

CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF HUMOR IN ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS: COGNITIVE AND PRAGMATIC APPROACHES

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Abstract:

Translating humor poses unique challenges due to its deep cultural roots and reliance on linguistic nuances, making it one of the most complex areas of translation studies. This article explores the cultural adaptation of humor in English translations, focusing on cognitive and pragmatic approaches. The cognitive perspective examines how translators navigate mental processes such as conceptual blending and frame-shifting to recreate humorous effects in target languages. Meanwhile, the pragmatic approach considers the contextual and situational factors that influence humor, including speech acts, cultural implicates, and social norms. By analyzing the intersection of these approaches, this article highlights strategies used to preserve the intent and effect of humor across cultural boundaries, emphasizing the importance of cultural competence and contextual awareness in successful humor translation. Through case studies and examples, the article demonstrates how translation techniques such as substitution, paraphrasing, and adaptation can bridge cultural gaps while maintaining the essence of the original humor.

Key words: humor, cultural adaptation, cognitive approach, pragmatic approach, conceptual blending, frame-shifting, pun, substitution, paraphrasing, footnotes, sarcasm.

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Introduction

Humor is an essential aspect of human communication, playing a significant role in shaping cultural identity, establishing social bonds, and reflecting shared norms and values. It is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of societies, influencing how people perceive the world and interact with each other. Translating humor is considered one of the most challenging tasks in translation studies due to its reliance on linguistic subtleties, wordplay, and culturally specific references that do not always have direct equivalents in other languages. Humor is often rooted in cultural nuances, which makes effective translation not just a linguistic challenge but a cultural one as well. Translators face unique difficulties when dealing with humor, especially when it involves puns, idiomatic expressions, or culturally dependent jokes. The essence of humor often lies in the linguistic features of the source language, the shared knowledge of a specific community, or the use of context-specific elements that may not be directly translatable. These complexities require translators to go beyond literal translation and find creative solutions that maintain the humorous effect in

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the target language while adapting the content to suit the cultural expectations of the audience. This article aims to explore how humor is adapted in English translations by examining both cognitive and pragmatic approaches. The cognitive approach focuses on the mental processes involved in understanding and recreating humor, such as conceptual blending and frame-shifting. On the other hand, the pragmatic approach emphasizes the importance of context, implicatures, and the social functions of humor. By considering these approaches, the article seeks to provide insights into the strategies used by translators to overcome the challenges of cultural adaptation and preserve the intended humor across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Humor is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of a society, making it one of the most challenging elements to translate. It often relies on cultural references, wordplay, idiomatic expressions, and implicit social norms that differ significantly across cultures. For instance, a joke that is amusing in one culture may fall flat or even be offensive in another because the shared knowledge and experiences that underpin the humor are not universal. Wordplay, such as puns, often hinges on the sounds and multiple meanings of words, which can be specific to a particular language. This culture-specific nature of humor requires a nuanced understanding of both the source and target cultures to effectively translate its intended impact.

Cognitive Approaches to Humor Translation

Understanding humor translation from a cognitive perspective involves exploring how the mind processes jokes and humorous content. Two key cognitive concepts—conceptual blending and frame-shifting—are crucial to humor. Conceptual blending refers to the process of merging two seemingly unrelated mental spaces to create a new, often surprising meaning, which forms the essence of many jokes. Consider a stand-up comedian making a joke like, «Marriage is like a deck of cards—all you need in the beginning is two hearts and a diamond, but by the end, you wish you had a club and a spade.» The humor here uses a conceptual blend involving the traditional symbols of a deck of cards and the stages of marriage, which involves metaphoric mappings between the card suits and the phases of a relationship. When translating this joke into Uzbek, the translator must adapt it to local culture, where card game metaphors may not resonate as strongly. Instead, they might blend local cultural symbols with the phases of marriage. For instance, they could use references to a well-known Uzbek game or replace the metaphor with one involving traditional household items or wedding rituals that capture the same sense of initial romanticism followed by practical struggles. Uzbek version: Oila qurishdan oldin ikki kotingni och, oila qurgandan keyin bir kotingni yum. This adaptation preserves the underlying humorous blend by adjusting the mental spaces to be more culturally relatable.

Frame-shifting involves the sudden change in perspective or context that surprises the audience and elicits laughter, as the mind must quickly adjust to the new frame of understanding. These processes are central to the way humor is constructed and understood, posing unique challenges for translators who need to evoke the same mental shifts in a different language and cultural setting.

«Time flies like an arrow;
Fruit flies like a banana»

Initially, the phrase «time flies like an arrow» sets a frame related to speed, but the second part shifts the frame by using «flies» to refer to insects, which leads to humor.

These examples of Cognitive Techniques in Humor Translation Translators often rely on creative problem-solving to retain humor's effect. For example, when translating a pun, the translator may need to identify a similar wordplay or linguistic structure that produces an analogous cognitive reaction. In some languages, this might mean inventing a new pun that fits the context of the joke, rather than directly translating the original. A joke that plays on the ambiguity of a word in English may require a similar word with dual meanings in the target language, which could necessitate a complete rewrite of the joke while preserving its intent.

Translation Techniques for Humor Adaptation

Translating humor often involves creative re-imagining when direct wordplay cannot be preserved. There are some translation techniques for humor adaptation.

1. Substitution is a technique where translators replace the original joke with one that is culturally equivalent in the target language. For example, if an English joke relies on a well-known phrase or a cultural reference, it may need to be swapped for a similar reference that resonates with the target audience's cultural context. This helps maintain the intended humorous impact, even though the content of the joke might differ significantly from the original.

Example in English: «I used to play piano by ear, but now I use my hands.»
Translation (Uzbek): «Men ilgari pianinoda quloq bilan chalardim, lekin endi qo'llarimdan foydalanyapman.»

Explanation: In this joke, the phrase «play piano by ear» is a common idiom meaning to play music without written notes. The humor comes from the absurdity of someone literally playing with their ear. The translation maintains the original meaning and humor, as the idiom is understood similarly in Uzbek.

2. Paraphrasing is another common approach, where the translator rephrases the joke while striving to achieve a similar comedic effect, often by maintaining the original joke's structure or playful nature but adapting its specifics to fit cultural nuances.

Example in English: «I told my computer I needed a break, and now it won't stop sending me beach wallpapers.»

Translation (Uzbek): «Men kompyuterimga tanaffus kerakligini aytdim, endi u menga plyaj fon rasmlarini yuborishdan to'xtamayapti.»

Explanation: The humor here comes from the computer misunderstanding «a break» as a vacation. The paraphrased translation conveys the same playful concept. Although the phrasing may differ, the joke's essence remains intact, as Uzbek speakers can appreciate the humor of a computer misinterpreting human needs.

3. Explanation and Footnotes: When substitution or paraphrasing isn't feasible, translators may choose to explain the humor either directly in the text or by adding a footnote. While this approach ensures that the reader understands the original intent, it can dilute the humorous effect because humor is often spontaneous and loses its impact when over-explained. Footnotes can sometimes be necessary in academic or annotated translations to give readers insight into cultural or linguistic contexts, though this tends to make humor less immediate and natural.

Example in English: «I told my friend 10 jokes to get him to laugh. Sadly, no pun in ten did.»

Translation (Uzbek): «Men do'stimni kuldirish uchun unga 10 ta hazil aytdim. Afsuski, 10 ta so'zda hech qanday so'z o'yini yo'q edi.»

Explanation: This joke relies on the pun «no pun in ten did,» which sounds like «no pun intended.» In the Uzbek translation, the wordplay is not directly translatable. Thus, an explanation might be necessary to clarify that «pun» refers to a play on words, and the humor hinges on the expectation that there would be a pun among the jokes told.

Main Challenges of Translating Humor

Translating humor presents various challenges, primarily due to its reliance on linguistic creativity and cultural context. Puns are particularly problematic because they depend on the dual meanings or similar sounds of words, which are rarely replicated between languages. Idiomatic expressions are also tricky, as direct translations may not convey the intended humorous effect or could result in a loss of meaning altogether. Moreover, jokes rooted in culturally specific events, historical references, or social norms require not only translation but also cultural adaptation, which may involve substituting the original reference with one that is meaningful to the target audience. This balance between staying true to the original humor and ensuring the translation resonates with the new audience is a challenging yet crucial aspect of humor translation.

If challenges are analysed in terms of Cultural Gaps, one of the most significant challenges in humor translation is navigating cultural gaps between the source and target audiences. Humor is highly culture-specific, and jokes that are amusing in one culture might be incomprehensible or even offensive in another. For instance, sarcasm is a form of humor that can be difficult to translate because it relies on subtle cues—tone, context, and shared cultural attitudes—that may not carry over well into another language. For example, if it's raining heavily and someone says, «What lovely weather we're having,» they are being sarcastic. In English-speaking cultures, sarcasm is often seen as witty, whereas in other cultures it might be perceived as rude or simply confusing. Similarly, dark humor, which makes light of serious or taboo subjects, can be particularly problematic in translation if the target culture does not have a tradition of treating such subjects humorously. For example, jokes about mortality may resonate in cultures that have a more relaxed attitude towards death but may be seen as highly inappropriate in cultures where death is treated with solemn reverence.

Another challenge is to balance Fidelity and Creativity. Translators also face the challenge of balancing fidelity to the original text with the need for creative adaptation to preserve the humor. This tension often forces translators to make difficult decisions: should they stay true to the literal meaning of the joke or adapt it more freely to make it work in the target language? For example, a pun in the original text might be completely lost if translated literally, requiring the translator to come up with a different pun or playful element that fits the target language and culture. This kind of creative liberty can help retain the humor's effect, but it risks losing some of the original text's nuances or stylistic features. In translating humor, perfect fidelity is often impossible; therefore, translators must focus on conveying the intended

humorous impact, even if the words or context need to be adapted significantly. This balance between fidelity and creativity is further complicated by audience expectations. A translated joke needs to resonate with the audience in a way that feels natural within their cultural context. If the adaptation strays too far from the original, it may be criticized for lacking authenticity. Conversely, if the translator sticks too closely to the original, the joke might fail to make sense to the new audience. This delicate balancing act underscores the skill and sensitivity required of humor translators, who must navigate both linguistic and cultural boundaries to make people laugh across languages.

Conclusion

Translating humor across cultures is an intricate and challenging task, requiring a deep understanding of both linguistic subtleties and cultural contexts. The cognitive approach, involving conceptual blending and frame-shifting, provides insight into the mental processes needed to recreate humor in a new language. Meanwhile, the pragmatic approach emphasizes the importance of context, implicatures, and social norms in preserving the humor's effect. Translators must balance fidelity to the original with creative adaptation, using techniques like substitution, paraphrasing, and sometimes explanation to bridge cultural gaps while maintaining humor's essence. Despite the difficulties, effective humor translation is possible through cultural competence, a deep understanding of audience expectations, and an innovative approach to adaptation. By navigating cultural differences thoughtfully, translators can make humor accessible and enjoyable to diverse audiences, demonstrating that laughter truly can transcend boundaries.

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