For Better or for Worse -
The Challenges of Translating English humour into Arabic

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ترجمة النص الفكاهي
في اللغة الإنجليزية

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الملخص:

لغة الفكاهة هي الدافع للغاية وتعتمد بشكل كبير على التعقيد البنيوي المتعمد ةالتعقيد والغموض الدلالي. لذا يجب على المترجمين الإلمام إلماما تاما باللغتين المترجم منها والمترجم إليها إضافة إلى الثقافة. وحيث إن المترجم بصفته وسيطا يتعين عليه خلق تأثير واستجابة مماثلتين للبيئة الأصلية من خلال تجاوز الصعوبات الكامنة ليس فقط في النواحي النحوية والدلالية والبرغماتية والثقافية للنص الأصلي ولكن أيضا من النواحي الأسلوبية والجمالية المتمثلة في الغموض والتورية وأصوات القافية والوحدات الصرفية والكلمات والسياق. الغرض من هذه الورقة هو دراسة وتحليل بعض جوانب الفكاهة الإنكليزية وشرح الصعوبات التي يواجهها المترجم فيترجمها إلى اللغة العربية التي تختلف عن اللغة الإنكليزية لغويا وثقافيا .

مصطلحات أساسية: النص الفكاهي، التداولية، المعاني، الغموض

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Abstract:

The language of humour is highly motivated and relies heavily on deliberately devised structural complexity and semantic ambiguity. Translators must know the target and source language and culture extremely well. The translator being the mediator is required to create approximately a similar impact and response to that of the original environment through transcending the difficulties inherent not only in the grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, and cultural features of the original text, but also in the aesthetic and stylistic features represented in a skillfully manipulated ambiguities, puns, rhyming sounds, morphemes, words and context. The purpose of this paper is to investigate and analyze some aspects of English humour and demonstrate the difficulties encountered in rendering it into Arabic, a language linguistically and culturally different from English.

Keywords: Humour, Pragmatics, Semantics, Ambiguity

1. INTRODUCTION

Humour is defined as “the ability to be amused by things, the way in which people see that some things are amusing or the quality of being amusing” (www.dictionary.cambridge.org). Another definition is provided by the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor as the capacity to perceive, appreciate, or express what is funny, amusing, incongruous, and ludicrous.

The language of humour is the result of conscious and deliberate planning and design; it relies heavily on puns and ambiguity whether spoken or written to produce a dramatic effect on the reader or hearer.

Besides, humour is a social collaborative act in which the teller/writer, the listener/reader and the humorous utterance simultaneously engage in a socio-cultural function, (Farghal 2006:1). For this reason it has been discussed by psychologists, sociologists, and linguists among others. This, as Attardo (1994:1) puts it, has often resulted, in epistemological hairsplitting. Yet, he concludes that what humour ultimately is depends on the purpose for which it is used (Attardo 1994:4). In this sense linguists would define humour as that whose intended effect is evoking laughter and which has an effect on the target audience.

Humour refers to “a variety of texts but often with subtle differences: jokes, jests, witticisms, quips, sallies, cracks, gags, puns, retorts, riddles, one-liners and conundrums” (Schmitz, 2002:3). Meaning in humour is not made clear but it has to be worked out through cooperation between by the listener, reader and humour producer.

Humour can be intentional or accidental (spontaneous). In intentional humour communication is non-bonfide and one or more of Grice’s (1975) maxims of the Cooperative Principle is flouted to create the humorous effect.

Accidental humour, on the other hand, is bona-fide communication (earnest, serious and information conveying) in which the infringement of the maxims of the Cooperative Principle is spontaneous and unintentional. It results from the producer’s inability to observe overlapping in the meaning of semantically related words. The following examples are from Farghal (2006)

- (In a Bangkok dry cleaners) Drop your trousers here for best results.
- (In a Rome laundry) Ladies leave your clothes here and spend the afternoon having a good time.

Despite the fact that there exists universal or globalized humour, it is assumed that some languages have their own characteristics linguistically and culturally that evoke in their audience pleasurable and playful response. Menacere, M. (1991: 36) tells us that:

> As individuals view reality differently, it would be impossible to ask two different languages to express thoughts in similar manner because each one possesses a mode of expression using the linguistic devices available in the language according to its needs.

This naturally has its bearing on translation for in the case of similar cultures and languages, it is often possible to have an effective translation' (Rephelson-West, 1989: 129).

The translation of English humour has been dealt with by Leibold (1989) who says that successful translation of humour is achieved through decoding the original humorous speech and recapturing its intentions. Laurian (1992) deals with the difficulties of translating jokes and concludes that some jokesare untranslatable and therefore it is necessary to change the reality of what the text refers to in the original. (cf. Nilsen (1989), Ornstein-Galicia (1989),), Lendvai (1996), and Zabalbeascoa (1996) among others). Attardo (2002) applied the General Theory of Verbal Humor, a revision of Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script theory, to the translation of humour. The theory comprised six parameters, namely, Language, narrative strategy, Target, Situation, Logical Mechanism, and Script Opposition. According to Attardo, to seek equivalence when translating humour, the translator should use these parameters to find the similarities and differences. Only if a parameter did not exist should a translator abandon it and replace it with that of the target language. These parameters were applied to translating some examples of humour from English into German, Italian and French.

As far as translation of humour from or into Arabic is concerned, there seems to be a dearth of literature on this area. The only works I came across are Farghal (2006) who, in the introduction of his article on accidental humour in public notices displayed in English, analyzed two Jordanian jokes in which humour was created through both script opposition and script overlap.

Muhawi (2002) deals with equivalence in translation of the meta linguistic joke in a local Arabic dialect as movement from oral performance, a semiotic system with its own rhetorical conventions, into a written text in standard English. He states that translation must be based on the concept of intersemiotic translation suggested by Jakbson (1959).

2. THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of this paper is to investigate and analyze some aspects of English humour and demonstrate the difficulties encountered in rendering it into Arabic, a language linguistically and culturally different from English.

Twenty jokes and humourous statements have been selected from humour websites and also from Nash's *The Language of Humour*. They were categorized according to the source that causes humour. For the purpose of translation we shall distinguish two main types of humour, linguistic and cultural.

It has been found that humour occurs at the various levels of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and culture. The translator would have to decide what to keep and when to break away from the linguistic and cultural domination of the source language so that natural discourse may be produced and the communicative objective of the message may be preserved. For the purpose of translation we shall distinguish two main types of humour, linguistic and cultural.

3. Linguistic Humour

Linguistic humour may be divided into three kinds: phonological, morphological and semantic and pragmatic.

Linguistic or language based humour is challenging and requires greater effort in processing because of the different structures of the English and Arabic.

3.1 Phonological

Phonological humour ambiguity is created by playing on language sounds, stress, intonation and pronunciation. An example would be the following:

(1) A: How do you make a cat drink?
B: Easy, put it in the liquidizer.
(Nash, 1985)

English stress and intonation in "cat drink" above cause the ambiguity, and semantically give it two possible interpretations i.e. a drink for a cat or the way to make a cat drink. This humorous text was shown to five bilingual teachers of English and translation who were asked to translate it into Arabic. Three of the translations opted for the interpretation that by putting the cat in the liquidizer it will be able to drink. One translation regarded 'cat' as a brand name for a drink and transliterated it into Arabic letters. One translation opted for the surface meaning that we can make a drink for the cat by putting the drink in the liquidizer.

The five translations demonstrate how problematic it is to render into the target language humour that is based on semantic ambiguity. The translations that opted for the deep meaning of the text have failed to create the ambiguity – the source of humour – and consequently, they were not funny at all. The reason for this problem is attributed, as Catford (quoted in Bassnet- McGuire, 1980:32) points out, to linguistic untranslatability resulting from the differences between the source language and the target language. No equivalent Arabic text would reflect semantically the two interpretations above.

Another difficulty in translating phonological humour is illustrated in the following joke:

(2) An American asks a Britisher what he does. The Britisher in his r- less vowel dialect responds “I’m a clerk”. The American assumes on the basis of this answer that the Britisher sits round all day going “tick, tock, tick, tock”.

(Nash,1985)

The ambiguity creating humour here comes from the British pronunciation of the word “clerk” which is understood by the American as “clock”. We see no humour in literal translation since phonologically it is not possible to clone the sound in Arabic, however, by providing a gloss to the body of the text such as:

قالها بلهجة إنجليزية بريطانية تشبه في نطقها كلمة “ساعة”
باللهجة الأمريكية

(My translation)

(Lit) He said it in British accent which is similar to “o’clock” in American English.

The readership is provided with background information about British and American pronunciation and the joke becomes comprehensible. The dramatic effect, however, is not as good as the original.

In the next example, the play is on the near homophones” soot” (a black carbon powder) and “suit” (to be convenient):

(3) Why does Santa Claus go down the chimney on Christmas Eve? Because it soots him.

www.jokes.com

The problem for the translator into Arabic here is not so much the cultural aspect of the one-liner above since Arabs are now well familiar with the imaginary old man with red clothes and a long white beard but in finding similar Arabic homophones to produce the humorous effect implied in “soot” (a noun changed deliberately into a verb to make it sound like “suit”).

Therefore, we may conclude that this type of humour is language specific and hence, untranslatable as far as equivalence is concerned. Nevertheless, Lefevere (quoted in Bassnett–McGuire, 1980: 82) proposes that the problem of linguistic untranslatability can be best solved by what he calls ‘versions’ in which the substance of the source text is retained and the form is changed. Therefore, any literal translation will not be appropriate and greater intervention on the part of the translator is called for.

3.2 **Morphological**

Humour can sometimes be created by playing on morphemes as in the following:

(4)
A: What’s a baby pig called?
B: A piglet.
A: So what’s a baby toy called?
B: A toilet.

(Nash,1985)

In the above joke ‘ –let’ is a ‘bound morpheme’ suffix meaning ‘small’ as in a ‘flatlet’ meaning a small flat. For the purpose of humour, it is used creatively to make a new word in which the final syllable of ‘toilet’ is interpreted as the bound morpheme–let, hence, creating a new word meaning a small toy. This manipulation of the morphological rule is done on purpose to create this special effect. Another example is the following:

(5) Marriage is a three ring circus:
engagement ring, wedding ring, and
suffering

(www.ahajokes.com)

Humour here lies in the combination of “suffer” and “ring” which creates the ambiguity. “Ring” may be interpreted as a circular piece of jewellery worn on one’s finger for engagement and wedding and it may also be interpreted as a large circular area surrounded by seats in a circus; “suffering” may be seen as a compound word in which “ring” is a free morpheme and is interpreted as a stage that follows engagement and wedding in the three stage marriage process. “suffering” , as one word, with “ing as a bound morpheme, insinuates that marriage ends in physical and mental pain and difficulties . Another example is the following:

(6) Q: Where do you find a birthday
present for a cat?
A: In a cat-alogue!

(www.jokes.net)

In the above joke , and for the sake of humour, the word “catalogue” is morphologically divided into two morphemes, “cat”, a free morpheme, and (-alogue), a bound morpheme , thereby creating another interpretation i.e., a book with a list of cat goods you can buy from a shop.

To translate (4) , (5) and (6) successfully into Arabic it would be necessary to find equivalent morphological forms that behave in the same way as those in English. And since the morphological system of Arabic has no ready mechanism for producing such forms, any translation preserving the form of the source language is not feasible and, therefore, the translator would inevitably resort to retaining the sense rather than perhaps paraphrase which is relatively easy and workable with other types of prose.

3.3 **Semantic and pragmatic**

Humour can be found in polysemous phrasal verbs. The following is an example:

(7) A: When is a car not a car?
B: When it turns into a garage.

(Nash,1985)

Ambiguity here lies in our interpretation of the verb ‘turn into’ either as ‘to move in the direction of’ or ‘to change into’. In translating it into Arabic without intervention, we will be left with one interpretation since the equivalent verb in Arabic is not polysemous. Consequently, loss of the humour inherent in the English utterance is inevitable. Literal translation would look like this:

– متى لا تكون السيارة سيارة ؟
– عندما تتحول إلى كراج (عندما تتجه إلى الكراج).

(My translation)

The translation above fails to convey the two meanings implied by the lexical item and, consequently, the communicative and pragmatic objectives are lost. Therefore, the translator may resort to a procedure called by Dickins et al (2002:40-49) "compensation" which can be used "in place", that is, consisting in making up for any loss of effect in a given place in the source text by recovering a corresponding effect at another place in the target text; or " in kind" involving a difference in kind between the source text and target text textual effect. In this case by changing the verb "turn into" to "تقف" or "توقف" meaning "to stop" and by playing on the duplicity of the meaning of the word "سيارة" (car – moving), the translator can create ambiguity that minimizes the loss in the original and is perhaps as humorous.
Example (5) may be translated as:

– متى لا تكون السيارة سيارة؟
–لما توقف

(Lit.) When is a car not a car?
When it stops.

(My translation)

A common source of humour in English is puns. Look at the following examples:

(8) Iraqi Head seeks arms
(http://www.ling.upenn.edu/)

(9) Marriage is not a word. It is a .sentence–a life sentence
(www.humor.about.com)

In example (8) the homograph "head" can be interpreted as a noun meaning either chief or the anatomical head of a body. Likewise, the homograph "arms" can be interpreted as a plural noun meaning either weapons or body parts.
The headline can easily be read as a disembodied head searching for arms (body parts) or wanting to have them attached.
(9) It is the word "sentence" that is played upon to create humour. It has two meanings i.e., a grammatical group of words and the punishment that a judge gives to someone who has been declared guilty of a crime.

Any Arabic translation not considering the humorous effect created by the pun would lead, as Newmark (1995) puts it, 'to ugly translation thereby defeating the text'. In translating the above into Arabic, a similar ambiguity may be recovered.

الزواج ليس كلمة إنما هو جملة بل هو أزمة بالجملة
(Lit.) Marriage is not a word. It is a sentence.
It is a wholesale crisis .

The Arabic version of (9) the word for "sentence" is "جملة" which has the same letters and pronunciation of the Arabic word for "wholesale". In the above rendering " life sentence" has been replaced by "wholesale crisis" , which does not have the same denotation, but it is meant to preserve the ambiguity . The Arabic sentence is not an exact rendering of the original as far as accuracy is concerned as it is sacrificed for the sake of naturalness and communicative value, yet it creates similar ambiguity which, I believe, "teases the brain" and perhaps produces a smile.

In some humorous statements, no intervention by the translator is required. The meaning and the communicative value of the source text are well preserved as in the following examples:

(10) If your wife wants to learn how to drive, don't stand in her way.
(www.ahajokes.com)

إذا أرادت زوجتك تعلم قيادة السيارة
فلا تقف في طريقها.
(My translation)

(11) An archaeologist is the best husband a woman can have; the older she gets, the more interested he is in her.
(Agatha Christie quoted in www.ahajokes.com)

عالم الآثار هو أفضل زوج يمكن
أن تحظى به المرأة فكلما زادت في
العمرزاد اهتمامه بها
(My translation)

There was a man who said, "I never knew what happiness was until I got married...and then it was too late!".
(www.ahajokes.com)

(12) قال رجل "لم أكن اعرف ما هي السعادة
إلى أن تزوجت و كان ذلك بعد فوات
الأوان
(My translation)

(13) They say when a man holds a woman's hand before marriage, it is love; after marriage, it is self defense.
(www.ahajokes.com)

يقال أنه عندما يمسك الرجل يد المرأة قبل الزواج
فذلك دليل على الحب أما بعد الزواج فإنه
للدفاع عن النفس.
(My translation)

The examples above are fairly straightforward. In (10) the ambiguity in "stand in her way" that creates humour is that you do not stand in front of your wife's car when she is driving to avoid being run over. In (11) the wife of an archaeologist is compared to something from ancient time which becomes more valuable as it gets older. In (12) "then it was too late" humour is implied in realizing that happiness was lost with marriage and it was too late to do any thing about it. In (13) it is the connotation that after marriage a man holds the woman's hands , not out of love and affection but to avoid being attacked and hit by his wife.

This type of humour is universal and generally speaking poses no serious problems for the translator. Language as well as humour are well preserved and easily rendered into Arabic as shown above.

Pragmatic humour occurs when people concentrate on the sense of the utterance rather than its force. The speaker deliberately intending to create humour gives less information than is required and becomes ambiguous (flouting the Gricean maxim **quality** of the cooperative principle) thereby leading the hearer, in his/her interpretation of the utterance, into drawing certain conclusions, i.e. implicature and replying accordingly (See Grice H. P. 1975, the cooperative principle, pp. 45-6).

(14)	A:	Does your dog bite?
	B:	No
		(A – bends down to stroke the dog and gets bitten)
	A:	I thought you said your dog didn't bite?
	B:	It's not my dog.

(Nash,1985)

- هل كلبك يعض ؟
- لا (ينحني لكي يربت على الكلب فيعضه)
- حسبت أنك قلت لي بأن كلبك لا يعض؟
- ولكنه ليس كلبي.

(My translation)

(15) A blonde went to an appliance store sale and found a bargain. "I would like to buy this TV," she told the salesman. "Sorry, we don't sell to blondes," he replied. She hurried home and dyed her hair, then came back and again told the salesman, "I would like to buy this TV." "Sorry, we don't sell to blondes," he replied. "Darn, he recognized me," she thought. She went for a complete disguise this time: a brown curly wig, big baggy clothes, and big sunglasses. Then she waited a few days before she approached the salesman again and said, "I would like to buy this TV." "Sorry, we don't sell to blondes," he replied. Frustrated, she exclaimed, "How do you know I'm a blonde?" "Because that's a microwave," he replied.

(http://www.jokes.com)

ذهبت إحدى الشقراوات إلى محل لبيع المواد الكهربائية والمنزلية في يوم التخفيضات فوجدت شيئا رخيص الثمن فقالت للبائع " أريد أن اشتري هذا التليفزيون" . أجاب البائع "متأسف نحن لا نبيع للشقراوات" . ذهبت مسرعة إلى البيت وصبغت شعرها ثم عادت وقالت للبائع مرة أخرى " أريد أن أشتري هذا التليفزيون" . فأجاب "متأسف نحن لا نبيع للشقراوات" . فقالت في نفسها " اللعنة لقد عرفني" فذهبت وتنكرت تنكرا كاملا حيث وضعت شعرا مستعارا مجعدا بني اللون ونظارات شمسية ولبست ملابس فضفاضة. انتظرت بضعة أيام ثم ذهبت إلى البائع وقالت له " " أريد أن اشتري هذا التليفزيون" فأجابها البائع "متأسف نحن لا نبيع

للشقراوات“.فصرخت قائلة من شدة الإحباط
” كيف عرفت اني شقراء؟“ فأجاب ” لأن هذا
ميكروويف“ .

(My translation)

In the examples above, pragmatic humour in (14) results from A's conclusion that the dog belongs to B and that it does not bite ; in (15) it is a result of the blonde's belief that the seller did not want to sell her the television set because she was blonde.

Apart from the use of different cohesive devices to establish linkage, my proposed translation of examples (14) and (15) demonstrates that the content and grammatical structure and style of the original text can be preserved, thereby securing referential and pragmatic equivalence. More importantly, the humour of the source text is perfectly retained. This is due to the fact that the text is "static", not departing from the norm, hence it requires the least intervention on the part of the translator and literal translation appears to be appropriate and achieves its goal.

4. Cultural humour

Newmark (1995: 94) defines culture as the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression. Consequently, translation involving heterogeneous cultural and linguistic systems is different from translation between related languages belonging to the same cultural sphere in that the difficulties are greater. Besides, for any cultural translation to be successful, it has to take into account all the different values and thought patterns and even logic of the source text. It depends on how much of the source language culture can be imposed on the target language structure in order for the communication to be effective and the language to be natural. Failing to do this will only result in the breakdown of communication. The following humour is an illustration of cultural difference:

(16) Manchester children all follow United, because their mothers tell them to stay away from the Maine Road.

(From Raphelson-west (1989: 132)

(17) There were paratroopers showing a Californian around their native city of New York. They decided that he could best see it and avoid traffic by jumping out of a plane, so they took him up and all prepared to parachute. They told him, 'After you jump, count to ten and then pull the cord'. Well, he jumped but fell to the ground before pulling the cord. When the paratroopers landed, they heard, emitting from beneath a haystack,: six…..seven…….., eight……..

(From Raphelson-West (1989: 132)

when translating examples (16) and (17) into Arabic, they will be perfectly comprehended, but there is no way for the reader or hearer to know the ambiguity in ‘the Maine Road’, the home of Manchester City Football Club nor will he/she know about the speaking habits of the people in California and New York in that the stereotypical New Yorker speaks fast and the stereotypical Californian speaks slowly. Untranslatability here is due to the absence in the target language culture of a relevant situational feature for the source language text, i.e. the location of Manchester City’s football ground in (8) and the speaking habits of the people of California and New York in (9).

Other culture-specific examples are the following:

(18) Q: How does Moby Dick celebrate his birthday?
A: He has a whale of a party!
www.jokes.net

(19) Q. Why is a dog scared of a fire?
A. It doesn’t want to become a hot dog
www.humor.about.com

(20) Q. What is the biggest pencil in the world?
A. Pennsylvania.
www.humor.about.com

Any translation of joke (18) has to evoke in the reader / listener the famous story of Captain Ahab and his obsession and desire to kill the huge whale, Moby Dick. In (19) humour is created by the ambiguity inherent in the meaning of “hot dog” which is a dog that is hot or a cooked sausage eaten in a long soft roll, often with fried onions” dictionary.cambridge.org. In Arabic, the connection between ‘dog” and “hot dog” will be lost in any Arabic translation of this joke. In joke (20) the Arabic word for pencil is “قلم “ which has nothing in spelling to do with the American state of Pennsylvania. If translated into Arabic, the humour that lies in the connection between “pencil” and “ Pennsylvania” will be lost. The translator would perhaps have to find a different joke “with another scenario and frame” (Schmitz 2002:18).

Cultural hegemony leaves the translator with the option of either “domesticating” the joke, i.e. to express it in a way familiar to the target language reader or hearer being aware that the socio-cultural match is lacking in the target language. In this case this is maximal intervention or “foreignizing” it where the translator decides to make concessions to the culture of the source text making it entirely visible to the target language reader or hearer (minimal intervention) through providing a gloss to compensate for the cultural gap. However, this would also serve the purpose of demonstrating what jokes are like in American or British culture. Whether the translator opts for the first or the second procedure to bridge the gap of culture is, as Chau (1984) puts it, left to the skill and intuition of individual translators.

5. Conclusion

The language of humour is highly motivated and relies heavily on deliberately devised structural complexity and semantic ambiguity. To translate it, is, as Schmitz (2002:17) puts it, indeed a challenge and highly creative for translators must know the target and source language and culture extremely well. Besides, to appreciate it, the reader or hearer has to go through the process of analysis in his mind to work out the intended meaning. The translator being the mediator is required to create approximately a similar impact and response to that of the original environment through transcending the difficulties inherent not only in the grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, and cultural features of the original text, but also in the aesthetic and stylistic features represented in a skillfully manipulated ambiguities, puns, rhyming sounds, morphemes, words and context.

On the basis of the foregoing analysis of rendering English humour into Arabic –admittedly selective and based on a restricted sample of English humorous utterances- two main types may be distinguished within linguistic humour: the first type which infringes the norms of the source language and which reveals striking discrepancies with the target language; the second type which does not. The former appears to be untranslatable being dynamic and language-specific. The latter type is relatively easy to manage since it involves an overlap of semantic and pragmatic meanings and formal equivalence is feasible.

Cultural humour, on the other hand, is transferable only if the cultural features are diffused and gain currency globally, otherwise they have to be explained with background information in which case it would be at the expense of humour and would only serve to show what humour is like in the foreign language. Sometimes, it would be more effective to replace the whole utterance with target language humour.

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