultural communication, animation, american cartoons, children audience.  
Estudios de televisión, estudios de audiencias, comunicación intercultural, animación, dibujos animados norteamericanos, público infantil.

## 1. Introduction and background

Animation is one of the most expensive and difficult to produce television genres. Hence, only a few countries in the world have the expertise to create it, while the rest have to import it (Martell, 2011). Among the countries producing animation, the most salient are the United States of America and Japan, which have developed two important traditions: animated «cartoons» and «anime» (Napier, 2001). As a consequence, the majority of the animated series available worldwide reflect the ways of life, traditions and values of these two countries.

As a technique of audio-visual creation, animation can tell any kind of story (horror, romance, pornography, suspense, action, etc.), and thus, it can reach audiences of any age. However, traditionally the youngest viewers have been the most attracted to animated cartoons, especially comedy or adventures, to the point that they prefer them above any other kind of television program.

In Mexico, where production of animation is scarce, the majority of the animated series broadcasted on television are imports. In fact, animation is one of the genres, along with films and fiction series, for which there is a strong American dominance (Lozano, 2008). This means that Mexican children devote a good part of their leisure time to watching these animated cartoons, which show different realities from the ones they experience in their daily life. The first example of such differences that comes to mind is the representation of the scholastic routines of the animated characters: these attend schools that not only look different (with long corridors lined up with lockers in the case of American cartoons), but which also show different social routines (in anime, pupils change their regular shoes for slippers when they enter the classrooms).

Two questions emerge from observing this situation: a) are children able to identify that they are watching a program created in another culture? and b) which strategies do they use to deal with the foreign cultural references they find in the program?

Their popularity among children and the fact that the market is dominated by two nations, make animated series a unique case for studying how local audiences perceive television messages of international reach.

All television programs, when imported, have to pass a «localisation» process (Chalaby, 2002) to make them more understandable and likeable for the new audiences. Still, this does not mean that the programs will lose all of their cultural specificity, since they contain references to the lifestyle, landscapes, values, humour, traditions and even stereotypes of the country of origin.

Generally, animated series are adapted through dubbing, which implies the substitution of the original soundtrack for a new one in the target language (Kilborn, 1993). Besides the dialogues, we often find that dubbing also applies to songs and to the written signs that appear in the program. The most elaborated dubbing examples are achievements in translation, since they can include local accents, traditional sayings, popular expressions and even references to famous characters from the importing country (Cobos, 2010). But even such elaborated dubbing cannot change the visuals or the story of the programs. Within these translation gaps, specific cultural references remain, which the young viewers have to deal with if they are to make sense of the narrative.

Hence, it is relevant to ask how children perceive imported animated series. First, in order to know whether they can identify these cartoons as something different from their own culture and second, to explore how they make sense of the foreign cultural references found in these programs.

The review of the literature reveals that there is a scarcity of empirical research on the understanding that children have of animated programs of foreign origin. In particular, little is known about the strategies that they use to understand animated cartoons that have been adapted through dubbing.

Although the complex relationship between children and television has been amply studied from a variety of perspectives, there are just a few research works that have directly studied the way in which children understand foreign animated cartoons (among others, Corona, 1989; Charles, 1989; Moran & Chung, 2003; Amaral, 2005; Donald, 2005). In this sense, this work aims to contribute to a field of research that is still under development.

The main objective of this study is to ascertain if a group of Mexican children between the ages of 8 and 11 are able to identify that the animated cartoons they watch are foreign. A second goal is to identify the mechanisms these young members of the audience use to understand the references to American culture that appear in the series «Dexter's Laboratory» (produced by Cartoon Network). Finally, the third objective is to evaluate if this understanding could be affected by factors such as age, gender or social class. The publication of these results is pertinent because of the prevalence of the assumptions that originated the research: a) the Japanese and American dominance in the Mexican market for animation, b) the preference that children in these age groups show for animated cartoons, and c) the limitations of dubbing in order to

adapt the cultural references included in the programs. Thus, the specific relationship that becomes established between the American cartoons and Mexican children continues to exist, with the mediating action of dubbing.

## 2. Research methods

As it has been explained before, the objective was to explore how a group of children from a provincial city in Southeast Mexico understood American animated cartoons that have been translated through dubbing. Specifically, the aim was to observe whether the participants were able to recognise that the series was foreign, and to identify which were the mechanisms they put at play to make sense of media products created outside of their own culture.

For the empirical work, a qualitative approach was chosen, following the main tradition of international studies on television audiences (Ang, 1985; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Kraidy, 1999; Pertierra, 2012). Qualitative techniques, such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups, do not limit the respondents to a pre-determined set of answers, but can nevertheless offer a clear vision of the situation in which these children watch television.

Therefore, the results obtained in this manner should not be generalized to the whole population, but should be understood as insights about the meanings that a specific community is creating out of a given cultural product. In this particular case, they would make it possible to obtain a clearer idea about the ways in which these children perceive the cultural references that remain in this American animated series, even after dubbing.

The fieldwork consisted of six sessions of semi-structured interviews and six focus groups, which took place during the months of December 2004 and January 2005 in the city of Villahermosa, Tabasco, Mexico. The interviews were conducted in the children's homes, which allowed for the observation of the daily context where the social practice of television viewing took place. Half of the focus groups' sessions

took place in a public elementary school, while the other half took place in a private one. In Mexico, the type of school a child attends marks in a clear way the belonging to a given social class due to the high cost of tuition in private institutions.

A total of 44 children participated in the research project: 7 of them in the interviews (a pair of twin girls took part in a single session) and 37 in the focus groups. Plenty of attention was given in order to ensure that the groups were equally divided by age and gender. Likewise, we sought participants that belong

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to a variety of social strata, which in a certain way was determined by their attendance to public or private schools (Tables 1 and 2). An exact proportion was not achieved in every case, but the qualitative outlook of the study allowed for a certain amount of flexibility in this regard.

The age of the participants was within the range of 8 to 11 because these children are already capable of clearly understanding the narrative codes of television (Josephson, 1995; Anderson, 2004). Also, working with children this age ensures that all of them are able to read the written texts that usually appear in animated cartoons, as those signs cannot always be translated and remain in the original language.

In the case of the interviews, due to the difficulty of obtaining access to the homes of young children to carry on observations, the participants were recruited

through acquaintances and relatives of the researcher. The participants in the focus groups volunteered at their schools. In every case, the researcher obtained consent from the children as well as informed consent signed by the parents. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality.

The animated series «Dexter's Laboratory» was selected as the case study because of three main reasons: a) at the time, the series was available in Mexico both on over the air and paid television; b) it was dubbed in Latin American Spanish; c) it was very popular among the young Mexican television viewers (IBOPE, 2005). All of these characteristics made it accessible for the children who participated in the study, without distinction of age, gender or social class. An important additional reason was that the series, being set in contemporary United States, displayed the lifestyle of a typical American family.

The series tells the story of a boy genius named Dexter and of his sister DeeDee, who live with their parents in a house in the suburbs. There is a strong element of fantasy and science fiction in the narrative but there are also typical situations that show American culture. Besides Dexter's adventures, there are also short stories of a group of superheroes led by Major Glory (Mayor America in Spanish) in the series. The presence of all these elements was crucial to enable the discussion about aspects related to cultural differences.

Each of the interview sessions and discussion groups was divided into three parts: for the first 20 minutes the children watched an episode from the animated series, which had been recently recorded from the daily television broadcast. The viewing phase allowed the researcher to observe the reactions of the children while watching the program, as well as to gather spontaneous comments. Afterwards, the participants were asked to tell the main story of the episode. The discussion that followed was structured in a flexible way around a series of topics: it started by asking the participants their opinion about the series, then they were asked where they

**Table 1. Distribution of participants in the interview sessions**

PARTICIPANTS	AGE	GENDER	TYPE OF SCHOOL
Alicia and Andrea	9 years old	Girls (twins)	Public
Karina	9 years old	Girl	Private
Diana	11 years old	Girl	Public
Hernán	9 years old	Boy	Private
Angel	8 years old	Boy	Public
Lucas	8 years old	Boy	Private
7 participants in total	2 children age 8, 4 children age 9, and one child age 11	4 girls/3 boys	4 public/3 private

thought the character lived and where the series was produced; they were also asked to compare their own life with the life of the protagonist, and then slowly the discussion moved to questions concerning the American cultural references contained in the episodes, such as written signs in English, locales and places typical of the American cities, monuments, symbols, etc.

Both the focus groups and the interviews were videotaped and field notes were taken. The interviews were transcribed in full. Transcription of the focus groups was partial, due to the large amount of data and the level of overlap of the participants' interventions. However, the video recordings from these sessions were carefully analysed in order to take into account the answers in the most faithful manner possible.

The information obtained from the fieldwork was codified according to categories of analysis. Since the interest of the study was very specific, some of the categories had been established a priori and were already included in the guide of topics used to structure the sessions (e.g. understanding of the narrative, identification of the origin of animated cartoons, comparison between the life of the character and their own life, etc.). Other categories emerged directly from the answers that children offered, as well as from the field notes (e.g. violent cartoons, negotiation of foreign content through local referents, awareness of dubbing conventions, etc.).

**Table 2. Distribution of the participants in the focus groups**

FOCUS GROUP	AGE	COMPOSITION BY GENDER	TYPE OF SCHOOL
1	8 years old	3 girls/3 boys	Public
2	9 years old	1 girl/4 boys	Public
3	10 years old	4 girls/3 boys	Public
4	8 years old	3 girls/3 boys	Private
5	9 years old	4 girls/3 boys	Private
6	10 years old	3 girls/3 boys	Private
37 participants in total	12 children age 8, 12 children age 9, and 13 children age 10	18 girls/19 boys	18 public/19 private

### 3. Analysis and results

The first result derived from the fieldwork is that all the participants were able to understand and correctly tell the basic story of the episode. In this sense, there were no visible differences in terms of age, gender or social class of the respondents. The participants showed a good understanding of humour as well, which is one of the elements that is regularly lost or diminished in translation. This could be explained in part because a high percentage of comedy in cartoons is visual.

When their opinion on animated cartoons was asked, children mentioned the parts that they liked and those they disliked the most. From this question, it became clear that a majority of the participants were already acquainted with the characters and the basic themes in the series. Not only did they remember the main argument and specific moments of the episode, but they also mentioned many other scenes, characters and recurrent jokes in the series, which they had seen on their own televisions. Hence, the availability of «Dexter's Laboratory» to its audience was confirmed, as well as the popularity of animated cartoons in general, since the participants also named many other titles of both American and Japanese origins.

Immediately afterwards, the children compared what they saw in the animated cartoons with what they experienced in their own lives. Mostly, they focused on tangible things that surrounded them, such as the shape of the houses they saw in the series and their own houses. Many other children also compared the protagonist's family with their own family, talking about the anatomy of the characters, the parents' occupation and sibling rivalry. In this sense, age seems to be a determinant factor as 10-year-old children, from both the public and private schools, made more sophisticated comparisons. In fact, the 10-year-old participants of the focus group from the private school talked about Mexican and American lifestyles. After they had agreed that Dexter lived in the United States, they were asked how they knew this.

The answer came from two boys (Calvin and Armando) and a girl (Ari): «Calvin: Because of the American lifestyle; Researcher: How is the American lifestyle? Calvin: Well, a house with their family, only for themselves; Armando: And also they are always two-storey houses; Calvin: Yes, and a school with lockers, which are very rare here in Mexico; Armando: And that they go [to school] with everyday clothes; Calvin: With pants, everyday clothes, yes; Ari: And the public schools [in the United States] are like the private ones [in Mexico], only that the private ones [in the United

States] are much more expensive.» In this dialogue, the participants show they are able to compare elements of their daily life with what they watch onscreen, even in the case of a genre like animation, which could be considered incredible.

The next category of analysis was the place where Dexter lived. Most of the children, both in the interviews and the focus groups, responded that the character lived in the United States. They said that they had reached this conclusion because they had seen the character Major Glory, a superhero that wears the American flag as his uniform. The 10-year-old children in the focus groups, both in the public and private schools, were so sure that Dexter lived in the United States that they even tried guessing the exact setting of the series, saying that it could be Washington or New York City. On the other hand, a minority of children (one 8-year-old boy from the public school, five 9-year-olds from the public school and one 9-year-old boy from the private school) said that Dexter lived in the capital of their own country, that is, in Mexico City. As the reason for this conclusion, one of them mentioned that it was «because most of the characters [on television] live there». Somehow, the children, from a provincial city, see the capital as the centre of many things in the country, and particularly for television production.

When the participants were asked if they knew where the series «Dexter's Laboratory» was produced, once again the older children in general, and those that attended the private school in particular, were able to say that the program was produced in the United States. Among the reasons they mentioned to reach such conclusions were: a) the opening title and the closing credits of the program are in English; b) Major Glory's uniform displays the American flag; c) they had seen a special program about the production of the series on the cable/satellite channel Cartoon Network. One 8-year-old from the public school mentioned that he was sure the program was made in the United States because he had read it on the Internet. Similarly, a 9-year-old from the private school specified that it was produced in the United States «but it is translated here [in Mexico] ». Only the 9-year-old children group from the public school said that the series was produced in Mexico City, but they did not offer any reasons to justify this idea.

Following the logic of the previous question, the children discussed how it was possible to recognize the origins of animated cartoons. The participants coming from all social classes and ages were accurate in describing the differences between American and

Japanese animated series, even from an aesthetic point of view (they said, for example, that the characters in Japanese programs have huge bright eyes). Interestingly, mirroring a common opinion among parents at the time, some children said that Japanese cartoons could be recognized because they were violent (this was clearly expressed by a 10-year-old boy from the private school: «The most bloody ones come from Japan, such as «Jackie Chan», «Dragon Ball Z», «The Ninja Turtles»). Likewise, a couple of children said that the written signs that appear in the programs are good indicators of the cartoon's origin.

At this point, the children were asked to explain what they usually do when they see written signs in English in the animated cartoons. Most of them, without distinction in age or social origin, said that when they see a sign that is written in another language, they wait for a voice to «announce» what it means (this would be a dubbing convention). A minority of the participants, all of them from the private school, explained that they read the written texts because they could already understand their meaning in English, for they study the language as a mandatory subject at school. Elementary public schools in Mexico, on the other hand, do not offer teaching of the English language. However, the twin girls interviewed (9-years-old), who attended a public school, said that when they see an unknown word in the title of a cartoon they look for the meaning in the bilingual dictionary. Another 8-year-old boy from the public school explained that regarding the signs written in English, he would ask his father: «I never understand a thing. I ask my dad: what does that mean? And he does not understand a thing either. The one who understands is my uncle, because he knows English...». All of these seem to be common mechanisms among these children to try to understand the foreign cultural references.

Besides the participants' answers, it was also possible to take note of their reactions while they watched the episode. From there came the observation that they understand the narrative in a quite adequate way. 10-year-old participants from the private school even recognized the image of Albert Einstein in one of the shorts.

Also, there was a curious moment of negotiation of meanings, when the 9-year-old boy interviewed (private school), seeing the image of a cowboy riding in a black and white scene, identified him with the Mexican «revolucionario» Emiliano Zapata. Thus, he used a local reference to make sense of something that came from outside his own culture.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

Observing these children watching television confirmed what had theoretically been sustained, in the sense that these are viewers that created meanings socially-within their interpretive communities (Orozco, 1990; 1994; Seiter, 1998): while they were watching the episodes recorded for the sessions they commented with their peers, brothers or sisters, made observations, criticized, and asked about what they could not understand.

Complementary, these children were not only an active audience in an ideological sense, as Stuart Hall understood it (2001), but also an audience that was physically active while watching television (Palmer, 1986). During the interviews at their homes, they would entertain themselves in different activities while watching television, such as playing with their toys, eating candy, hugging their stuffed animals, finding the best spot on their beds or sofas, or even teasing their siblings. Also, it was observed that these children had clear categories for what is good and bad, realistic or not realistic in television programs and that they knew what to expect from different genres. In fact, it was possible to infer from their answers that they had specialized knowledge about animated cartoons, which constitute an important part of their daily cultural consumption, along with videogames, films, comic books, etc. (Kinder, 1991).

In regard to the specific focus of this work, all of the participants were able to follow the narrative of the American animated cartoons and they were able to understand the humour. There were not differences related to gender, since both girls and boys showed equal understanding. Age, on the other hand, seemed to be an influential factor, for older children made more sophisticated comparisons regarding their own lives and the elements they watched on the program. Also, children attending the private school were able to talk in a more abstract manner about Mexican and American lifestyles. The facts that these children were more familiar with the English language and that many of them had travelled abroad seemed to play a relevant role in this respect.

Regarding the notions they had about the places portrayed in the animated cartoons, and the place of production of the show, the participants as a group still expressed a certain level of ambiguity. For some of them, Mexico City, as a different and far removed place from their province, was an important point of reference. In fact, it was obvious that for older children and for those belonging to a higher social class, it was clearer that the program was specifically

American. They recognized the origin because of the title and credit sequences in English, as well as for some specifically American cultural traits of the characters.

The discussion on the ways these children recognized the origin of animated cartoons was very revealing, since they precisely described the aesthetic features of Japanese anime, and even expressed some of their judgements about it, such as the fact that it was considered violent.

Finally, it was possible to identify some of the mechanisms that these children applied for the understanding of the cultural references coming from outside their own culture, above all the signs written in English that could not be modified or deleted from the visuals. At this point, the efficacy of dubbing as an adaptation method was confirmed, because all of the children interviewed knew that by convention a masculine voice («a man») must read out loud in Spanish what is written in English. This implies that from a very young age, these children are already aware that some television contents are translated. Nevertheless, regarding the interpretation of these written texts, there was a noticeable difference between younger and older children, because the older reported that they made the effort to ask their parents about the meaning of the words, or even directly searched for them in a bilingual dictionary. At the social class level, the children from the private school had an advantage, for they knew the English language, some of them had been in the United States, or they had relatives who lived in that country. All of this provided them with better first hand-knowledge of the American lifestyle. At this point, my interpretation coincides with the one proposed by La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005) regarding the perception of telenovelas in Brazil: cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) seems to be a relevant factor that guides the interpretation of media narratives, even at ages so early as the range studied here.

The implications of these results can neither be generalized to all Mexican children nor to all children

from the same region where the study was conducted, due to the use of qualitative methods. In spite of that, many of the comments and observations show that these children are conscious about watching a message coming from a different culture. Apparently, the ability of the participants to differentiate their own reality from the one presented in a television program matures with age and is also related to cultural capital. The participants from the private school had a higher possibility of developing, from earlier on, a more complex conception of the world by learning English, through access to international channels on pay televi-

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sion and even by travelling to the United States, where they had personally seen the culture portrayed in American cartoons.

Television messages contribute to children's education by showing them portrayals of the world; as a result, it is important to endorse the active consumption of television by children. In this study, although limited in scope but nevertheless clarifying, children appeared as curious and conscious television viewers. They revealed themselves as subjects that built their cultural identity from a multiplicity of stimuli (local, national and global), to which they had access to according to the socio-economic conditions in which they lived in. A new series of empirical observations would surely enrich the understanding of this pheno-

menon, especially if we take into account that children are adopting new technologies such as smartphones and tablets, which are privileged access points to local and foreign cultural referents.

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