

## On the Translatability of Linguistic Humor

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### Abstract

In this paper the author is primarily concerned with linguistic, not cultural transfer in the translation of linguistic humor. A classification of linguistic humor is given, based on their translation possibilities and difficulties. We try to determine the relation between translatability and linguistic means. We hold that linguistic humor is on the whole translatable, but in some cases it may be a formidable task. When this happens, adaptation as an alternative can be used, though it is not a panacea.

**Key words:** Linguistic humor; Functional translation; Adaptation

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### INTRODUCTION

The translation of linguistic humor has been neglected for its alleged inferiority. Compared with the immense quantity of literary and technical translation, translated humor and the literature thereof is meager indeed.

The translatability of linguistic humor is deemed debatable. Some scholars claim that everything can be fully translated, linguistic humor being no exception.

Others simply say nothing is translatable, to say nothing of linguistic humor.

As we all know, linguistic humor involves special syntactic and pragmatic rules, as well as cultural factors. What is more, English and Chinese are widely different in grammatical structure, writing system and phonological representation. But if linguistic humor cannot be fully translated, can it be satisfactorily translated? In other words, can we get the gist of a humorous text across?

Though the phonology of the English language is very different from that of Chinese, there are individual resemblances. The same can be said of syntax and vocabulary differences, and so there are also approximations. A good translator can often find approximations in the two linguistic systems. And a good translation of linguistic humor is precisely built on these approximations.

### 1. A WORKING DEFINITION OF LINGUISTIC HUMOR

An important preliminary step to the discussion on the translation of linguistic humor is to specify what is meant by the term “linguistic humor”. As we all know, the majority of humor is born of the linguistic medium. By linguistic humor we mean humor resulting from peculiar intensities of linguistic patterning (Nash, 1985).

First of all, linguistic humor is inevitably related to linguistic signs. Like any other variety of language use, it has to draw on the patterns and implications of phonology and graphology, of syntactic structures, of lexical forms, of semantic field (Delia, 1992).

Secondly, linguistic humor is unavoidably based on the “deviant” use of linguistic forms. There should be extraordinary contrivances in it. Though the pantomimes by Charlie Chaplin are funny and entertaining, the humor in his performance mainly comes from his improper

selection of behavior instead of linguistic signs. Thus this kind of humor does not fall within the scope of our research.

Thirdly, linguistic humor often merges into ludicrous ideas and laughable situations.

In short, linguistic humor is exploited to create or enhance amusement and laughter. Humorous language is often the combined effect of sound, vocabulary, and syntax.

## 2. ADAPTATION IN THE TRANSLATION OF LINGUISTIC HUMOR

As a result of the importance attached to the humorous impact, translation of linguistic humor should be like copying a painting. "What is aimed for is not affinity in shape but likeness in spirit" (Fu Lei). That is to say, it should "attempt to produce on its reader an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original" (Newmark, 1988). However, though an equivalent effect is desirable, it cannot always be achieved. Then special methods and techniques must be used to recreate the original humorous flavor.

In order to retain in the target language the same level of impact and appeal in the original text, the translator may have to resort to some adaptive strategies. "Comedies and farces are often adapted, since their humor may have intractable cultural elements (banana skin) which are not funny when translated" (Newmark, 1996). He maintains that the translator is permitted to adapt and make the thought and cultural content of the original more accessible to the reader in communicative translation (1982). A traditionalist, Mildren Larsen, acknowledges that some forms of adaptation can be regarded as translation. She accepts "unduly free" translation so long as the intent is to evoke humor or other special response in the target receivers. Vermeer, a leading exponent of the theory of translational action, advocates the use of adaptation as an alternative to meaning-based translation (1994). As a matter of fact, adaptation is a highly theoretically commendable approach to the translation of linguistic humor.

Adaptation means adapting a text to meet the expectations of a different type of audience. If the humorous effect resists translation and the purpose of the linguistic humor is merely to raise laughter, the translator may "change the reality that the text refers to in the ordinal language" (Laurian, 1992) or 'compensate' it by another piece with a different but associated meaning (Newmark, 1988). However, adaption cannot solve all the problems in the translation of linguistic humor. For instance, if the content of the message exceeds the humorous impact in terms of importance, we prefer to preserve the former as a top priority and treat the latter as secondary. The version will probably have none of the original flavor but will serve the purpose of cross-cultural communication.

## 3. A TAXONOMY OF LINGUISTIC HUMOR

The taxonomy of linguistic humor is usually based on the degrees of translatability. From both a theoretical and practical standpoint, a comprehensive and feasible classification is very important. Unless he can recognize certain linguistic humor as a sample of a particular form, a translator would not know what to do about it. Clearly he would not be able to translate it. Since linguistic humor is created through many different means, we here divide them into the following three categories:

- a) Humor based on wording
- b) Humor based on sounds
- c) Humor based on Chinese characters

Linguistic humor in the Chinese language is progressively more difficult to translate in that order.

### 3.1 Humor Based on Wording

This part mainly deals with the peculiar choice of words and the deliberate distortion of word formation. The efforts can often give rise to new meanings and a delicate touch of humor.

#### 3.1.1 Homographic Puns

Homographic puns tend to be meta-linguistic in nature. Finding a same homographic pair of English words to convey the pun is possible, but the chance is very slim. So their translation can only be functional. Any literal, non-functional translation of homographic puns between unrelated languages is theoretically impossible. Let's consider the following example:

(1) 杨亮看见一个年轻女人也站到身边来。她把肩上沉重的篓子慢慢地往下移，却急喊道：“郭大伯，快接呀！”

“扛了一篓子果子，就压得歪歪扭扭叫叫喊喊的，还要称雄呢？”

“称雄！不成，少了个东西啦！”

于是大家又笑了。

丁玲《太阳照在桑乾河上》

By the word 称雄 (hold sway over a region) the first man means "showing off one's skill or ability", but the second man deliberately misinterprets it as "passing herself off as a man". The English idiom "cock of the walk" carries the two meanings of "a person who dominates others" and "male of other kinds of birds" at the same time. The coincidence helps to reproduce the humorous impact. A possible translation reads as follows:

*Yang Liang saw a young woman had come to his side. She slowly lowered the heavy basket on her shoulder to the ground, calling out urgently: "Uncle Guo, hurry up and take it!"*

...

*"Just a basket of fruit makes her stagger and shriek under the weight. And she thinks she's cock of the walk!"*

*"She cock of the walk? Not a chance! She doesn't have a cock!"*

*They all started laughing again.*

### 3.1.2 Demotion of "Big" Words

Out of the specific needs of expression some "big", "significant" words are temporarily "demoted" as general words. As a rule, what the "demoted" words mean often deviates from their original basic meaning. Such "contradictions" can often give rise to a touch of humor. Now considers this example:

(2) 他的旧法兰绒外套经过浸湿烤干这二重水深火热的痛苦, 疲软肥胖, 又添上风瘫病.....

钱钟书《围城》

The four-character term 水深火热 (deep water and scorching fire) is often used to describe a person's endless sufferings. However, the author purposefully chooses the literal meaning of the component characters instead of the idiom's total meaning and uses it to state the reason for the deformation of the coat. Thus he tacitly satirizes the poor quality of the flannel coat. The following version satisfactorily reproduces both the literal meaning and the extended meaning.

*His old flannel overcoat, which had undergone a soaking and baking, the two disasters of water and fire, was limp, puffed, and in addition "paralyzed".*

### 3.1.3 Transformation of Emotional Coloring

This means changing the emotional coloring of words for the time being, such as using commendatory terms as derogatory ones or vice versa.

In this case, authors often speak in one way and mean the other. The literal meaning is often quite the opposite of the inner thought. Such 'abnormal' uses of words often give rise to humorous flavors.

(3) "也不知是谁把我存下的破袜子都给补了." 小侯举起几双补好的破袜子说,"今天大部分人都在这儿, 是谁干的? 自己坦白吧!"

张天民《院士》

The literal meaning of 坦白 (confess) is to confess to one's own wrongdoing. Usually, the word is emotionally derogatory. However, the author deliberately uses it in a commendatory way in the above passage, thus creating humor. Generally speaking, such humorous texts can well be reproduced. Consider the following translation:

*"...I wonder who has repaired my collection of worn socks?" Xiao Hou held high several well-patched ones, and said, "Today most of you are present here. Who did it? You'd better confess to it."*

### 3.1.4 Linguistic Modeling

Linguistic modeling is a typical means of the "deviant" use of words and phrases. It imitates accepted terms and then coins expressions by ingeniously changing one or

two characters. The slight change can often lead to a humorous flavor.

(4) 辛楣笑道: "这是董斜川想出来的, 他说, 同跟一个先生念书的叫 '同师兄弟', 同在一个学校的叫 '同学', 同有一个情人的该叫 '同情'".

钱钟书《围城》

In the book *Fortress Besieged*, Zhao Xinmei first considers Fang Hongjian his rival in love. After Fang withdraws his passion to court Miss Tang, Zhao is unfortunately jilted by Miss Su. He feels that they are fellow sufferers in love. In view of this background, the author deliberately deviates from the rational sense of the word 同情 (sympathy) and proceeds to draw a forced analogy with 同师兄弟 (classmate) and 同学 (schoolmates). When the coined word 同情 (people who love the same girl) is replaced by the corresponding coinage "lovemates", the original humorous flavor is largely retained.

*Xinmei said with a grin, "That's something Dong Xiechuan thought up. He says people who study under the same teacher are called classmates, and people who go to the same school are schoolmates, so people who are in love with the same girl should be called "lovemates".*

### 3.1.5 Word-Order Reversing

Orders of words and phrases can be reversed to achieve some specific appeal and flavor. The inverted word or phrase is often in conflict with the accepted way of thinking, thus engendering humor.

(5) 鸿渐道: "给你说得结婚那么可怕, 真是众叛亲离了".

辛楣笑道: "不是众叛亲离, 是你自己离亲叛众".

钱钟书《围城》

The subject in the four-character idiom 众叛亲离 (being denounced by the people and deserted by one's friends) is in the passive voice. It is used to describe Fang's utter isolation from his relatives and friends. In contrast, the subject of the coined expression 离亲叛众 (desert one's friends and denounce the people) is in the active. The reversed relation between subject and object results in an opposite but still related meaning. In the following translation the original humorous flavor is to a certain extent kept.

*Hortgjian said, "You make marriage sound so awful. As if I were being denounced by the people and deserted by friends."*

*Xinmei said with a smile, "It's not that you're being denounced by the people and deserted by your friends, but that you yourself desert your friends and denounce the people."*

### 3.1.6 Word-Splitting

Every word has its fixed phonetic form, distinctive structure and established semantic content. Generally

speaking, the accepted features should be used and comprehended as a whole. In other words, they cannot be split at random; however, it doesn't mean that words can never be taken apart. As we all know, a polysyllabic word often consists of several morphemes. Sometimes a writer deliberately takes apart disyllabic single-morpheme words or compound words, and sometimes inserts some other elements in between. Such deviant formation can result in special humorous effect.

(6) 馆里通共不过一千本本, 老的、糟的、破旧的中文教科书居其大半, 都是因战争而停办的学校的遗产. 一千年后, 这些书准像敦煌石室的卷子那样名贵, 现在呢, 它们古而不稀, 短见浅识的收藏家还不知道收买. 钱钟书《围城》

In China, seventy years of age are known as 古稀 (old and rare). The author purposefully extends it into 古而不稀 (old but not rare). The “variant” differs greatly from the original single-morpheme word in both structure and meaning. It means “old but worth not much”. From the context, we can easily see that the author intends to ridicule the authorities for ignoring higher education. The following translation adequately conveys the author's intent, though it is not so humorous as the original text.

*Hongjian went to the library to look for books. The library had fewer than one thousand books, most of which were old, battered, torn textbooks of Chinese, relics of schools that had been suspended during the War. The library had fewer than one thousand books. A thousand years hence these books would be as priceless as the manuscripts from Dunhuang caves. Now they were old without being rare. Short-sighted shallow-minded book collectors still did not have sense enough to buy them up.*

### 3.2 Humor Based on Sound

Humor based on sounds seems to be most difficult to translate. Finding a similar homophonous pair of English words to convey the pun could seldom occur. According to contemporary translation theory, if a certain piece of linguistic humor is not very informative, adaptation may be applied to help reproduce the humorous effect in the target language.

#### 3.2.1 Homophones

Homophones are pronounced alike but different in spelling and meaning. They are often exploited to create humorous atmosphere. It takes wisdom and skills to translate it satisfactorily. We might as well consider the following example:

(7) 胡太太叹了口气, 看见胡国光还是一肚子心事的踱方步。

“张铁嘴怎么说的?” 胡太太惴惴的问。

“很好. 不用瞎担心事了. 我还有委员的福分呢!”

“么事的桂圆?”

“是委员! 从前行的是大人老爷, 现在行委员了! 你还不明白?”

茅盾《动摇》

In the quoted passage from the nouns 委员 (deputy) and 桂圆 (longan) are phonetically similar. Madame Hu, illiterate and ill-informed, mistakes 委员 (deputy) for 桂圆 (longan). As a result, it gives rise to the humorous episode. Qian Gequan, a well-famed translator, ingeniously replaces longan with “common tea”, which is partially homophonic with committee”. Such an adaptation helps to keep the original humorous impact. The translation reads:

*Madame Hu gave a sigh and anxiously watched her husband pacing about as before.*

*“What did Chang Tieh - tsui say?” She asked timidly.*

*“He gave me very good news. We need not look for trouble. I have the possibility of being a member of a committee!”*

*“What's a common tea?” asked the wife, who only vaguely caught the sound.*

*“A committee! Lords and esquires are out of date, and the prevailing nomination is a committee. You still don't understand.”*

#### 3.2.2 Homophonic Puns

Homophonic puns often yield double irrelevant meanings, which make writings or speeches implicitly humorous. In view of the vast differences between English and Chinese, it is far from easy to convey the spirit. Consider the following example:

(8) 王婆出来道: “大官人吃个梅汤”. 西门道: “最好多加些酸味儿”. 王婆做了个梅汤, 双手递与西门庆吃了, 将杯子放下. 西门庆道: “干娘, 你这梅汤做得好, 有多少在屋里?” 王婆笑道: “老身做了一世媒, 那讨得在屋里?” 西门庆笑道: “我问你这梅汤, 你却说做媒, 差了多少?” 王婆道: “老身听得大官人说媒做得好.”

王世贞《金瓶梅》

As a matter of fact, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to find a pair of homophonous English words which means 媒 (matchmaking) and 梅 (plum) respectively. Egerton, a most celebrated translator, adapts into “damson”. Simultaneously, he changes 做媒 (matchmaking) into “dealing in damsels”, for matchmaking evidently cannot do without young unmarried women. The translator ingeniously replaces the homophone 梅 (plum) and 媒 (matchmaking) with a quasi-homophonous pair of “damsons” and “damsels”. The translation goes like this:

*“May I offer some damson broth, sir?” said old woman Wang, when she came out.*

*“I should like some very much”, Xi-men said, “but let it be a little sour; if you don't mind.”*

*The old woman made the broth, and offered it to him with both hands. When he had finished it, he put down the cup.*

"You make excellent damson broth, stepmother", he said.

"Have you got many damsons in your room there?"

"I have dealt in damsels all my life", the old woman said, "but I never keep them in my room".

"I was talking about damsons, not damsels", said Xi-men. "You are getting a little mixed."

"It was damsels you were thinking about, none the less", the old lady retorted.

### 3.2.3 Dialectal Expression

Dialectal expressions when used in standard language can often cause laughter. A large number of jokes come from the different pronunciation of the same expression in Mandarin and Cantonese. Needless to say, dialectal expressions are one of the main sources of humor in the West. Since dialectal expressions are often used in particular communities, they each have distinctive features. Generally speaking, achieving equivalent effect in any literal translation of dialect-based humor is out of the question. However, adaptation can be exploited to produce a satisfactory version.

(9) 武汉有一位采购员到北京出差。他一进商店便问：“同志，你这小水壶多少钱一个”时，恰好被售货员听成“你这小媳妇多少钱一个”。此时，售货员愤怒至极，大声回敬：“流氓！”采购员正好听成“六毛！”看到这些物美价廉的小水壶，采购员手舞足蹈，大声叫道：“太好了，太好了，你们这些小水壶（小媳妇）我全要啦！”闹得姑娘们群起而攻之。

谢伦浩编著《乐在幽默》

Obviously the humor results from dialectal pronunciation of words.

When the natives of Wuhan pronounce the word “小水壶” (little kettle), it sounds like the word 小媳妇 (newly-wed young lady) in Mandarin. To make things worse, the word 小媳妇 (a newly-wed young lady) is a swearword in Beijing dialect. Misunderstanding thus arises. As can be seen in the text, the joke is not informative at all. Its sole purpose is to trigger laughter.

When it comes to the translating of dialect-based humor, most translators say that it is almost an impossible mission. Indeed, word-for-word translation can never reproduce the humor of the source text. In such formidable cases, we might as well change 小水壶 (kettle) into “watering can” and 小媳妇 (newly-wed young lady) into ‘watering cunt’. Then, we adapt 流氓 (rascal) into “sex fiend”, which sounds like 六毛 “six cents”. Thus the sense of humor can be somewhat retained. The following is such an attempt:

Once, a native of Wuhan went to Beijing on a business trip. The moment he stepped into a store, he asked, “how much is this watering can, miss” Unfortunately the salesgirl thought he had said “how much is this watering cunt, miss”? She flew into a rage and growled, “Sex fiend!” It so happened that this Wuhanese didn’t catch

what the girl said. He mistook it for “six fen”. Thinking that the watering cans were lovely and cheap, he was overjoyed and answered at the top of his voice, “Terrific. All your watering cans (cunts) are mine.” As a result, the salesgirls all rose up and drove him out.

### 3.3 Humor Based on Chinese Characters

As we know, Chinese characters are hieroglyphs. Writers can take advantage of the shape of Chinese characters to convey their thoughts and ideas. More often, they take apart Chinese characters and then put the parts together. By making synthetic use of the form and tone features, writers can often create suspense and humorous effect.

#### 3.3.1 Chinese Characters Suggesting Shapes

The writing form of Chinese characters represents ideas. If appropriately used, it can often engender a touch of humor. See this example.

(10) 只有小栓坐在里排的桌前吃饭，大粒的汗从额上流下，夹袄也贴住了背心，两块肩胛骨高高凸出，印成一个阳文的“八字”。

鲁迅《药》

Lu Xun makes use of the shape of the character 八 (eight) vividly to depict a deplorable skinny tuberculosis victim. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang translate the sentence in this way:

Only Xiao Shuan was sitting at table by the wall, eating. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead, his lined jacket was sticking to his spine, and his shoulder blades stuck out so sharply, an inverted V seemed stamped there.

#### 3.3.2 Character Splitting

By character splitting we mean dissecting a character and reassembling it its component parts. It’s fairly thought-provoking. It often keeps readers or listeners in suspense and creates an elusive but humorous atmosphere, giving readers ample room for imagination and association. Consider the following example:

(11) (曹)操尝造花园一所。造成，操往视之，不置褒贬，只取笔于门上书一“活”字而去。人皆不晓其意。(杨)修曰：“‘门’内添‘活’字，乃‘阔’字也。丞相嫌园门阔耳”。

罗贯中《三国演义》

The character 活 (alive) placed inside the character 门 (gate) forms a new character 阔 (wide). Yang Xiu accurately decodes Cao Cao’s secret message, which shows his superb talent. Unfortunately, it causes Cao’s jealousy and suspicion. The resulting humor is unlikely to be reproduced. However, the following translation will serve the purpose of cross-cultural communication.

One time, Cao Cao had a garden built. When it was ready, he went to inspect it. Without uttering a word of praise or criticism, Cao Cao took a brush and wrote

a single character 活(alive) on the gate to the garden, and then left. No one could interpret what he meant. Yangxiu saw it and said, "The character 活 'alive' inside the character 门 'gate' makes the character 阔 'broad'". His excellency was simply saying that the gate is too wide.

As can be seen from the foregoing part of this part, most linguistic humor is translatable, although humor based on peculiarities of a certain language is often untranslatable. Even in these cases, the "adaptation" method can sometimes help to convey part, if not all, of the humorous effect.

## CONCLUSION

Translation of linguistic humor is a fairly stimulating challenge to translators and amateurs alike. It requires the accurate decoding and smooth transfer of the original message as well as an equally amusing effect on the target language readers. So the translation of linguistic humor can only be functional.

Now that we have analyzed the translated version of some humorous texts, it seems pertinent here to discuss the question of "translatability" or "untranslatability".

"Translatability appears to be a cline rather than a clear-cut dichotomy. Source language texts and items are more or less translatable rather than absolutely translatable or untranslatable." (Catford, 1965) Broadly speaking, failure of translation falls into two categories: those where the difficulty is linguistic, and those where it is cultural.

By linguistic untranslatability we mean "failure to find a TL equivalent due to entirely the differences between the source language and the target language." (Catford, 1965) As is evidenced by the above humorous texts, such SL formal features as character-splitting could hardly find their corresponding features in the target language. Hence they are basically untranslatable. We recommend adaptation as an alternative approach in dealing with untranslatable cases of linguistic humor.

Philologists and linguists in the West have discussed the question of translatability. Some take a more optimistic view; others, more pessimistic.

We believe that as far as Chinese and English texts are concerned, with a few exceptions, the majority of linguistic humor is translatable, yet it takes language proficiency, effort and sometimes inspiration on the part of the translator.

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