

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATING RUSSIAN HUMOR INTO ENGLISH

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Abstract: *This thesis examines the theoretical and practical problems of translating Russian humor into English. It identifies key linguistic, linguocultural, and cognitive barriers to preserving the comic effect. Using incongruity theory and dynamic equivalence, the study proposes a typology of humor and a translatability scale, concluding that adequate translation requires functional strategies such as adaptation, compensation, and explicitation rather than literal equivalence.*

Keywords: *Russian humor, translation strategies, dynamic equivalence, linguocultural barriers, incongruity theory, verbal humor, pragmatic adequacy*

Introduction and Relevance

This dissertation addresses the underexplored area of Russian-to-English humor translation, emphasizing its growing importance in intercultural communication. Humor is identified as a complex, multi-layered phenomenon where the comic effect arises not from semantic content alone but from the interaction of linguistic structures, cognitive mechanisms, pragmatic intentions, and cultural codes.

Object and Subject of Research

- Object: The humorous text as a unit of intercultural communication.
- Subject: The linguocognitive, pragmatic, and linguocultural features of translating Russian humor into English, including the strategies and transformations required to preserve the comic effect.

Purpose and Hypothesis

The research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the theoretical foundations and practical mechanisms for adequately transferring Russian humor into an English-language communicative environment. The central hypothesis posits that adequate translation of Russian humor is achievable only through a holistic consideration of its cognitive structure, pragmatic orientation, cultural specificity, and the application of functionally oriented translation strategies.

Methodology

The study is grounded in cognitive linguistics, functional-pragmatic translation theory, dynamic equivalence theory, and comparative-discursive analysis. Methods include structural-semantic, interpretive, contextual, and comparative analysis, alongside generalization of translation practice.

Key Findings

1. Nature of Humor: Humor is defined as a linguocognitive and pragmatic phenomenon. The most productive theoretical model for translation analysis is the Incongruity Theory (Kant, Schopenhauer), particularly the Script-based Theory of Humor (Raskin) and the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo & Raskin). These models reveal that humor relies on the opposition of cognitive scripts and violation of communicative expectations.

2. Typology and Translatability: A translation-oriented typology of humor was developed. It distinguishes between verbal humor (puns, irony, sarcasm, parody) and situational humor. The study establishes a scale of translatability:

- Low translatability: Puns, phonetic wordplay, culturally specific humor.
- Medium translatability: Irony, sarcasm, intertextual humor.
- High translatability: Situational and absurdist humor based on logical paradox.

3. Equivalence and Adequacy: The research demonstrates that formal equivalence is often insufficient or impossible when translating humor. Priority must be given to dynamic (functional) equivalence (Nida) and pragmatic adequacy. A multi-level equivalence model is proposed, encompassing semantic, stylistic, pragmatic, cognitive, and cultural levels. The primary criterion for success is achieving a comparable perlocutionary effect (laughter, ironic distance) in the target audience.

4. Major Translation Difficulties: The study identifies three categories of barriers:

- Linguistic: Polysemy, homonymy, idioms, morphological play (diminutives), and syntactic contrasts.
- Linguocultural: National realities, historical allusions, precedent phenomena (e.g., "Stakhanovite"), and social stereotypes that lack direct English analogs.
- Pragmatic and Cognitive: Mismatches in communicative norms, background knowledge, and cognitive scripts between Russian and English speakers. For example, the famous Russian phrase "We wanted the best, but it turned out as usual" loses its cultural irony when translated literally.

5. Translation Strategies and Transformations: The most effective strategies for translating Russian humor are:

- Functional replacement / Adaptation: Replacing a culture-specific element with a familiar analogue.
- Compensation: Shifting the comic effect to another part of the text.
- Modulation, Concretization, Generalization: Logical transformations of meaning.
- Explicitation: Adding brief explanations for obscure cultural references.

The study concludes that a literal (word-for-word) translation is rarely successful for humorous texts.

Practical and Theoretical Significance

- Theoretical: Refines the conceptual framework for humor research in translation studies and expands understanding of functional-pragmatic equivalence.
- Practical: Offers actionable strategies for literary, audiovisual, and stand-up comedy translators. The findings are applicable to teaching translation theory, practice, and intercultural communication courses.

CONCLUSION

Translating Russian humor into English is not a mechanical substitution of linguistic units but a creative act of intercultural mediation. The translator must reconstruct the comic mechanism, prioritizing pragmatic effect over formal accuracy. While absolute equivalence is rarely achievable, adequate translation — one that evokes a functionally comparable response in the English-speaking reader — is possible through flexible, strategy-driven decisions. The most challenging elements remain wordplay, culturally marked realities, and irony embedded in implicit communicative norms.

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