Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)
CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication
Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2016
ISBN: 978-606-8624-17-4
Section: Language and Discourse

HOW FUN IT IS TO TRANSLATE HUMOUR

Bianca-Oana Han

Assist. Prof., PhD, "Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu Mureș

Abstract: Everyone speaking at least one foreign language, besides his or her mother tongue, has been or is prone to be in a situation in which the following words apply: "I cannot translate this joke: it will only spoil the fun…". This article aims to prove that humour is to be pondered upon as being cultural-information carrier, as it is endowed with the capacity to gather the very hidden and subtle meanings we can discover in language.

Keywords: translating humour, language, communication, specific cultural items

Ever since the beginning of this article, we feel we ought to assure the reader that translating humour is, paradoxically enough, as funny and amusing as it is ghastly and dreary, since translation per say, is already a rather difficult, energy- and resource-consuming activity. But when translation needs to render humour from one language to the other, with everything that humour stands for, things can easily become more problematical. This appears to be the reason why humour translation represents a real challenge even for the experienced translator, and the truth is that, when rendering humour in translation, the translator's choices are, somehow, limited.

"Intercultural communication represents a very complex topic for linguists. In the context of intercultural communication humour appears to play a very important role. Exploring humour across cultures is not new in translation studies and yet still considered a fruitful topic for scholars. Many have written about the translatability or untranslatability of humour. Some said that humour does not travel well across linguistic barriers."[1]

[1] Ramona-Agneta Budea (Nedea), *Translating Humour and Profanities in Films*, in Translation Studies: Retrospective and Prospective Views 2011, Year IV, Issue 12 Galati University Press Editors: Elena Croitoru, Floriana Popescu & Antoanela Marta Mardar Galati, Romania, pp. 6-14

BDD-A25423 © 2016 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 17:00:20 UTC)

Humour relies on specific linguistic, cultural, nation-related elements which can only be adapted having a basis of deep cultural understanding. The important role in the process of translating humour is, obviously, played by the translator, who needs to prove his skills and competences of a good linguist, a flexible communicator, pragmatic person. The translator plays the leading role of this process, a leader who needs to be creative and open to challenges. Because of its difficulty and high complexity level, the translation of humour is a particular part of the translation field, along with the specialised translation of specific fields of science, where terminology plays an important role in de-coding and then re-coding the message.

According to Burgess, ”translation is not a matter of words only: it is a matter of making intelligible a whole culture.”[2] Stretching the idea, “when it comes to translating humour, the operation proves to be as desperate as that of translating poetry” states Diot in Vandaele.[3] Thus, since humour envelopes the wit and popular intelligence of a people speaking a language, just like a poem comprises the sensibility of the human mind, translation of such intrinsic values cannot be taken lightly.

Why does humanity need humour? Humour can be defined and explained on the ground of a large and complex theory. The theory of humour is based on many aspects which concern humour with everything it implies: comical situation, comical words/language, culture, intellectual level, need of humour, mood of interlocutors, adequate time and, of course, the effects of humour, for instance, the laughter, which ”is a fundamental part of everyday life”[4].

Let us figure out what humour is and why it is that challenging, translation wise. According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, humour is ”the quality in something that makes it funny” or ”the way that a particular person or group find certain things amusing”. As it can be noticed, the key words in these two definition are ”funny” and ”amusing”, which automatically imply the idea of laughter, of good mood, of happiness and other positive aspects of human life. From a psychological point of view, ”laughter can help

[2] Anthony Burgess, *Quotes on translation*, 2007, https://pbtranslations.wordpress.com/2007/03/14/quotes-on-translation-2
[3] Jeroen Vandaele, 150. *Humour in translation*. Oslo: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010. http://folk.uio.no/jeroenv/Vandaele%20Humor%20in%20Translation_proofs.pdf
[4] Robert Provine, *The Science of Laughter*, 2000, https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200011/the-science-laughter>

BDD-A25423 © 2016 “Petru Maior” University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 17:00:20 UTC)

us minimise physical, mental, and emotional pain by looking at a situation from the lighter side of things."[5] From a social point of view, humour is seen as "a quintessentially social phenomenon"[6]. Therefore, due to the fact that humour is an active social factor, one may assert that humour is a type of interpersonal communication, as it creates a bond between speakers. In terms of interpersonal communication where humour may occur, there are certain aspects that must be considered, for example culture, time, place, etc. In order for a funny situation or word to be perceived and understood accordingly by the others and for laughter to be induced, the type and means of communicating humour must be perfectly shaped in accordance to the upper elements, which have to be common for everybody involved in such a communicational situation (culture, time, place). Moreover, in terms of social communication, humour and implicitly laughter, facilitate the creation of interpersonal relationships, since humour creates a more relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

According to Raphaelson-West[7], there are three types of humour: linguistic humour, cultural humour and universal humour. *Linguistic humour*, as the name suggests, has at its basis language itself. This being the case, it regards the way people spell the words, the way they utter and emphasise them and of course, the meaning of the words used, which must be appropriate to the situation. Warren[8] divides linguistic humour into six categories which namely pun, morphology, lexical ambiguity, idioms, structural and scope ambiguity and pragmatics. All of these are to be rendered accordingly, but probably the one that carries the deepest load of hidden meaning, thus creating a huge effort in translation, in an inverse proportion to its size, the smallest lexical unit is the word pun.

Puns, is a category which has been also characterised by Delabastida[9] as having four other linguistic-linked aspects which have to be taken into account:

- homonymy (identical sounds and spelling);
- homophony (identical sounds but different spellings);
- homography (different sounds but identical spelling);

[5] Steven Handel, *The Psychology of Laughter*. 2011, http://www.theemotionmachine.com/psychology-of-laughter
[6] Giselinde Kuipers, *The Sociology of Humor*, 2008, p. 365, http://www.academia.edu/1166958/The_sociology_of_humor
[7] quoted in Lutviana, Rizky and Subiyanto Aryf. *The failure in translating humour*, http://jurnal-online.um.ac.id/data/artikel/artikelD3AF46983CDFF27BDAAEF11A9A623746.pdf
[8] idem
[9] idem

BDD-A25423 © 2016 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 17:00:20 UTC)

- paronymy (there are slight differences in both spelling and sound)

Any of these types of puns embrace a fair amount of linguistic humour, increasing the difficulty in translation. For this reason, Delabastida[10] suggests five strategies to translate them:

- translating the source text wordplay with wordplay in the target text, which may be more or less different,
- translating it in a way that loses some aspects of the wordplay,
- replacing it with some other devices, aimed at creating similar effect such as rhyme or irony,
- source text pun copied as target text pun, without being translated,
- omitting it.

The other categories which generate linguistic humour, morphology and lexical ambiguity, semantic ambiguity, i.e. the idioms, the structural and scope ambiguity and the effect the words have from the social, communicative, contextual point of view, i.e. pragmatics, are also prone to give any translator nightmares.

On the other hand, another type of humour is the *cultural humour*, a type of humour which is culture-based. Cultural elements are specific elements which can or cannot be found in other cultures, they are bound to belong to a particular people, thus endowing this kind of humour with more picturesque, colourful elements. According to Newmark[11], cultural humour has its origins in the following elements: ”ecology, including flora and fauna; material culture (artefacts), including food, clothes, houses and town; social culture: work and leisure; organisations, customs, activities, procedures, concepts: including political and administrative, religious, artistic; gestures and habits.”

The last, but not least type of humour is the *universal humour*, which consists of elements which are common within two or more cultures. Neither linguistic aspects nor cultural elements may condition this type of humour. Hence, this is an ”independent” kind of humour, a kind which can be easily and correctly understood in terms of intercultural communication.

[10] quoted in Budea, *op. cit*., p. 7.
[11] Newmark, P. 1988. A Textbook of Translation: Longman

BDD-A25423 © 2016 “Petru Maior” University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 17:00:20 UTC)

Regarding the factors that may influence the translation of humour Shipley, (quoting Attardo[12]) talks about two types of factors in dealing with this kind of translation: external factors and internal factors. From the point of view of the *external factors*, we deal with:

Time frame consideration (TFC) – (in comedy movies, comedy shows, etc.) which refers to the fact that, if the funny events are recent in the source language medium, when translating them, their effect must be also transmitted to the target language medium, even if there may be a high distance of time between the event and its translation.

Social-class and educational considerations (SEC) – according to Attardo[13], the author of a text has a target audience in mind. This refers to the fact that there is the possibility for a joke not to be understood properly if the audience is not the appropriate one. For example, a joke about medicine between two doctors might not be completely understood by a linguist or vice-versa. For this reason, humour must be adapted to the audience.

Cultural awareness decisions (CAD) – this external factor refers to the fact that a funny element of the source language is internationally known, it should not be translated if not needed.

Whereas the *internal factors*, regard:

Language (LA) – according to Attardo[14], ”the simplest approach to translation is: substitute Language in TL for Language in SL. ”

Narrative strategy (NS) – the narrative strategy in translating jokes may be unnecessary as long as the joke itself depends on the language. The narrative strategy is not common among cultures, so the translator is free to adapt the joke according to a culture-specific narrative strategy in order for the joke to sound typically.

Target (TA) – this factor is mainly the same as the second external factor, because it concerns the target audience. Thus the joke must be outlined so that it can be fully understood by a certain social class, age class or any other kinds of audience.

Situation (SI) – this refers to the case when a humourous situation cannot be translated into the source language either because there is not such a situation in the target language, or because that situation is not funny in the target language. The solution is the

[12] Attardo, S. quoted in Shipley, Trajan. *Towards a humour translation checklist for students translation*. Universidad Autonoma de Madrid, n.d. Pdf. https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=2317721
[13] idem
[14] Idem

BDD-A25423 © 2016 “Petru Maior” University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 17:00:20 UTC)

replacing of the source situation with another one in the target language by respecting and keeping all the knowledge aspects.

Logical mechanism (LM) – here can be debated the subject of puns translation, when the same sound equals the same meaning. Due to the fact that puns are linked to language, their translation, as well as all the other logical mechanisms are easier to translate.

Script opposition (SO) – this last internal factor is similar to Situation, because it is about the translation of a joke which does not have an equivalent in the target language, so it may cause problems in terms of translation. But if there is some kind of equivalence between the two cultures, script opposition may be used.

Regarding the competences needed by a translator, since translation is an art, we should consider the translator an artist. Besides his acquired and practiced skills, a translator must have a natural born talent to translate, which is also the base of all the other competences that he accomplishes throughout his career. According to Budea[15], a good humour translator ought to have four main competences: linguistic, communicative (pragmatic), technical and humour translation competence.

-Linguistic competence: the linguistic competence of the translator consists of his/her linguistic knowledge reflected through a rich and various vocabulary and also of a perfect knowledge regarding grammar and other syntax aspects. Because the translator is a bilingual, he/she must respect these linguistic conditions of both languages and to use them accordingly.

-Communicative (pragmatic) competence: the communicative (pragmatic) competence of the translator must be reflected in his/her capacity of making the target text as comprehensible as the source text, by creating a natural sound of it. He/she must be aware of the changings that must be made at the text level but, at the same time, to be as pragmatic as possible, meaning that he/she has to offer accuracy in the outlining of the target text.

-Technical competence: the technical competence of the translator is a result of all the skills and abilities achieved through study and practice. The technical competence of the translator is palpable through the naturalness of the translated text.

-Humour translation competence: the humour translation competence is a special competence, which, in my opinion, cannot be achieved by technical means. It is an ability that the translator is born with, because in terms of translating humour, it is needed a translator

[15] Budea, *op. Cit.*

BDD-A25423 © 2016 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 17:00:20 UTC)

with that so-called ”sense of humour”, who can offer that special nature and colourful meaning of the source text, in order to create the same effect that the original writer aimed at.

Humour occurs from different and numerous sources which regard people’s daily life, nature, culture, environment, etc. Because of the fact that humour has its own peculiarity, when it comes to its translation, we can definitely talk about a complete science, but also art. The theory which has been built on the background of this special type of translation aims to clarify the ambiguity of humour given by its specific elements it derives from (language, culture, country, etc.). But, of course, all these theoretical parts of humour translation would be purposeless without a translator to use them in order to bring forth the common effect of humour. i.e. to make people laugh.

Humour is a particular part of translation which represents a true challenge for the translator, who needs to make the most of his best skills and competences and a perfect knowledge of languages, cultures and national specificity.

Bibliography

- ***, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. Barcelona: Cayfosa, 1995
- Budea, R., *Translation Studies. Retrospective and prospective views*. 12th Volume. Article: *Translating humour and profanities in films*, Galati: Galati University Press, 2011
- Burgess, A., *Quotes on translation*, 2007 https://pbtranslations.wordpress.com/2007/03/14/quotes-on-translation-2
- Delabastita, D., *Wordplay and Translation*, Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1996
- Handel, S., *The Psychology of Laughter*. 2015. http://www.theemotionmachine.com/psychology-of-laughter
- Kuipers, G., *The Sociology of Humor*, 2008. http://www.academia.edu/1166958/The_sociology_of_humor>
- Rizky L., and Aryf S., *The failure in translating humour: A case study in the Indonesian translation of humour graphic novel "The diary of a wimpy kid"*. Malang,
- Newmark, P., A Textbook of Translation: Longman 1988
- Provine, R., *The Science of Laughter*, 2000. https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200011/the-science-laughter
- Vandaele, J., *Humour in translation*. Oslo: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010 http://folk.uio.no/jeroenv/Vandaele%20Humor%20in%20Translation_proofs.pdf

BDD-A25423 © 2016 “Petru Maior” University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 17:00:20 UTC)