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TRANSLATION STUDIES AND HUMOUR: KEY CHALLENGES IN HUMOUR TRANSLATION

Master Student at Samarkand State University named after Sharof Rashidov
Institute of Central Asian people's languages and culture
Specialty: Comparative linguistics, linguistic translation studies
Samarkand City, Academic Lyceum of Samarkand State Pedagogical
Institute Senior Teacher of English
Qo'shatova Gulbadan Yusup qizi
e-mail: gulbadanbegimqoshatova@gmail.com
Supervisor: Associate Professor (PhD) of the Department of English
Linguistics and Literature at Samarkand State University
named after Sharof Rashidov
Saidova Aziza Davlatovna

Abstract

This article examines the multifaceted challenges inherent in humor translation, positioned as one of the most complex domains within translation studies. It systematically analyzes the linguistic, cultural, pragmatic, and technical barriers that impede the seamless transfer of comedic intent across diverse languages. By investigating phenomena such as linguistic untranslatability in puns, the role of cultural realia, and the nuances of pragmatic implicature, the study highlights the necessity for translators to act as cultural mediators rather than mere linguistic conduits. Furthermore, the article evaluates established scholarly strategies—including substitution, compensation, and domestication—as vital tools for maintaining the "humorous load" of a text. Special attention is given to the impact of digital globalization and technical constraints in audiovisual media, emphasizing the need for a multidisciplinary approach that integrates sociolinguistic expertise with technological agility.

Keywords

Humor translation, linguistic untranslatability, cultural realia, pragmatic failure, translation strategies, substitution, compensation, domestication, audiovisual translation, cross-cultural communication.

Translation studies have long recognized humour translation as one of the most intricate and demanding areas within the discipline, demanding not merely linguistic equivalence but the preservation of an emotional and cognitive response—laughter itself—across disparate cultural and linguistic boundaries. Unlike straightforward propositional content, humour operates on multiple layers, intertwining phonological, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic elements that are deeply embedded in the source language's idiosyncrasies. This complexity arises because humour is not a universal phenomenon but a culturally contingent construct, shaped by shared knowledge, values, and experiences that resist direct transfer. In pedagogical universities and beyond, where future translators are trained, understanding these challenges is crucial for developing competencies in navigating the tension between fidelity to the source text and accessibility for the target audience. The integration of digital tools in informatics curricula further amplifies this relevance, as audiovisual media increasingly dominate global content, requiring translators to adapt humour under stringent technical constraints.

At the forefront of these translational difficulties stand profound linguistic barriers, frequently categorized under the scholarly rubric of linguistic untranslatability, which arise from the fundamental and inherent specificities of divergent language systems. Wordplay and puns serve as the most salient exemplars of this phenomenon, as they rely almost exclusively on the delicate exploitation of

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homophones—lexical items that share an identical phonetic realization yet possess vastly different semantic roots—homonyms, or complex polysemy, where a single signifier evokes a constellation of disparate connotations. For instance, the English pun "I've grown/groan so tired of this" hinges entirely on the precise auditory overlap between the participle "grown" and the verb "groan"; however, in languages such as Russian or Uzbek, where these specific phonetic resemblances are absent, the humor evaporates instantaneously during the transfer process, leaving behind nothing but a flat, literal translation that lacks the cognitive "spark" of the original. Structural and systemic discrepancies further exacerbate these challenges. Phonological variations, such as the rigid vowel harmony characteristic of Turkic languages or the nuanced tonal distinctions inherent in Sinitic languages, often disrupt the rhythmic flow and prosodic timing that are essential to the delivery of comedic timing. Similarly, morphological complexities—such as the high degree of inflection in German or the agglutinative nature of Finno-Ugric languages—frequently clash with the concise, monosyllabic punchlines typical of Anglo-American humor. Beyond mere structure, idioms and proverbs compound the problem by encapsulating dense historical-linguistic legacies that rarely possess direct semantic parallels across cultures. The English expression "kick the bucket" to denote death, which is rooted in specific agrarian imagery and historical slaughterhouse terminology, finds no intuitive or visceral equivalent in cultures that lack that idiom's particular folkloric baggage. This leaves the translator in a precarious position, often forced to choose between cumbersome explanatory footnotes that dismantle the text's pacing or awkward reformulations that strip the phrase of its original cultural resonance. Ultimately, these linguistic constraints suggest that translation is not merely a process of lexical substitution, but a complex negotiation with the unique cognitive and structural architecture of individual languages.

Cultural barriers, commonly theorized as cultural untranslatability, pose equally formidable and often insurmountable obstacles to the translation process, as humor frequently draws its vitality from local realia—those specific tangible or intangible elements that are inextricably woven into a particular society's unique social fabric. Humor is rarely universal; rather, it is a localized phenomenon that relies on a shared reservoir of cultural knowledge. Jokes that reference iconic contemporary figures, specific historical traumas, or deeply ingrained national stereotypes—such as a biting quip about American consumerist culture targeting "Walmart" or "Target"—falter significantly in socio-economic contexts that lack analogous mega-retailers. In post-Soviet markets or traditional Central Asian societies, where the retail landscape is historically dominated by the decentralized chaos of open-air bazaars or the rigid structure of state emporiums, the semiotic weight of a "Target" joke is lost, as the audience lacks the lived experience of the specific suburban consumerism that the humor intends to satirize. Furthermore, the divergence of social norms and ethical taboos introduces a layer of complexity that transcends mere comprehension. What elicits uproarious chuckles in one culture through the medium of irreverent satire—for instance, the sharp, iconoclastic mocking of political or religious figures prevalent in Western stand-up comedy—may register as deeply blaspymous, offensive, or even bewildering in societies governed by strict hierarchical respect, ancestral veneration, or religious orthodoxy. This profound cultural mismatch underscores the inherent relativity of humor; it is a delicate mechanism that functions only when the source and target audiences share a similar moral and social compass. A translator, therefore, must function as more than a linguistic conduit; they must be a cultural mediator who anticipates not just the cognitive understanding of a joke, but the elusive affective spark that triggers genuine amusement. Navigating this landscape requires an acute sensitivity to the risk of "pragmatic failure," where the source-culture's intent of levity inadvertently clashes with the target-culture's sense of gravitas or sacredness. In such instances, the translator is often forced into a process of "cultural domesticating" or adaptation—replacing a localized reference

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with a functional equivalent in the target culture—to prevent the humor from being perceived as a breach of social decorum or, worse, a total semantic void. Ultimately, the successful translation of culturally-embedded humor requires an intimate knowledge of what a specific society holds sacred and what it deems laughable, a balance that remains one of the greatest challenges in contemporary translation studies.

Pragmatic barriers introduce a profound layer of communicative subtlety, frequently challenging the effective conveyance of tone, intent, and the inherent subjectivity that characterizes humorous discourse across different linguistic landscapes. In the realm of translation, irony and sarcasm present significant hurdles because they rely heavily on the mechanism of implicature—a process where the intended meaning diverges sharply, and often diametrically, from the literal semantic value of the words uttered. Cultural pragmatics can invert these meanings entirely; for example, the nuanced British tradition of "understatement" (where a phrase like "not bad" is used to signify excellence) might be radically misinterpreted by members of more direct communicative cultures who interpret the utterance at its literal face value. The razor-sharp edge of sarcasm often hinges on specific contextual cues, paralinguistic features, or situational irony that is frequently absent or diluted during the translation process. Similarly, rhetorical devices such as hyperbole (extreme exaggeration) or litotes (understatement for effect) often falter when the source and target audiences do not share the same communicative norms or thresholds for what constitutes an appropriate level of emphasis. This dilemma is further compounded by the role of subjectivity. Because humor possesses an deeply personal and emotive dimension, a translator may find themselves in a position where they intellectually grasp the mechanics and logic of a joke but fail to experience its actual "mirth" or visceral comedic impact. This creates a profound "sense of humor" dilemma that can skew intuitive decision-making during the translation process, as the translator struggles to bridge the gap between cognitive understanding and emotional resonance. This subjective filter necessitates the use of rigorous analytical frameworks to ensure functional equivalence, yet even the most sophisticated strategies often struggle against humor's ephemeral, context-bound essence, which remains tethered to the specific time, place, and psychological state of its original audience.

Technical and format constraints in modern media translation introduce practical hurdles, particularly in audiovisual domains like film, television, and digital streaming, which dominate contemporary informatics-driven content creation. Subtitling imposes draconian limits—typically 35 characters per line and two lines maximum—compressing expansive puns into brevity, often sacrificing wit for readability. Dubbing synchronizes verbal humour with lip movements and pauses, where a source-language punchline's timing misaligns with target phonetics. Visual-verbal correspondence heightens the stakes: in comics or cinema, a joke tied to on-screen action—like a character's exaggerated gesture punctuating a verbal gag—loses cohesion if linguistically altered, fracturing the multimodal humour. These constraints, amplified by real-time digital platforms, underscore the need for informatics-savvy translators proficient in adaptive software for lip-sync analysis or subtitle optimization.

To address the inherent complexities of comedic transfer, eminent scholars such as Patrick Zabalbeascoa and Salvatore Attardo have delineated sophisticated strategies designed to mitigate these challenges, offering rigorous pragmatic pathways for the modern translator. Central to this discourse is the strategy of substitution, a method wherein source-specific jokes are systematically replaced with target-culture equivalents that possess similar semantic weight or social resonance. For instance, a translator might swap a localized American gag regarding the corporate culture of "Walmart" for a nuanced satire of a local supermarket chain or a bustling traditional bazaar, thereby successfully evoking a parallel burst of laughter from the target audience by tapping into their specific lived

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experiences. Complementing this is the technique of compensation, which operates on the principle of equilibrium. This strategy balances inevitable linguistic or cultural losses in one section of the text by injecting original humor into another, more conducive segment. By doing so, the translator preserves the overall "humorous load" or the global comedic density of the work, ensuring that the audience's cumulative experience remains consistent with the author's intent. Furthermore, the concept of domestication (or naturalization) plays a vital role in acclimating the source content to the linguistic and social norms of the target environment. This involves a creative reshaping of puns or wordplay around familiar target-language idioms and phonetic structures, making the translated text feel as though it were originally conceived in the recipient's tongue. Conversely, omission—the complete removal of untranslatable elements—serves as a pragmatic last resort when a comedic instance proves too deeply tethered to its source to survive the transition. However, this approach remains ethically fraught and highly controversial within academic circles, as it risks the erasure of the author's unique stylistic voice and cultural identity. Collectively, these methodological approaches—blending high-level creativity with analytical restraint—underscore the profound artistry inherent in the translation process. Nevertheless, despite the sophistication of these strategies, none can fully eradicate the fundamental core tension between maintaining source-text authenticity and achieving immediate, visceral target-culture resonance, highlighting translation as a constant negotiation of loss and discovery.

In essence, humour translation embodies translation studies' paradigmatic conundrum: reconciling untranslatability with communicative efficacy. Linguistic, cultural, pragmatic, and technical barriers interweave to demand multifaceted expertise—from deep sociolinguistic insight to technological agility. For pedagogical universities training informatics educators and translators, addressing these challenges fosters curricula that blend theory with practice, preparing professionals to sustain humour's vital role in cross-cultural exchange amid digital globalization. Sustained research into hybrid strategies and AI-assisted tools promises incremental advances, ensuring laughter transcends borders without losing its spark.

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