LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN JOKE TRANSLATION

Diana-Elena Popa
Universitatea *Dunărea de Jos*, Galați

Aspecte lingvistice şi culturale în traducerea glumelor (Rezumat)

Limba şi cultura sunt indivizibile şi fără o informație socio-culturală comună atât locutorului, cât şi recipientului, simpla existență a unui cod lingvistic comun se dovedeşte a fi insuficientă în traducerea glumelor. Elementele culturale specifice limbii sursă trebuie transferate în limba țintă. In cazul traducerii glumelor însă acest lucru poate fi extrem de dificil în măsura în care unele trăsături ligvistice şi elemente socio-culturale sunt atât de specifice comunității lingvistice respective, încât, dincolo de granițele acestei comunități, gluma nu are efectul scontat.

As a general tendency in translation studies emphasis has gradually shifted towards cultural issues which has had profound implications for translating humour as well. Nedeergard-Larsen (1993:211), among other scholars, has drawn a table of the variety of culture-bound problems translators may encounter in their work. While this also applies to humour, the whole issue of translating humour is rather more complex, because a translator not only has to judge whether the TL reader understands the humour in a given text but he/she must also know or guess whether the humour functions as humour in the target culture. Humour is, therefore, both a social phenomenon and a cultural one.

But is translating humour fundamentally different from any other form of translation? After all, successful translation, it is often agreed, involves recreating in the TL text those features of the SL text that are relevant for the text to function for a certain purpose (Kussmaul 1995:90). With a humorous text, the purpose is, for all practical purposes, always the same, namely, to elicit laughter. Therefore, the translation should be able to function for the TL audience in a maximally similar way as the original text did for the SL audience even if this was achieved by substantially altering it. Balancing between SL restrictions and TL demands, the translator's main concern should be the immediacy of effect that can be easily lost. Moreover, the translator of humorous texts has to know what is expected of him/her in the process of dealing with humour that has to be transferred to another language. Bell (1991:20) defines the phenomenon as "the replacement of a representation of a text in one language by a representation of an equivalent text in a second language." Both words and language are embedded in a culture. McCarthy and Carter (1994: viii) are of the opinion that language as a system of signs is a cultural vehicle in which the collective experiences of the speakers in their surroundings is reflected and where the community's patterns of social values crystallize.

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Words are not loose entities drifting in space, but belong to a language system, which in turn belongs to a specific culture. And language differences often go hand in hand with cultural differences. In fact, language is one of the most important determining factors with regard to cultural diversity.

The role of the translator in the translation process is to bridge the difference between cultures and languages, which are symbols of that specific cultural identity. He/she is also an instrument in the process of translating between cultures – he/she is the mediator who provides the signs (in the target language and culture) that are used by the receivers to generate meaning.

Thus, translation is not strictly limited to language. Some theorists such as Lambert (1997:60) are of the opinion that translation is an activity which involves "a kind of verbal, but never strictly verbal communication", and is "norm-bound and culture-bound".

It becomes clear that the act of translation involves more than language, it involves non-verbal signs, and is culture-bound. The representation in a second language has to comply with certain requirements in order to be a successful translation. In the case of humour, the translation should fulfill the function of the original humorous text and have a similar effect on the receivers. Yet, Larose (1989:78) considers equivalent effect or response to be impossible – how is the effect to be measured and on whom and how can a text possibly have the same effect and elicit the same response in two different cultures and times?

Wordplay, combining "formal similarity" and "semantic dissimilarity" (Delabastita 1993, as cited in De Geest 1996), is a good example of humour being culture-specific. It is culturally bound in that culture defines what kind of wordplay is appropriate and that recognizing and appreciating it requires shared knowledge. When translating wordplay from the SL to the TL, a translator has basically three options: wordplay, some other rhetorical devices or no wordplay (Leppihalme 1996). The choice between the options is not simple as it includes both textual and extratextual concerns. Source language wordplay may contain, for example, elements that are unacceptable, or even taboo, according to TL norms and that may have to be changed for TL purposes. Accordingly, one could say that the translator rewrites humour for the TL audience following, at least to some extent, the norms accepted in the target culture.

Consequently, as far as humour is concerned, no matter how well the translator knows the target language, cultural references and polysemous items may involve them in long and complicated explanations, after which the recipient rarely reacts with a laugh. Thus, a common linguistic code is definitely not all that is needed in order to appreciate humour, wordplay implicitly. Language and culture are intertwined and without shared knowledge between sender and recipient, a common linguistic code will be almost of no help.

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Lambert acknowledges that translation cannot be restricted to language alone and notes that the phenomenon of translation is communicational and cultural, in which language plays a key role (Lambert, 1997:63).

Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf maintain that each language together with its individual sounds, words, syntax reflects a separate social reality which is different from that which is neglected in another. Thus, translation is not merely a matter of substituting the words of the SL with those in the TL and adapting the syntax to suit it. If a translator wants to be successful, she/he has also to convey a whole range of added meaning belonging to the source culture.

"No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached." (Whorf, 1956:69)

The formal linguistic features and the sociocultural elements that form a joke are often so specific to a single language and cultural community that, beyond its frontiers, the joke is unlikely to succeed. Like Delia Chiaro says: "Jokes, it would seem, travel badly."(1992:77)

Nonetheless, if two cultures possess categories of jokes which play on similar subject matters, then it ought to follow that translating jokes into the two reciprocal languages should be a fairly easy task. However, the worlds of two cultures do not always match quite so easily. Yet, a successful translation of a joke must capture the sense of the original rather than merely the words and it can be regarded as a successful piece of communication if it makes sense to the receptor. That would mean that signs, connotations, denotations and references in the source joke would have to be translated or recreated in such a way in the target text that the response of the target language receivers would be equivalent to that of the source language receivers.

When two languages involved in the translation of a joke possess even a little shared cultural ground with each other, although the target version will not always be perfectly clear to the recipient, it will at least bear some resemblance to the message in the original joke.

But when jokes play on events, states and situations which are peculiar to their culture of origin, they create serious problems on the recipient's understanding. Here are some jokes playing on British cultural elements that can hardly be understood outside their cultural-bound context.

Julia Roberts, an Englishman and a Frenchman were all sitting in the same train compartment. Nothing much happened until the train went into a tunnel. Through the darkness could be heard the sound of a loud slap and a cry of pain. When the train emerged from the tunnel, Julia Roberts and the Englishman were sitting perfectly normally, but the Frenchman was rubbing his cheek and nursing a swollen eye.

Julia immediately thought: "The Frenchman must have tried to kiss me when we went in the tunnel, but kissed the Englishman by mistake and got a slap for his pains."

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The Frenchman thought: "The Englishman must have tried to kiss Julia and she slapped me by mistake."

And the Englishman thought: "That is great. Every time we go into a tunnel, I can smack that French prat!"[1] *(1)*

There is the sociocultural implication of the ever lasting rivalry between the English and the French. To find the joke funny, you need to be aware of the never ending English-French *mental war* within an English person. In fact, there is another joke that says that "*Sure sign that you're English is that you're still mentally at war with Germany, France, Scotland, the American colonies, the Danes, the Celts, the Vikings, and the Romans".*[2] *(2)*

A joke similar to joke (1) is the following:

There was an Irishman, and Englishman and Claudia Schiffer sitting together in a carriage in a train going through Tasmania. Suddenly the train went through a tunnel and as it was an old style train, there were no lights in the carriage and it went completely dark. Then there was this kissing noise and the sound of a really loud slap.

When the train came out of the tunnel, Claudia Schiffer and the Irishman were sitting as if nothing had happened and the Englishman had his hand against his face as he has been slapped there. The Englishman was thinking: "The Irish fella must have kissed Claudia Schiffer and she missed him and slapped me instead." Claudia Schiffer was thinking: "The English fella must have tried to kiss me and actually kissed the Irishman and got slapped for it." And the Irishman was thinking: "This is great. The next time the train goes through a tunnel I'll make another kissing noise and slap that English bastard again!"[3] *(3)*

This joke is more elaborate providing more details that contribute to the effect of the punchline (the fact that they were travelling in Tasmania explains the old fashion carriages with no light). As far as the cultural background is concerned, it relies on another well-known rivalry, namely, that between the English and the Irish.

Yet, when sociocultural restraints are combined with linguistic restraints, translating it can become an arduous task. If we are to remember Jacobson's theory, then it will follow that full equivalence in translating is impossible. Here is an example:

Prince Charles was out early the other day walking the dog. When a passé-by said: "Morning", Charles said: "No, just walking the dog."[4] *(4)*

[1] The joke is taken from Tibballs, Geoff, 2002, *The Mammoth Book of Jokes*, London, Robinson p. 124.

[2] Ibidem, p. 125

[3] The joke is taken from the internet: www.thejokebox.com.

[4] Idem.

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This joke is particularly difficult to translate because it plays on two levels: the linguistic and the cultural one. In translating such a joke, one needs, first of all, to understand the core of the joke and then try and transfer it to the target language. Yet, the cultural context has to be explained first: on the one hand, Prince Charles is part of the present British Royal family, more precisely, he is the son of Queen Elizabeth; and on the other hand, it must be said that the joke describes the event as taking place somewhere immediately after his wife, Lady Di's accidental death.

On a linguistic level, the phonemic resemblance between the verb ***to mourn***, in its continuous aspect – ***mourning*** and the noun ***morning***, which belongs to the greeting "Good morning", but which in familiar English may be left as such. The linguistic part will be impossible to render into Romanian because of the obvious lack of phonemic coincidence of the two words.

Yet, as far as the cultural coordinate is concerned, the particular reference can be explained in a footnote. Nonetheless, the footnote will merely isolate what is a part of a broader cultural identity (Lady Di's relation to his husband, her life and her role played in the British Royal Family, her accident, her death etc) and while explaining what the small circle may signify they will still leave in the dark – take for granted – the general background which gives energy and relevance to the small details.

Dagut (1978:49) is of the opinion that the cultural gap, or the absence of reference is caused by ***community specific*** referents in one community and their absence in the other culture. Cultural objects, beliefs, customs, institutions and humour for that matter, are determined by the cultural history and traditions of the specific language community. A language community creates ***designators*** to symbolize referents which do not occur in the other language community. An illustrative example for such a cultural gap would be that provided by Delia Chiaro (1992:81) who cites Yan Zhao's study on a Chinese joke. From a linguistic point of view, the joke can be easily translated but, from a cultural perspective, it is almost impossible to understand for Western Europeans (to the Romanians it might make some sense due to the abrupt sociopolitical changes after 1989):

After saving money for quite some time, the family has finally bought a washing machine. Days later, the son comes home from school to find his middle-aged mother standing on a small stool and handwashing clothes with a washboard inside the brand new washing machine. Puzzled, the son asks, "Why don't you use the machine, Mama?" "I am just used to doing it this way." (5)

The analyst and translator of the joke, Yan Zhao, explains that it plays on the influence of old traditions and the confusion caused to the Chinese by modernization. The recipient's amusement lies in the mother's confusion of new and old, technical and manual.

But what does a translator do when he/she is faced with an untranslatable cultural-bound joke? There are some possible methods that he/she might use to deal with it. Firstly, the translator has to isolate the different cultural references, whether explicitly

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or implicitly stated. Only after having identified them and the signs used to represent them, can the translator attempt to find dynamic equivalence in the target culture. It is only then that she/he may decide to keep the word or even translate the concept literally and add a footnote or explanation within the translation itself. She/he could also leave it out but this would be to the detriment of the text and the message, unless she/he uses a substitute concept, word that would evoke a vaguely similar response. In the case of joke translation, the joke might even be replaced with one that is culturally-bound in the target language in order to create a similar message, and reaction from the receiver.

Although no translation is either entirely "adequate" or entirely "acceptable" (Lefevere, 1980:155), when translating humour, the translator has to find a theory that would accommodate the requirements and be flexible enough to deal with the transfer of cultural aspects between languages and cultures. The translation should be able to fulfill its role as humorous discourse in the target language and be regarded as authentic by the receivers in the target culture, in other words "reproducing the total dynamic character of the communication" (Nida, 1964:120).

To sum up, we may assert that due to its linguistic but mostly to its cultural challenges, humour presents translators with the opportunity to exercise their creativity.

Yet, be it linguistic or cultural-bound, or even a combination of the two, it serves as a test of what can or cannot be translated and may even lead to a *replacement* or *recreation* according to the SL norms if the "new" humorous discourse is to evoke laughter or at least a smile on the part of the target language audience.

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