Translating Cultural Humour: Theory and Practice

Khalida Hamid Tisgam
University of Baghdad
College of Education for Women

Abstract

Humor is one of the most defining aspects of humanity. It is an integral part of everyday communication and an important component of so many literary works, films, art and mass entertainment. When trying to translate cultural humor, opaque elements and language-specific devices are expected to make the translator's work difficult, while some elements are ultimately not transferred at all. So, why does one translate a cultural humour? Usually, he does so in order to convey a message to someone whose culture and language differ from one’s own and thus prevent direct communication. This study sets out to provide evidence for the hypothesis that jokes that are bound to a specific culture lose their humorous aspect when translated literally into standard Arabic. Hence, the source culture can be substituted by the target one which shares the same aspect in a way that preserves their humorous aspect. The reason why jokes have been chosen among various humorous situations is that jokes are more formalized and more readily diffusible than the other forms of humour. It is found here that if the targets are funny in their own culture but not in the TL, a translator may invent new target-culture based jokes, instead of translating the original.
1. Theoretical Part:
1.1 The origin of the word 'humour'

Humour is a Latin word meaning liquid, fluid or moisture. According to ancient Greek theory the body of man comprises of four humorous, or liquids: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile (Smith, 1912:113). A humorist is a person who was said to possess and excess of one of the fluids. The remedy for bad temperament caused excessive humor was thought to be laughter (Ibid).

1.2 Definitions of humour

The problems involved when it comes on defining humor are that some scholars have doubted that an all-embracing definition of humor could be formulated (Attardo, 1994:3). Yet, many have attempted to define humour; there is the one that connects humour with relief felt at the momentary lifting of one of the many restrictions which the physical and social environment imposes upon man (Rosenthal, 1956: 2). Dudden (1987:7) remarks that humour to the anthropologist is "a culturally shaped individual cognitive experience, culturally determined because the sociological factors are the primary mechanisms leading to its occurrence". As for the psychological aspects of the humour, the best definition can be find in Freud’s book “Wit and Humour in the Unconscious” (1905). It is worth mentioning that Muslim authors offered a definition of humour,
i.e. the joke, among them are:

1- Ali b. Rabban at-Tabari in his book "Firdaws al-Hikmah" who defined humour as: “the result of the boiling of the natural blood when a human being sees or hears something that diverts him and thus startles and moves him” (Rosenthal, 1956: 132).

2- Al-Kindi, the well-known Arab philosopher, defined humour as “an even-tempered purity of the blood of the heart together with an expansion of the soul to a point where its joy becomes visible” (ibid: 133).

1.3 Introduction

All jokes are expressive of the social situation in which they occur. Each culture has its own special risks and problems. There are many jokes in which only the constituents of the same society can experience humour. For example, the jokes which farmers exchange among themselves may sound very funny to them, but they do not sound funny to educate the men. This reflects the fact that what is funny among men of an unintelligent society is not funny among men of an intellectual society (Chun, 1977:124).

Thus one should understand the cultural and social facts and the shared believes and attitudes in order to grasp the essence of the joke (Nash, 1985:9. “Culture can be defined as the total range of activities and ideas and their material expression in objects” (Newmark, 1991:73). A ”joke” can be defined as a form of humour in which the funniness culminates in the final sentence, called the bunchline (Ahmed, 1996: 1). Jokes can be analyzed into: the setting of the scene and the punchline. To Fry, (Raskin, 1985: 29) the punchline represents the surprise element which distinguishes humour from non humour. It contains the most fundamental element of the joke, viz; the incongruity (Ibid: 54). When the translator of jokes fails to transfer this effect, or
when the reader of the translation does not comprehend the text just as the SL reader, it means that the translator does not succeed in his job.

Besides, jokes, as popular communication, serve to affirm and perpetuate a cultural identity among people in different physical locations. Hence, Cultural jokes are ones that are related to a specific nation. They may be related to conflicts between the values, beliefs and attitudes found in the culture. Accordingly, we agree with Waters who says, "it's not the jokes. It's what lies behind them; Its attitude" (Powel al, 1988: xx).

It must be noticed that when dealing with cultural jokes one should not forget the ethnic ones. Davis noticed that one of the most outstanding features of industrial societies is the universal popularity of jokes told at the expense of allegedly stupid groups of people (Powell, 1988: 1). The reason is that modern industrial societies are dominated by belief in technical and economic efficiency. Accordingly such jokes are considered as an affirmation of the value of rationality, efficiency and intelligence on the part of joke-tellers, and the failure is ascribed to outsiders (ibid.: 4). By telling jokes about the stupidity of a group, people can gain reassurance that they and the members of their group are not stupid (Hasenauer, 1988: 354). To an outsider who is not aquatinted with such jokes, many of them will not sound funny to him.

The Almighty Allah gave us language as one of His greatest gifts. But it is not only a great gift -- it is an exceedingly rich and complex gift. That very richness makes translation a challenging operation.

Since human beings are the only living species who can speak in many different languages to communicate with each other, but this is, at the same time, a great obstacle because they are unable to understand what other individuals say. If one thinks about it, this is the very barrier that has created the need to translate from one language into another and the need for the translator himself. Consequently, the translator has a major task;
it consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating echos the original. He, for this reason, reads, re-reads, writes, re-drafts, edits, and re-writes. During this struggle to understand and create, he tries to restore the effect of original as exactly as possible.

There will be some attempt here to shed some light on the problems of translating such kind of jokes, and try to give some suggestions that may be helpful to translators in order to arrive at the precise translations of such jokes.

1.4 Looking for the equivalence of humorous effect

Norton (1984: 3) points out: Translation is a transfer process, which aims at the transformation of a written SL text into an optimally equivalent TL text, and which requires the syntactic, the semantic and the pragmatic understanding and analytical processing of the SL.

As for to Popovic, the notion that tension between source and target texts is a representative of the tension which exists between two cultures (Catford,1967:87). But it seems that People rarely question the fact that cultural jokes get lost in translation, an idea that appears to suggest some failure on the part of the translator (Corral,1988:25). Culture may create a great difficulty for the translator since readers of the TL are not acquainted with the SL culture. Thus, culture poses an obstacle in the way of translator’s attempt to dig in the area of rendering SL cultural jokes into TL.

Following Vandaele: "humor translation is qualitatively different from 'other types' of translation and, consequently, one cannot write about humor translation in the same way one writes about other types of translation" (Vandaele, 2002:150). Similarly, when it comes on translating humor, the translator has to deal with the intended effect of humor and its possible unsuccessful reproduction.

He also talks about four elements to be pointed out:

a) humor, as a intended effect, has an exteriorized
manifestation (laughter), which is quite difficult to render, whereas the meaning of other texts is 'less compelling' in terms of perception.

b) the comprehension and appreciation of humor and humor production are two distinct skills; although "translators may experience its compelling effect on themselves and others (laughter), but feel unable to reproduce it" (ibid.). Therefore, humor can be considered as a talent-related skill, since it is neither learnable nor teachable.

c) "The appreciation of humor varies individually" (ibid.); it is very much depended on the translator's sense of humor; that is the translator's recognition of a comic instance, and
d) "the rhetorical effect of humor on translators may be so overwhelming that it blurs the specifics of its creation; strong emotions may hinder analytic rationalization' (ibid.).

It goes without saying that humor is also confronted with the personal translator's dilemma of whether to translate a bad joke or just produce a funny effect. Since not all jokes are considered to be funny to all people. For example, cultural jokes are musing only within their culture and not regarded as such by those who are outside that culture. Many jokes may be the same semantically, but as far as culture is concerned, there is something missing that renders the joke untranslatable so, there are complex problems encountered in the process of translating such jokes. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

1- These jokes lost their humorous aspect when translated literally

    into standard Arabic.

2- The source culture can be substituted by another one which shares

    the same aspect.

3- Since these jokes tend to overlap, so what is said about the Irish,

    Polish or Scots can be said about Jews, Puerto-Ricans or Russians.
1.5 Tools available for the translation of Cultural Humor

Human beings, throughout history, have made an effort to take advantage of various methods of communication with the intention of utilizing the knowledge of other nations and endeavoring to preserve this knowledge for the coming generations. As the most effective methods of communication, language has been employed to satisfy the very need of communication. The predicament that may emerge as an obstacle in the way of communication seems to be the fact of dissimilarity of languages throughout the world. In today's world, communication between different nations with different languages is feasible through translation.

In spite of the broad recognition among historians of culture of the major role translation has played in the crystallization of national cultures, relatively little research has been carried out so far in this area (Chun, 1977:57).

According to Chapman (1974: 142), every joke consists of the following:

* **Linguistic Content**: it refers to the speech patterns in which a humorous message is encoded.

* **Semantic Content**: it refers to the topic and theme of the joke. Often the reason for encoding a joke defines its topic.

* **Cognitive Content**: It refers to the cognitive complexity of the joke.

Most of the jokes are of different forms, the most prominent of jokes which are used here are:

1- **One Liners**: jokes told by one character.
2- **Two Liners**: jokes supposed to be told by two characters.
3- **Narrative Jokes**: mostly composed of two parts, the narrative introduction and the dialogue.

1.6 Methods of translation
Since translation is a transfer process which aims at the transformation of SL text into the best optimally equivalent TL text, so, as Belloc (1931: 153) maintains that translation must "consciously attempt the spirit of the original at the expense of the letter".

Debra (1989:130) states: "In order to translate the joke it would be necessary to have an idiomatic expression about humor which contained a word which rhymed with a word which means something about puns or language. The cultural jokes are seen to be "more widely translatable" (ibid.). Considering the following example where we have nations x, y, z, for instance, and both nations x and y have relations with nation z, it is possible for nation x to make jokes about nation z, which would be translated into the language of nation y, but translating a joke of nation x into the language of nation z might be impossible for the reason that, "even if the listener is good-natured and can laugh at himself, he might not understand the stereotype" (ibid., original emphasis). To make it more explicit, Debra (1989:132) points out that: "There are many jokes which may mean the same thing semantically, but in terms of pragmatics and culture, there is something sorely missing which makes the joke untranslatable."

Thomas O'Neal, in his “Translation of Untranslatable Jokes: Linguistic and Cultural Barriers in Joke Translation,” writes about laughter as a general human characteristic and the ability to identify the cause of laughter in a text as essential for translators. He stresses these professionals must be able to spot the elements which cause or contribute to humorous effects in the text, and can also realize under what other necessary conditions that happens. Besides the identification of such elements, translators need to have the ability to reproduce an equivalent or similar combination of features enabling them to create a comparable effect in the target language.

According to Catford (1965 :106)our starting point is the text, “which is viewed, not simply as a sequence of sentences, but as a Gestalt, a multi-dimensional structure.”
Debra (1989: 130) indicated that “if both nations A and B had relations with nation C, it would be possible for A to make jokes about nation C which could be translated into the language of B. Translating the language of nation C might be impossible” (Ahmed, 1996: 139). Besides, “If the joke is ethnic, the targeted ethnic group can be substituted for only by another ethnic group which shares the evoked ethnic script with it” (Raskin, 1985: 207). Raskin (1985: 253) says that if one culture does not happen to possess the ethnic script, it is possible to strike the target culture. Since ethnic jokes tend to overlap, so what is said about the Irish, Polish or Scots can be said about Jews, Puerto-Ricans or Russians.

Besides, Mateo (1995) proposed a list of possible strategies for translating humour. The present study is in line with the fourth one; i.e., ST humour is replaced by a 'synonym' in TT. They are as follows:

- **ST** humour becomes **TT** humour with literal translation
- **ST** humour becomes **TT** humour with 'equivalent effect' translation
- **ST** humour is enhanced in **TT** with some word / expression
- **ST** humour is replaced by a 'synonym' in **TT**
- **ST** humour becomes **TT** sarcasm (i.e. more overt criticism)
- The hidden meaning of **ST** humour comes to the surface in **TT** (no humour in **TT**)
- **ST** humour is explained in footnote in **TT**
- **ST** humour has literal translation with no humour in **TT**
- Humorous **ST** is completely deleted in **TT**
- No humour in **ST** becomes humour in **TT**

It is worth mentioning that the data chosen for this study are published jokes that are assumed to have cultural characteristics. It consists of a number of cultural jokes. These jokes are of no linguistic or semantic problems, but are culturally problematic. Most of these jokes are taken from two books, namely: Mechanisms of Humour, by Raskin and Humour in Society, by Powell. The chosen jokes are of no linguistic or
semantic problems, but are culturally problematic in order to shed some light on the problems and difficulties faced when translating them.

2. Practical Part :
2.1 Practical Steps of Translation

*Doctor, doctor! I keep thinking I’m a ten pound note!*
*Well, go shopping, you need the change.*

دكتور، دكتور! أراودني شعور بأنني عشرة دنانير.
إذن تسوق، فأنت بحاجة إلى تصريف.

دكتور ما أدري ليش أتصور نفسى عشرة دنانير!
روح للسوق، دولك على صرافة!

We notice here that the first translation did not keep the humorous effect of the joke because it simulated the atmosphere of the original joke. As for the second one, It preserved the humorous aspect when the expression “ten pound note” was substituted by its nearest cultural equivalent.

*How many Puerto-Ricans does it take to bury Puerto-Rican?*
*Five. Four to carry the coffin and one to carry the transistor.*

- كم عدد البورتوريكيون الذين تحتاجهم لدفن بورتوريكى؟
- خمسة. أربعة لحمل النعش وواحد يحمل الراديو الترانزستر.

سвен: كم صعيدي تحتاج لدفن صعيدي؟
جيم: خمسة. أربعة ايشيلون التابوت وواحد ايشيل النيبوت.

The above joke is concerned with the Puerto-Ricans who often walk with their transistors and listen to music. But such a joke, if translated literally into Arabic, will loss its humorous aspect because it is culture bound. So, I replaced the Puerto-Rican with “الصعيدي” to make the joke understood by the Arab reader/listener. In addition, the Arab reader is more familiar
with the formula of "कम ""सिन औ जीम "" than 

_How do you make a Scotsman mute and deaf?
By asking him to contribute to a charity._

- كيف تجعل الإسكتلندي أصم وأيكم ؟
- بأن تطلب منه الإسهام بصدقة.

سِن: اشترون إفكلي يهودي اصير أطرم واخرس ؟
جِي: تطلب منه بنطى صدقة.

An Arab hearer/reader may not laugh on hearing or reading such a joke since it is culture-specific. To solve this problem it is better to change the “orientation” element which is about the cultural effect into another ethnic group known to the Arab hearer/reader (Ahmed, 1996: 146). Accordingly, we can use the Jews to show the connection between the Scotsmen and stinginess.

_Did you hear about the Irish who took a ruler to bed so he could tell how long he had slept?_
We notice here that though the first translation seems funny, but it does not comply with the Arab culture because Arabs (i.e. Muslims) swear with their right hands, so the second translation is changed into the suitable context.

Did you hear about the Polish center-forward who missed a penalty but scored on the action play?

The best translation is the second one because it preserved the humorous aspect. By omitting the cultural effect the joke became universal and funnier.

2.2 Conclusion

Ever since the first social structures emerged and human beings started to communicate socially or emotionally with members of their own species from other societies who had devised different codes of communication i.e. those who used different languages, they realized that there was a strong need for a mediator to facilitate this process. That mediator was the translator.

No matter how ordinary or usual humor seems to be in everyday life, it is found to be much more problematic as a theoretical concept. The problems involved when it comes on defining humor, are that some scholars have doubted that an all-embracing definition of humor could be formulated. Besides, the appreciation of humor may vary from one person to another and so does the appreciation of a well or poorly translated text.

Accordingly, The difficulty of translating any jokes lies in
the fact that humour is an integral part of the teller’s life-style, mode of life, philosophy of life, etc. which are closely related to his culture. The most difficult jokes to translate are those which are called “the cultural jokes”. In such kind of jokes, translators may keep the cultural context, locate the humorous aspect(s) of the joke and try to explain those aspects. If the targets are funny in their language but not in the TL, a translator may invent a new target-culture based instead of translating the original. In addition, since these jokes are found in almost every country, they can be adapted to any two nationalities favored by the translator in order to narrow the gap cross-culturally in the process of translating.

It is worth mentioning that though a translator may resort to footnotes and explanations excessively when a culture-specific text is translated, he must pay a great attention to the fact that in the case of translating jokes it is better to avoid using footnotes and explanations as much as possible for the simple reason that using such devices means killing the joke or sacrificing its humorous effect, though they are useful for cross-cultural purposes.

Finally, as Dollerup (1974:198) points out, translators "need a complete knowledge of the subtler shades of meaning in foreign words or phrases and should remember the pitfalls of failing to recognize them."
Bibliography


Vandaele, J. (2002). "(Re-) Constructing Humor: Meanings and Means". In: The Translator, Volume 8, Number 2, pp. 149-172.