"Chicks Love it" "It's not Ha-wee-wee":
Subtitling Strategies in Translation of Humor from English into Persian

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the approaches and strategies employed by Iranian subtitlers in the translation of humor from English into Persian. It further aimed at investigating the extent to which these concepts are translatable. The data for the purpose of this study included four subtitled movies selected among those originally produced in English and subtitled to Persian. In order to have a contrastive analysis of humors and their translations, the movies dialogues and their subtitles were compared and contrasted. Based on the definitions of the concept of humor, humorous elements were singled out from each movie and their corresponding subtitled translations were identified and juxtaposed. Analyzing and contrasting the extracted data, approaches and strategies employed by Iranian subtitlers in dealing with these humorous elements were investigated. Findings revealed that translators relied on eight different strategies in translating humorous concepts. The strategies employed were namely transfer, paraphrase, localization, addition, deletion, transliteration, preservation and creation. The study concludes with some socio-cultural and linguistic obstacles in humor translation. Much of the translated humors lacked effective sense and in some cases the sense of the main message in the source language was omitted.

Keywords: Subtitling, Translation strategies, Humor, Translatability

1. Introduction

Language as we know it is a communication tool. There are some factors involved for a successful communication one of which is understanding the message. Just as we need to know the message for a successful communication, there is also the need to about the culture. Thus, there is an interconnection among language, message and culture. Humor is one of the interesting tools which people rely upon for a more meaningful, effective and fun way to convey their messages. Linguistic, cultural and social elements are of great importance in humor. To understand humor, one needs to know a great deal of these elements which are often believed to be untranslatable. Translators are to translate these elements without reducing the intended effect or to create Nida's "equivalent effect" in which "the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message" (Munday, 2012, p.67). One area in which humor is greatly applied for practical purposes is mass media.

The nature of humor and also some limitations that exist in subtitling process such as space and time limitation make translation of humor concepts different from other kinds of translations. In a majority of cases the humor is untranslatable and usually the humorous concept of expression will be destroyed through the process of translation. This does not mean that humor cannot be translated at all, it is rather translatability degree and accuracy of translation which is the question. Many linguists agree that using some strategies by translators make translation of some language and culture bound concepts (e.g. metaphors, puns, humors, etc.) possible. Many studies have explored the existence of these

strategies in work of translators and subtitlers and came to revealing results and findings. The present study will explore the so called equivalent effect of these strategies i.e., the extent to which the translators could create the same effect (humorous concept) as it was perceived by the original audience. The present study is more specifically aimed at addressing the following questions:

1. What translation strategies are employed by translators in subtitling the humorous expressions from English into Persian?
2. To what extent the translated subtitles represent the original meanings of the humors available in the movies using these translation strategies?
3. What are the obstacles and problems in translating humor concepts?

2. Translation Theories and Strategies

Different scholars have introduced different strategies for translating cultural bound concepts. For instance Newmark (1988) has proposed different and detailed strategies in the area of translation and culture including 'literal', 'Transference', 'Cultural equivalent', 'Functional equivalent' 'Descriptive equivalent', 'Synonymy', 'Through-translation', 'Shifts or transpositions', 'Translation label', 'Compensation', 'Componential analysis', 'Reduction and expansion', 'Paraphrase', 'Couplets', 'Notes, additions, glosses'. According to Vinay and Darbelnet (1995), there are two general categories of translating, namely 'direct' and 'oblique'. These two categories include seven strategies which are 'borrowing', 'calque', 'literal translation', 'transposition', 'modulation', 'equivalence' and 'adaptation'. Moreover different scholars have considered different translation strategies specially for a better transformation of humor from the source language (SL) into the target language (TL), for instance, Freud (1991) has provided a summary of the existing strategies including 'condensation' , 'multiple use of the same material' , and 'double meaning'. Gottlieb (1992) has also presented a set of other strategies in the area of subtitling, namely 'expansion', 'paraphrase', 'transfer', 'imitation', 'transcription', 'dislocation', 'condensation', 'decimation', and 'deletion' And finally, Chiaro (2004) has proposed three different strategies for the translation of humor on screen which are as follows:

1. The substitution of VEH (Verbally Expressed Humor) in the Source Language with an example of VEH in the Target Language;
2. The replacement of the Source Language VEH with an idiomatic expression in the Target Language;
3. The replacement of the Source Language VEH with an example of VEH in the Target Language elsewhere in the text" (p. 42).

3. Humor

Humor, the major variable of the present study, is an inseparable component of any language. Humor is a vehicle for mass entertainment and is served for the purpose of pure enjoyment, sheer exhilaration and a moment of laughter. "Humor occurs when a rule has not been followed, when an expectation is set-up and not confirmed, when the incongruity is resolved in an alternative way" (Vandaele, 2010, p. 149).

Choosing the most natural and applicable strategies for a better transfer of humor from one language into another is indeed a challenging task for translators. Verbally expressed humor is among the most difficult to translate. Verbal humor is often viewed as untranslatable due to its language dependent quality. Translators are often faced with the seemingly impossible task of translating verbal humor; they must keep as much as possible of its informational and pragmatic content and, at the same time, producing a similar effect as it would provoke in the source language culture. Humor is both social and individual related and it very much depends on sense of humor of both translator and the receiver. All these make translation of humor a dilemma for translator. For the purpose of this study humor will be defined as a humorous effect evoked by words and humor translation will be regarded as a way of achieving the humorous effect in a target recipient of translation.

4. Constraints of Subtitling

Gottlieb considers subtitling to be 'interasemiotic': "It operates within the confines of the film and TV media, and stays within the code of verbal language. The subtitler does not even alter the original; he or she adds an element, but does not delete anything from the audiovisual whole." (Munday, 2012, p. 270). Gottlieb (1992) explains that subtitler is faced with formal (quantitative) and textual (qualitative) constraints. Textual constraints are those imposed on the subtitles by the

visual context of the movies, he believes that wording of the subtitles must reflect the style, speech tempo and the syntax an order of key elements in the dialog. Formal constraints are the space factors (a maximum of two lines are allowed, with some 35 characters each) and time factor. The duration of a subtitle depends on the quality and complexity of the text, the speed of the dialogue; the average viewer's reading speed and the necessity intervals between subtitles. Hatim and Mason (1990) argued that "when films are subtitled, certain phonological features of mode have to be represented in writing. This mode shift can create problems, such as how to represent in writing the slurred speech of a drunkard" (p. 50).

Knowing the fact that people read more slowly than they speak, subtitles mostly tend to provide a summary of the dialogues rather than exactly words which are said on the screen. Thus, this makes omission an almost indispensable task. The inherent time and space limit in subtitling also creates the problem of material selection. This makes the translator to look for the most significant material within the source text and to decide on those which are not deemed the most urgent information to be transferred into the target language and hence, left untranslated. These constrains are a real challenge dealing with subtitling humor. What gives it an extra twist is that in the case of subtitling the use of footnote or translator's note is not possible. It is necessary to note these constrains and limitations in order to have a more effective and natural subtitle product.

5. Method and Materials

The present study examines the Persian subtitles of four American movies: *Night Run*, *Hotel Transylvania*, *Dumb and Dumber*, and *How I Met Your Mother*, with particular focus on the humor segments. Conducting a descriptive method the researchers aim to figure out the possible strategies employed by translators to translate/subtitle humor elements from the SL into the TL.

Table 1: The Movies Comprising the Corpus of this Study

Movie Name	Director	Translator/Subtitler
Midnight Run(1988)	Martin Brest	Amir Haghighi
Dumb and Dumber(1994)	Peter & bubby Farrelly	Amir Gooran
How I Met Your Mother(2005) Season1-eoisode1	Rob Greenberg	Ehsan65
Hotel Transylvania	Genndy Tartakovsky	9movie-mohamad

The study is primarily qualitative and involved an analysis of subtitles which was based on screen translation theories and the work of researchers in the area of humor translation. It is also coupled with a quantitative approach by using frequency tables of the used strategies by translators. The researcher carried out a descriptive comparative content analysis of the dialogues and the corresponding subtitles of aforementioned movies. The typology of subtitling strategies has been employed in order to find out and describe what the subtitler has done in every segment of the movies in which the humor elements are present.

The corpus for the purpose of the present study comprised 120-minute-movie dialogue in English and 120-minute-Persian subtitle (240 minutes in aggregate) which was selected from the first 30 minutes of each movie for the purpose of randomization. A total of 115 frames including the humor elements have been identified out of the corpus. These were selected among various genres in order to have a more comprehensive topic and content coverage which would in turn shed light on more possible translation and subtitling strategies. Furthermore, the quality of subtitles was satisfactory enough compared to other English movies with Persian subtitles available in the market. A four-step procedure was followed to analyze the data:

1. Each English sentence containing humor elements was extracted from the original movies and then juxtaposed with their Persian subtitles and analyzed comparatively.
2. All translation strategies employed by translators were investigated with the strategies mentioned in the literature in mind.
3. The most appropriate and frequent strategies used by Persian translators were identified.
4. The challenges and most problematic areas in their translation/subtitling were detected.

6. Result and Discussion

The results of this study indicate that translators relied on eight main strategies to translate humor elements. A summary of the strategies employed along with their examples are provided in what follows.

6.1 Translators' strategies

Transfer: refers to the strategy of translating the source text completely and accurately. This strategy is more desired one for translator since s/he can make the most effect by little effort. No significant changes in lexical and structure is expected to happen in this strategy. This strategies was employed in 20 percent of cases.

Examples:

Don't make me get your mom.	کاری نکن مامانتو بگیرم.
I would never do anything to offend a man of your size.	من هرگز نمی خواستم یه مرد با این هیکل رو اذیت کنم.
Bigger, like "Gorilla with an upright bass"?	بزرگتر، مثلا یه گوریل که بیس میزنه؟
What do you think I'm gonna do? Jump off a train moving 90 miles an hour?	
	فکر میکنی میخوام چیکار کنم؟ از یه قطاری که با سرعت 90 مایل بر ساعت میره می پرم بیرون؟

Paraphrase: It relates to where the translator had to make changes in structure and lexical items. Although this was the most frequently used subtitling strategy, in half of the cases studies the humorous element was not transferred into the TL successfully and lost some part of their humorous concept. Still in 50 percent of the cases the subtitlers were successful in transferring the meaning and humorous elements.

Examples:

Then I see these goofy-looking dudes on fire.	بعدش من این مردای آتیش گرفته ی مسخره رو دیدم.
Classic human paranoia	هذیان معمولی انسان ها
Don't you let anyone scoop your brains out.	نذار کسی مغزتو در بیاره.
Don't put that shit on me.	منو مجبور نکن.

Localization: It was adopted to substitute the verbal humor with an instance that is in TL. When transfer and paraphrase couldn't transfer the humor concept this strategy seems to be the best solution. Except in two from all 20 found cases the strategy was practical.

Example:

How does Carl land a Lebanese girl?	چه جوری کارل یه دختر لبنانیو تور کرده؟
Come on let me have you, you pansy.	زود باش بزار اینو بگیرم، تو اوا خواهری.
Oh, yeah? What do you think this is a class trip?	نه بابا؟ فکر کردی این سفر شیک و باکلاس میشه؟
What are you babbling about?	داری چی زری میزنی؟
Those rat bastards, they're rubbing it right in our faces	اون موش های حرومزاده جلو چشم ما زدن به چاک .

Addition: This strategy was used by translators to make the humor concept much clearer. Because of subtitling constrains mentioned earlier this strategy was least frequent.

Example:

Boy that kid smelled.	پسر اون بچه بو گند میده.
Hey! Chicks love it.	هی اون ماشین پرمو واقعا دختر کشه.

Deletion: refers to the total elimination of parts of a text. Subtitlers used this strategy mainly for two reasons: First, deletion of some words could help to transfer the meaning; Second, because of the translator inability to get the meaning correctly, as a result of not being familiar with colloquial or slang words.

Example:

It's kind of funky to breath under here.	زیر یه جورایی بدبوئه.
(The deletion of to breath is helpful here).	
No humping, no pushing, no sniffing heinies.	غرغر نکنین، پرو نباشین، فن فن نکنین.
- did you know there's a pop-tart under your fridge? – No, but dibs.	میدونستی که یه دونه کلوچه پایین یخچالت هست؟ - نه

Dibs is a slang that means claims something, heinie is a very old fashioned word for butt and hump is a slang term, too. The translator doesn't seem to be familiar with these cultural bound colloquialisms and slangs.

Transliteration: it refers to translating word by word without any alteration in the meaning. Employing this strategy, the meaning wasn't transferred properly and humor concept missed its original sense and meaning.

Example:

Piece of a cake!　　　مثل یه تکه کیک!
(Localization strategy might have been a more reasonable strategy in this case).
They were a major influence on the Beatles　　مثل میمون از بیتل ها تقلید میکنن.

The above statement is an interesting analysis of rock and roll history (the Monkeys were a popular group formed after the Beatles arrived in the United States). If the audience not be familiar with Monkeys band they will miss the subtle point. For subtitling constrains explaining the point was impossible.

Preservation: in this strategy the word was transferred directly to TL. It was used mainly in translation of names of people and neologisms.

Example:

Don't worry about a thing Mrs. <u>Neugy-burger</u>.　　نگران این نباشین خانم نیوگی برگر
Well, see, I'm not the Frankenstein; I'm his cousin, <u>Johnnystein</u>.
<u>جانیشتاین.</u>　　خب، ببین من فرانکشتاین معروف نیستم. من پسرعموشم

In these two above-mentioned example there are a word play with the names of characters. The preservation strategy seems useful in these cases. But in the following example this strategy doesn't seem to clear the point.

Duck: I can't fly. I suffer from aviophobia. I also suffer from acrophobia and claustrophobia.
Jerry: If you don't cooperate, you're gonna suffer from <u>fistophobia</u>.
- من نمی تونم با هواپیما پرواز کنم. من همین طور آکروفوبی و کلاستروفوبی هم دارم.
- اگه همکاری نکنی <u>فیستوفوبیا</u> هم میگیری.

This dialogue is the most famous and hilarious part of movie that translator wasn't able to make it clear and one who is not familiar with English language will miss the point of word play.

Creation: the strategy adopted when no translation solution could be found and meaning was inevitably lost. It's usually used as a last resort.

Example:

I wanna go someplace where we know somebody who can plug us into the social pipeline.
من می خوام برم جایی که بتونیم دوستی هامون رو بیشتر کنیم

The English dialogue is a poetic way of saying "well meet lots of (rich) people", that the poetic part is lost in translation.

De…wait…for it…nied. Denied.　　ردت کرد، رد

Because of the structural differences of two languages this interesting word play is missed in translation and the translator had to just transfer the meaning.

What, is she gonna but her eyes at you in Morse code?　　چی، تو میخواستی بهت چشمک بزنه و یه کد رمز بهت بده؟
-I'll give you whatever you want. –start by shutting up.　　– بهت هر چی بخوای میدم. – از همین الان خفه شو.

After analyzing the data, descriptive table was presented, which specified the frequency and percentage of the 8 subtitling strategies identified in translating process.

Table 2: Frequency/Percentage of the Strategies Used

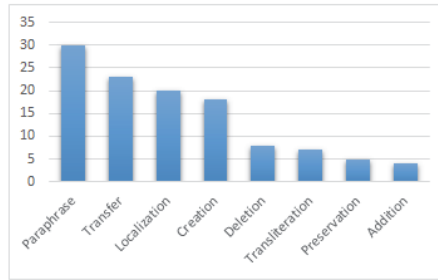| Type of Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Paraphrase	30	26.08
Transfer	23	20
Localization	20	17.39
Creation	18	15.65
Deletion	8	6.95
Transliteration	7	6.08
Preservation	5	4.35
Addition	4	3.48

Figure 1: Frequency/Percentage of the Strategies Used

According to data gathered the translators of subtitles were able to use the "Transfer" strategy only in 20 percentages of cases and they had to get help from other strategies for translating the humor concepts. But in 53 cases of total humor cases the humor concept was lost in translation. In other words, the translators failed to transfer the humor to the target audience in 46% of cases, and in fact using the mentioned strategies seems to have been impractical. The most frequent strategy used was paraphrase which was successful just in 50% of cases and least frequent one was addition which constituted only 3.5% of cases as a result of constrains of subtitling. The most successful strategy was localization with 90% accuracy. This is very revealing for translators to employ this strategy more often in their translations. It was found that the translators have to use some strategies for translating humors, but these strategies weren't successful in making effective sense. Humorous translated subtitles have been discovered to have lost their meaning and in some cases the sense of the main message in the source language was omitted in translation.

In what follows problems and obstacles in translating humorous concept elements are presented as a result of this study. In general these obstacles are classified in four groups:

6.2 Challenges and obstacles

6.2.1 language-specific devices aspects

Cross-linguistic differences comprising differences in syntactic and lexical items caused difficulty in translation of humor concepts. The cross-linguistic differences which are found in this corpus are classified in four categories:
Structure and syntactic:

Give me that booze, you <u>little pumpkin, pie hair-cutted freak</u>. زود باش بده من اونو، <u>جانور حقه باز</u>.

Little pumpkin, pie hair-cutted freak is a horrible grammatical construction but funny insult. Although the translation is acceptable, it isn't as funny as the original.

Jonathan Mardukas <u>in the flesh</u>. اینم از این، جاناتان ماردوکاس <u>تو قفس</u>.
In the flesh means in person or before one's eyes.

Idioms:

Put it on their tab بزار به حسابشون. .
Move it or lost it sister! تکون بخور تا آسیب نبینی.

These two idioms are funny but there aren't idioms as funny as them in Persian. The meaning is only transferred inevitably; hence the results aren't as humors as original ones.
Puns:

-Gas man! –how do they know I have gas? ـ آقای گاز! ـ اونا از کجا می دونستن که من گاز معده دارم؟

A clever play on words: gas can refer to the gas that heats house, or the gas that one got in stomach after eating. Like idioms, puns can be problematic in translation.

-pull over. –No, it's a cardigan.　　　　　　－ بزن کنار. ــ نه، این ژاکت پشمیه.

When you are told to "pull over" by the police, that means to stop your car on the side of the road. But as a noun, a "pull-over" is a type of sweater and cardigan is a nice sweater. There wasn't any way that translator makes the point clear and the limits of space in subtitling don't allow more explanation so inevitably the humor point is lost. Moreover, since the audience may be unfamiliar with cardigan the translator has used generalization.

Alliteration:

Kick his ass, Seabass　　　　　یالا بزنش سی بس.

An interesting play with the sound of words that is impossible to bring in translation.

6.2.2 Socio-cultural aspects

Having background knowledge and information about some social and cultural concepts in SL is important for both translating and understanding the some humor elements for both translator as well as the receivers. Culture-bound humor often presents a dilemma: you can either lose readers with a puzzling allusion or you can burden the text with extra explanation. Although it should be considered that nothing is worse than killing the joke by over-explaining. The main reasons that have caused difficulty in translation were socio-cultural differences and lack of concepts and knowledge in target language.

Example:

Why don't you get lobster? Then I can get some surf and turf action.
چرا لابستر سفارش نمی دی؟ اینجوری منم بیشتر میتونم این دور و برا بچرخم.

Surf and turf is a main course which combines sea food and meat. The foods are considered cultural-bound.

It's a $10 fine for jackwalking in LA.　　　تو لس آنجلس تو خیابون راه رفتن 10 دلار جریمه داره ها
Jackwalk in Los Angeles means to cross or walk in a street recklessly or illegally.

Under "D" in the rolodex for "jerk".　　　شمارش برای راحتی زیر حرف دی که تو کلمه رولدکس نوشته میشه نوشته شده.

A *Rolodex* was a rotating file device used to store business contact information. The translator was not familiar with this device that may even not be used in SL countries anymore.

Where beautiful women instinctively flock like the salmon of Capistrano.
شدن. جایی که زن های خوشگل مثل ماهی های غزل آلا اونجا جمع

Capistrano is a city in California that is famous for its sparrows (type of bird) not its salmon (type of fish). If the audience does not share the same information s/he would not get the hilarious point of the expression.

It's not Ha-wee-wee, but I guess it's still technically out.
خب هاوی وی نیست، ولی فکر کنم باز هم در اصل بیرون از خونه حساب بشه.

Ha-we-we is the name Dracula daughter, Mavis (the character of movie) gave to Hawaii. The audience needs to have background knowledge to make a relation between ha-wee-wee and Hawaii.

6.2.3 Idiolectical aspects

Much of the humor in *dumb and dumber* movie is based on the fact that Lloyd uses very educated language despite the fact that he is so dump. Knowing that his choice of words is so out of character for such a stupid guy help the audience appreciate much of the movies' humor and it is something that translator didn't pay attention to and a significant amount of humor is lost in translation.

Example:

You know what really chaffs my ass, though?　　　می دونی چی ناراحتم می کنه؟

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This expression means "you know what makes me angry?" (But never said: only lips get "chapped," or dried out).

Sons of bitches　　　حرومزاده ها

Funny plural for son of a bitch that the translator was unable to show it in his translation.

That was sheer genius!　　یه شاهکار بود!

Sheer is an adjective that rarely comes with an adjective like genius. The character has used an especial expression that has not been reflected in the translation.

6.2.4 Lexico-Visual concept aspects

This part can be related to written elements such as newspaper headlines, onscreen titles, blackboard lettering, hanging banners, posters, billboards and etc. These elements can be parts of plot. For example *'Rohd island slut'* is the hilarious name of the newspaper that the character of the movie is reading. These lexico-visual humors usually are dismissed and translators do not translate them.

7. Conclusion

The main goal of the current study was to determine the approaches and strategies employed by Iranian subtitlers in the translation of humor from English into Persian in four selected American movies. It further investigated the translatability degree of these elements. It is obvious that it is a challenge for the translator to create a new text as close as possible to the original. But humor translation seems to be an overwhelming task which inevitably challenges almost all translators. It demands significant time, endeavor and energy particularly in the area of subtitling. To successfully translate humorous texts, translators must take the socio-cultural elements into account.

The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that translators relied on eight main strategies to translate humor elements. The strategies employed were namely transfer, paraphrase, localization, addition, deletion, transliteration, preservation and creation. Some of these strategies were used more frequently than others mainly because of subtitling inherent space constraints and limitations and also due to the nature of the translation problems which required the subtitlers to opt for one particular strategy over another. Paraphrase and addition were the most and least frequent employed strategies, respectively.

The study further touched upon some challenges and obstacles in translating humorous elements faced by translators. In general these obstacles fell into four categories with own sub-categories: 1) language-specific devices aspects, 2) Socio-cultural aspects, 3) Idiolectical aspects, 4) Lexico-Visual concept aspects. This study has found that generally the readers' cultural and intellectual background determines how much sense s/he gets out of a humorous expression. The socio-cultural differences are among the major obstacles in translating humors. The strictly socio-cultural-bound feature of humor makes its translation more difficult than other concepts and in the spite of strategies identified and mentioned by different linguists and scholars humor translation remains a challenging task for translators. For the translator to be able to transfer the humor concept into the TL, he needs to understand the humor element and have the required knowledge to find proper cultural equivalent in the TL. To this aim, a translator needs to have a vast knowledge both languages and to know a great deal of the history, culture and social relation of the languages involved.

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