

## THE TRANSLATION OF HUMOR: PRACTICAL APPROACHES AND PERSISTENT OBSTACLES

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**Abstract:** *Humor is widely recognized as one of the most challenging elements to translate across languages and cultures. Rooted in linguistic play, cultural references, and shared social knowledge, humorous texts often resist direct transfer. This article examines the practical strategies available to translators of humor and identifies persistent obstacles that remain even for experienced professionals. Drawing on Attardo's (1994) General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), Zabalbeascoa's (2005) typology of translatable jokes, and comparative analysis of translated examples from audiovisual and literary sources, this study argues that successful humor translation requires a functional rather than formal equivalence approach. However, certain obstacles—particularly phonological puns, culture-specific allusions, and multimodal constraints in subtitling—remain resistant to satisfactory solution. The article concludes with practical recommendations for translators and directions for future research.*

**Keywords:** *humor translation, audiovisual translation, wordplay, cultural references, translation strategies, untranslatability*

### INTRODUCTION

Humor is everywhere—in films, television series, advertising, literature, and social media. Yet when content crosses linguistic borders, the laughter often stays behind. Translators frequently report that jokes, puns, and witty remarks are among the most difficult textual elements to transfer faithfully into another language (Chiaro, 2010). The problem is not merely linguistic but deeply cultural: what is funny in one community may be confusing, offensive, or simply flat in another.

This article addresses two central questions. First, what practical strategies can translators employ when faced with humorous source material? Second, which obstacles persist despite the availability of these strategies? By examining concrete examples and drawing on established translation theories, this study aims to provide both a practical toolkit and a realistic account of the limits of humor translation.

The article is organized as follows. Section two reviews key theoretical frameworks. Section three presents a typology of practical strategies. Section four analyzes persistent obstacles with illustrative examples. Section five offers recommendations, and section six concludes with implications for practice and research.

## Literature Review

### Theories of Humor

Three classical theories dominate humor studies. Superiority theory (Hobbes, 1651) holds that laughter arises from feeling superior to others. Relief theory (Freud, 1905) suggests humor releases psychological tension. Incongruity theory (Kant, 1790; Schopenhauer, 1819) proposes that humor emerges from a mismatch between expectation and reality. Most contemporary translation scholars adopt incongruity as the most productive framework, as it focuses on the cognitive mechanism that can potentially be recreated across languages (Attardo, 1994).

### General Theory of Verbal Humor

Attardo and Raskin (1991) developed the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), which identifies six knowledge resources that operate in any humorous text:

1. Language – the exact wording
2. Narrative – the story structure
3. Target – the butt of the joke
4. Situation – the setting or context
5. Logical mechanism – the reasoning twist
6. Script opposition – the underlying binary clash (e.g., real/unreal, normal/absurd)

For translation, the key insight is that different knowledge resources have varying degrees of translatability.

The language parameter is the most difficult to transfer (especially puns), while narrative and situation are often the easiest (Attardo, 1994).

### Humor Translation Frameworks

Zabalbeascoa (2005) proposed a typology of jokes based on translatability, distinguishing between jokes that are internationally understandable, culturally bound but transferable with adaptation, and those that are virtually untranslatable. Vandaele (2002) emphasized that successful humor translation often requires prioritizing the humorous effect over semantic accuracy—a form of functional equivalence (Nida, 1964). Delabastita (1996), working specifically on puns, identified several translation strategies including pun-to-pun, pun-to-non-pun, pun-to-related rhetorical device, and pun-to-zero (omission). These strategies remain foundational for contemporary humor translation practice.

### Practical Approaches to Translating Humor

Based on the literature and analysis of translated examples, six practical strategies emerge as the most commonly employed and effective.

#### Direct Transfer (Calque)

When the humor relies on universally recognizable situations or when the source and target languages share a cultural reference, the translator may transfer the joke literally. This works best for situational humor or physical comedy.

For example, a character slipping on a banana peel remains funny in any language without modification.

#### Substitution (Cultural Adaptation)

When the original reference is culture-specific, the translator replaces it with a comparable reference from the target culture. This is the most common strategy for translating sitcoms and stand-up comedy. For instance, a joke about Thanksgiving might become a joke about a local harvest festival. The mechanism of incongruity remains; only the surface details change.

#### Paraphrase (Explanatory Translation)

When neither direct transfer nor substitution is possible, the translator may paraphrase the humorous content, sacrificing the joke structure to preserve the core meaning. This often results in a weaker humorous effect but maintains narrative coherence. Paraphrase is frequently used in subtitling when space or time constraints prevent more creative solutions (Chiaro, 2010).

#### Compensation

The translator introduces humor elsewhere in the text to compensate for an untranslatable joke in the original. This strategy requires significant creativity and is more common in literary translation than in audiovisual work, where visual cues constrain possibilities.

#### Pun-to-Rhetorical Device

When a pun cannot be reproduced, the translator may replace it with another rhetorical device such as alliteration, repetition, or irony that produces a comparable stylistic effect, even if the specific wordplay is lost (Delabastita, 1996).

#### Omission (Last Resort)

When no strategy yields an acceptable result, the translator may omit the joke entirely. This is most justifiable when the joke is marginal to plot or character development. In audiovisual translation, omission is sometimes forced by subtitle space or dubbing lip-sync constraints.

#### Persistent Obstacles in Humor Translation

Despite the strategies above, certain obstacles remain stubbornly resistant. This section identifies five persistent challenges.

#### Phonological Puns

Puns based on homophones (words that sound the same but differ in meaning) are notoriously difficult. For example, the English pun “Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana” exploits the dual meaning of “flies” (verb vs. noun) and “like” (preposition vs. verb). Most languages lack an equivalent phonological coincidence. Translators typically resort to paraphrase or omission, losing the playful effect entirely (Delabastita, 1996).

#### Culture-Specific Allusions

References to local celebrities, political figures, television commercials, or historical events rarely travel. A joke about a British politician or an American Super

Bowl commercial will be incomprehensible to a target audience lacking that background.

Substitution is possible only when the target culture has a sufficiently analogous reference—a condition that is not always met (Zabalbeascoa, 2005).

#### Visual-Verbal Synergy

In audiovisual media, humor often emerges from the interaction between dialogue and image. Subtitling can destroy this synergy when the subtitle covers a visual element (e.g., a sign or gesture) or when the timing of the subtitle mismatches the visual punchline. Dubbing introduces separate problems, as lip movements must roughly match the translated dialogue, constraining word choice and sentence length (Chiaro, 2010).

#### Register and Taboo

Humor frequently involves violations of linguistic register—swearing, vulgarity, or inappropriate formality. Different cultures maintain different taboos. A joke that uses mild profanity in English may become shockingly offensive in a more conservative language, or conversely, may lose all force in a culture where that word carries no weight. Finding the equivalent degree of violation is extremely challenging (Vandaele, 2002).

#### Prosody and Timing

Verbal humor depends on rhythm, stress, and timing. A punchline delivered in a specific rhythm loses its effect if the translation has a different syllable count or stress pattern. This is particularly acute in dubbing, where the translated line must fit the actor's mouth movements and the original timing. Even in written translation, the cadence of a joke can be destroyed by small changes in word length or order.

#### Illustrative Examples

The following examples illustrate the application of strategies and the persistence of obstacles. These are representative cases; a full empirical study would require a larger corpus.

##### Example 1: Puns in Subtitling

Source (English, *Friends*): Chandler: "I'm not great at the advice. Can I interest you in a sarcastic comment?"

The humor lies in the unexpected contrast between "advice" and "sarcastic comment," plus the word "interest" used commercially. A direct translation into many languages loses the ironic register. In the Spanish subtitled version, the translation was: "No soy bueno dando consejos. ¿Te puedo ofrecer un comentario sarcástico?" The strategy used was near-direct transfer with minor lexical adjustment ("ofrecer" instead of "interesar"). The incongruity survives because the commercial frame ("ofrecer") is recognizable in Spanish. The obstacle encountered was minimal in this case, because the humor is situational and register-based rather than pun-based.

##### Example 2: Culture-Specific Reference

Source (English, *The Simpsons*): Homer: “Books are useless! I only ever read one book, ‘To Kill a Mockingbird,’ and it gave me absolutely no insight on how to kill mockingbirds!”

The humor relies on knowledge of the American literary classic *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) and the absurd literal reading of its title. In a culture where this book is not taught, the joke fails. A possible solution is substitution with a locally known title that can be read literally. In French, one translator substituted a known proverb or children’s story, though no perfect equivalent exists. The persistent obstacle is cultural asymmetry. Some references simply lack functional equivalents (Zabalbeascoa, 2005).

#### Example 3: Phonological Pun

Source (English, Groucho Marx): “Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana.”

The pun depends on the dual reading of “flies” and “like.” No direct equivalent exists in most languages. An attempted solution in German was: “Die Zeit fliegt wie ein Pfeil, aber Obstfliegen wie eine Banane.” (The time flies like an arrow, but fruit flies like a banana.) The first half works literally, but the second half loses the pun because “Obstfliegen” (fruit flies) is a compound noun, not a verb-noun ambiguity. The joke becomes merely a strange statement. This persistent obstacle shows that phonological puns remain largely untranslatable without complete rewriting (Delabastita, 1996).

#### Practical Recommendations for Translators

Based on the analysis above, the following recommendations emerge for professional practice.

First, prioritize function over form. Translators should ask: “What makes this funny?”—incongruity, surprise, or violation—and recreate that mechanism even if the surface words change entirely (Vandaele, 2002).

Second, know when to domesticate. For culture-specific references, substitution with a local equivalent is usually superior to a foreignizing literal translation that no audience will understand (Nida, 1964).

Third, accept loss strategically. Not every joke can survive. Translators should omit marginal jokes to preserve energy for central ones.

Fourth, collaborate with editors and directors in audiovisual translation. Humor often requires negotiation about timing, visual elements, and cultural acceptability (Chiaro, 2010).

Fifth, test translations with target-language speakers when possible. A joke that works in the translator’s head may fail in real reception.

Sixth, document decisions. An explanatory footnote (in literary translation) or translator’s note can signal to readers that a joke was adapted rather than lost through incompetence.

#### Conclusion

The translation of humor is a domain where linguistic skill meets cultural knowledge and creative risk-taking. Practical strategies exist—direct transfer, substitution, paraphrase, compensation, and rhetorical replacement—and they succeed in many cases, particularly for situational humor and puns with semantic rather than phonological bases.

However, persistent obstacles remain.

Phonological puns, deeply embedded cultural allusions, visual-verbal synergy in subtitling, cross-cultural taboo differences, and prosodic constraints in dubbing continue to resist satisfactory solution.

These obstacles are not failures of translator competence but inherent features of language difference.

Future research should explore three directions. First, empirical reception studies could measure how target audiences actually respond to translated humor compared to source audiences.

Second, the role of artificial intelligence in humor translation deserves investigation—current machine translation systems perform poorly on jokes, but fine-tuned models might assist human translators.

Third, comparative studies across multiple language pairs could identify which obstacles are universal and which are specific to particular language combinations.

Until then, the translator of humor remains a skilled artisan working at the limits of translatability, making audiences laugh in one language with words written for another—a feat that, when it succeeds, is itself a kind of joke worth celebrating.

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