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## Translating jokes and puns

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If a joke is not translated as a joke, the translation is bad. This article asserts that almost all verbally expressed humour is translatable, given appropriate strategies and reasonable criteria for success. It focuses on two problem areas, language-specific jokes (in particular puns) and culture-specific jokes, distinguishing these from more manageable kinds of humour. A brief survey of research on puns is given, followed by practical advice to increase the translator's responses to wordplay, and a systematic way to proceed instead of just waiting for inspiration. Translators of humour (like writers of humour) have a licence to use language creatively, and this enlarges the options for handling outrageous jokes. There follows a shorter discussion of culture-specific jokes and how they differ from 'universal humour'. Some light must be shed on obscurity, yet obviousness is a killer of humour. Suggestions are made about how to bridge cultural gaps without killing the joke, and also about the cultural problem of obscenity. The article ends with a list of eight strategies available to any translator faced with a joke and keen to rise to the challenge.

**Keywords:** humour; cultural diversity; free translation

This article explores two kinds of utterances which can cause problems to translators.

The word 'jokes' is taken here to mean short units of verbally expressed humour, whether these are part of longer texts or merely isolated units (e.g. an isolated riddle). The article will ignore non-verbal jokes and verbal–visual jokes (e.g. in TV sketches), although the latter certainly pose problems for dubbers and subtitlers.

The word 'puns' designates those kinds of wordplay that exploit the ambiguities of words or phrases. Since the majority of puns have a humorous intent, they form a subset of 'jokes'. But puns pose special problems for translators because, unlike most kinds of verbally expressed humour, they use the specific features of a particular language.

Jokes can be headaches. For a long time the literature about translation did not say much about them, or said things that were unhelpful: 'jokes are untranslatable' or 'it's far from easy' or 'these things get lost in translation' or 'humour doesn't travel well'.

In my view, claims that jokes are untranslatable have two main sources: either translators' incompetence (jokes are indeed lost but no serious effort has been made to find equally humorous substitutes) or a narrow notion of translation, combined with an unrealistic standard of success. For those who see translating as an essentially

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verbal process using limited tools like synonyms and transpositions, translating a joke means creating an amusing target text (TT) that is *nearly identical* to the source text (ST). In my view, however, that is unreasonable. Translatability does not require that the TT use the same linguistic structures, but merely that it deliver, broadly speaking, the same joke. Since jokes are frequently adapted in the telling, as we all know, the ‘same joke’ can exist in 10 different guises. Nor does this ‘same joke’ have to be *equally funny* in the target language (TL). Funniness is hard to measure, and humour varies with cultures, not to mention individuals. What we should and can do is translate humour well enough for it to be recognisable as humour and to have some chance of amusing people. (It is also permitted for a translator to make a joke even more amusing in the TT.)

A striking discussion of this issue can be found in Douglas Hofstadter’s *Le Ton beau de Marot*:

When something is said to be ‘untranslatable’, be skeptical. What this claim often means is that it would be impossible *for a dullard* to translate the work in question: that it takes some *thought* and *intelligence* to recreate it in another language. In short, *to translate something witty requires a witty translator*. This is hardly profound, and yet witty translators don’t seem to be in the mind of people who prematurely pronounce so many works ‘untranslatable’. (Hofstadter, 1997, p. 394, his emphasis)

Note his word ‘prematurely’. It is premature to declare anything impossible until at least 10 competent people have tried and failed. Hofstadter notes that the witty verse found in Christian Morgenstern’s *Galgenlieder* had been called untranslatable – and then says that this claim has been disproved, by the translator Max Knight. It is a matter of fact that a lot of comic writing has been translated with success, particularly between European languages, and this feat has often involved adequate handling of jokes and puns.

Of course some jokes are easier than others. Rather than discussing the vain quest for a unitary theory of humour (as found in thinkers like Hobbes, Bergson, Freud, etc.), I find it more practical to focus on the variety of ways in which verbal humour functions. Here is a set of questions which translators may find useful:

DIAGNOSIS: what kind of joke is it?

- (1) *What is the work’s genre/context/tones/situation/purpose?*
- (2) *Is the humour obscure/clumsy/complex/hilarious/offensive?*
- (3) *Is the humour language-specific or not?*
- (4) *Is the humour culture-specific or not?*

Question 1 can help us judge how important the humour is in the text’s objectives. For example, it is more excusable to ignore a pun in a serious lecture than in a sitcom script. Question 2 can help to assess its impact for the original readers (which the translator probably wishes to replicate). The key variables, however, are located in questions 3 and 4 – the biggest translating problems arise if the humour is language-specific or culture-specific. Other kinds of humour are generally translatable.

Fortunately, many jokes are neither language-specific nor culture-specific. They work in numerous other ways – such as understatement, or paradox, or absurdity, or

discrepancy, or playfulness, or bathos, or juxtaposition, or sudden switching, or amusing irony, or unexpected crudeness, or shameless audacity. Some scholars have made a list of 27 joke mechanisms, identifying them with terms like exaggeration, role-reversal, faulty reasoning, and garden-path, to name four that do not pose special problems for translators (Attardo, 2002, p. 180).

Though verbally expressed, most jokes are not *wordplay*, because their use of individual words is normal, not ludic. It follows that when speakers at international conferences are given the advice ‘Don’t tell jokes’, that is a crying shame. The advice ought to be: ‘Do tell jokes, provided they’re neither language-specific nor culture-specific’.

### Easily translatable jokes

A good example of an easily translatable joke is this famous riposte, allegedly spoken in 1912 in Blenheim Palace:

- Winston, if I were your wife, I would put poison in your coffee.
- Nancy, if I were your husband, I would drink it.

That relies not on wordplay but on surprise reversal and unspoken meaning. Despite its elevated social context, the humour is universal, since every culture knows about husbands and wives and drinks and poisons, not to mention insults.

The next example is just as translatable:

- Q: Why do the people I meet take an instant dislike to me?  
A: To save time.

Some of the easiest jokes to translate are found in the subgroup called ‘elephant jokes’.

- Q: What is gray, with four legs, a big nose and a handle?  
A: A portable elephant.

- Q: Why did the elephant sack his athletics coach?  
A: Because he still couldn’t pole-vault over the giraffe.

Here the humour has nothing to do with English and everything to do with absurdity. It ought to work wherever people have heard of elephants, giraffes and athletics coaches.

Another subgroup is the ‘idiot joke’ – research has shown that nearly every culture tells jokes highlighting the stupidity of a group of neighbours or provincials. If one wants to translate such texts and get a laugh, a common ploy is to change the apparent target group. Often, indeed, such jokes are recycled, so that a Canadian riddle about stupid Newfies becomes an Australian joke about Kiwis or a German one about Stupnagels. The original joke may well contain culture-specific material, but that is not actually crucial. For example, a Canadian ‘Newfy joke’ only seems to be about Newfoundlanders; it is really about stupidity. Therefore it can be treated as a generic ‘idiot joke’.

Absurdity and stupidity are only two areas that can be called universals of humour. Jokes often target general human foibles, such as sibling rivalry, or

dimwitted neighbours or reckless teenage boys. Cowardly soldiers, pompous pedants and randy old men were the butt of humour in Latin comedy and ever since. And don't we all know about timidity, and stinginess, and snobbery, and cunning plans that backfire? Humour about those universal follies and failings tends to translate well, especially if it avoids complexity and wordplay.

Also common, if not universal, is the phenomenon of politicians who seem to think they're godlike. I recently received two pages of jokes from France, which all belong to a new subgroup, the 'Super-Sarko Jokes'. For instance:

Some boys wear Superman pyjamas: Superman wears Sarkozy pyjamas!

Out of the 30 examples, 27 posed no problems in translation.

### Language-specific jokes and puns

Let us now focus on language-specific problems, most of which involve wordplay. Besides punning, wordplay humour uses devices like parody, anagram, spoonerism and transformed allusion. In such cases the translator's objective is to recreate in the TL the cognitive flash of humour – what Hofstadter calls 'the sudden unexpected slippage of a mental structure that had seemed perfectly solid and not in the least suspicious until the moment the mental rockslide occurred' (Hofstadter, 1997, p. 216).

Most of the literature about wordplay focuses on puns. Peter Newmark declared 20 years ago that: 'The translation of puns is of marginal importance and of irresistible interest' (Newmark, 1988, p. 217). Since then, much more has been published on the subject, either in translation journals like *The Translator* (1996, 2002), or in research on humour (Raskin, 2008; *Humor*, 2005) enabling us to learn, for example, that 'the Italian translations of Marx Brothers' films are a never-ending source of inspired solutions to puns on screen' (Chiaro, 2008, p. 593).

Some of the best of this scholarly work is found in a set of essays entitled *Traductio: Essays on punning and translation* (Delabastita, 1997). This work does not merely assert and show that a lot of wordplay is translatable, it also includes lengthy exposés of the 'tools' which translators have used for the purpose. Thus Delabastita, who edited the collection, lists eight methods for approaching puns, only one of which is omission. An article by Henrik Gottlieb (pp. 210ff) lists five ways of subtitled wordplay in TV comedy shows. He declares: 'I do not believe that wordplay is in most cases untranslatable' (p. 226). An article by Andrejs Veisbergs expounds eight options for tackling the kind of pun that is based on a transformed idiom. And Malcolm Offord (pp. 241ff) discusses six different strategies actually used by translators for the puns in Shakespeare's comedies. He notes that: 'the translator weaves his own web of wordplay from the strategies and sources available to him' (p. 258), and that 'creativity on the part of translators occurs quite regularly' (p. 247). These encouraging findings have prompted me to try to set out some practical ways whereby working translators can increase their 'creativity' in handling this problem. Some are proposed below.

The crux of every pun is, of course, a verbal ambiguity. Most involve homophones, homonyms or homographs. If the pun is a key part of a humorous sentence, one should try either to replicate it – or else to compensate, by placing at the same point or nearby a TL joke of a similar kind (as the English translators of *Astérix* did brilliantly).

If, however, the sense is more important than the witticism, priority should go to transferring the sense. In an informative text, the pun may even need to be explained – even if this means sacrificing the ‘cognitive flash’ and the laughter.

Now although replicating puns is the hardest to do, it’s not as hard as some claim. In Hofstadter’s view: ‘there are hidden puns lying around at all times’ and ‘for nearly every pun in language X there are one or more very close puns in language Y’ (pp. 403–404). He may be exaggerating there, but it is certainly true of English. One would expect it to be true of any language with a large lexicon or a limited range of phonemes.

Hofstadter does not mean puns which work *identically* in two languages. That would reduce the incidence of translatable puns to less than 1%. ‘Shared puns’ are indeed rare, even between cognate languages. Yet they exist. Consider this advertising blurb: ‘When she opens a present from Amy’s, she’ll be wrapped!’ puns on the homophones ‘wrapped/rapt’. By chance the French verb *emballer* happens to mean both ‘to wrap’ and ‘to thrill’. Hence *En ouvrant un cadeau de Chez Amy, elle sera emballée!* Such perfectly translatable puns are most likely to occur in between closely related languages – where they are not really a matter of chance.

English: Life depends on the liver.  
 German: *Das Leben ist eine Leberfrage.*

English: If he writes in verse, take the inverse meaning.  
 French: *S’il écrit en vers, le sens sera l’envers.*

Shared puns can be analysed as a simple square, where a direct translation of the two punning words in the SL immediately produces punning words in the TL (see Figure 1).

I suggest, however, that the most common models for translating puns are pentagons or hexagons. Take the case of a vulgar slogan used by Air New Zealand: ‘Bugger off for bugger all’. Could one put that into French? Well, one half can be translated directly as *Foutez le camp!* and the other half as *pour presque rien* – there’s no pun there yet. But it takes only one small semantic leap from the idea of ‘next to nothing’ to the phrase *Les prix sont fous* (the prices are crazy), which puns perfectly with the singular of *foutez*. The resulting slogan works quite well: *Nos prix sont fous, fous...fous le camp!* These components form a pentagon (see Figure 2). A better solution, probably, is *Foutre le camp pour foutre rien*, which corresponds to a square rather than a pentagon.

For a hexagon model, I return to the medical epigram: ‘Life depends on the liver’. Unlike German, French offers no cognate counterpart. But direct translation gives us the French word for liver *foie*, which has a homophone *foi* meaning faith. And *foi* is related – at a stretch – to the semantic field of life and vitality. So a pun can be



Figure 1. Pun produced by direct translation.

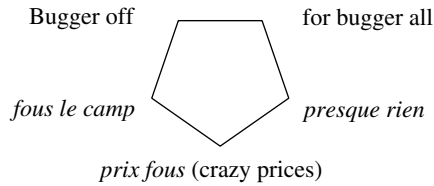


Figure 2. Pun reached via one leap.

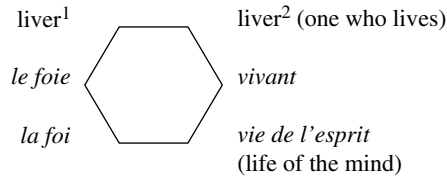


Figure 3. Pun reached via two leaps.

created: *La vie est une question de foie*. I call that a hexagon, counting the abstract word *foi* (faith) as two steps away from the word *vivant* (see Figure 3).

And now a historical case. In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the Mock Turtle says to Alice: 'Why, if a fish came to ME, and told me he was going on a journey, I should say "With what porpoise?"' And she replies: 'Don't you mean "purpose"?'

There the first French translator, Henri Bué, was confronted with an outrageous pun between 'purpose' and 'porpoise'. What could he do? A purpose is *un but*, a porpoise is *un marsouin*. Untranslatable? Well, he searched for synonyms of 'purpose', and identified one option as *projet*, a project. Then he found a near-homophone of that, the word *brochet*, which is a pike, not a porpoise, but which swims in the same semantic pool.

«Vois-tu, si un poisson venait me trouver, moi, et me disait qu'il va partir en voyage, je lui demanderais: «Avec quel brochet?»  
N'est-ce pas: «projet», et non: «brochet» que vous voulez dire?»

This solution involves more steps than a hexagon. A word two steps away from 'purpose' puns with a word three steps away from 'porpoise'. But the circle is closed with a real pun, and this is genuine translating not adaptation, since it achieves functional equivalence (see Figure 4).

Perhaps the translator just got lucky? I think not. He may have explored 20 creative options before closing that circle. He may even have solved it systematically. More likely, he used a kind of combined exploration and intuition very similar to the kind that people develop to solve British cryptic crosswords – a skill which certainly improves with practice.

To illustrate the possibility of systematic solving, let me take another example, an extract from a French comedy duo:

- On traverse l'Atlantique et on débarque à Angers.
- Mais il n'y a pas de mer à Angers!
- Comment, il a démissionné?

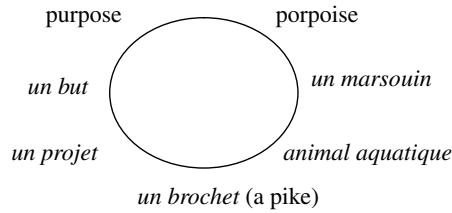


Figure 4. Pun reached via three leaps.

[We cross the Atlantic and disembark at Angers.  
 But there's no ocean at Angers!  
 What, has he resigned? *Why is the French audience laughing?*]

There the wordplay lies in the ambiguity between (1) *mer* (= sea) and (2) its SL homophone *maire* (= mayor). Searches can be made from each of these points.

From (1) we go to (3) TL synonym SEA, and thus find

- 3b. homophone of this – C
- 3c. homophone of this – SEE

From (2) we find (4) TL synonym MAYOR, and

- 4b. homophone of this – MARE

Clearly there is no 'shared pun', but some if not all of these lines may permit the closing of the circle:

*Version using 3/3b.*

- We cross the Atlantic and disembark in the Beauce.
- But there's no sea in the Beauce!
- What, have they changed the spelling?

*Version using 4b/4.*

- We cross the Atlantic and bet on the mare of Angers.
- But Angers doesn't have a mare!
- What, has he resigned?

*Version using 4/4b.*

- We cross the Atlantic and visit the mayor of Angers.
- But Angers doesn't have a mayor!
- Then we visit the stallion.

If none of these is judged equal to the original – which was scarcely brilliant – one can still return to (1) or (2) and try another tack, such as (5) alternative TL synonym of (1) OCEAN:

*Version using 5/5b.*

- We cross the Atlantic and disembark at Angers.
- But Angers doesn't have an ocean!
- What, a whole city of cretins!

Opinions may differ on the suitability and funniness of these options. Are any of them close enough to call translations? My point, however, is proven: translators

should not hastily dismiss any pun as untranslatable, and need not to ‘sit waiting for a brainwave’. On the contrary, what Hofstadter calls ‘hidden puns’ may well be near at hand. And if no close pun is found (the pentagon model) then find a more remote one (the hexagon etc). Have you still not succeeded? Think again of your purpose, then find a different tool to achieve it.

What of a long sequence of puns? Here is a piece of journalism published at a time when some French bakers were indulging in a price war.

#### MA MIE

Les boulangers qui vendent le pain à un franc ont certes du pain sur la planche, disent leurs concurrents, mais à force de proposer leur baguette pour une bouchée de pain et de n’avoir pour tout bénéfice que des miettes, ils risquent fort de se retrouver bientôt au pain sec.

Pour une fois ce n’est pas nous que l’on roule dans la farine et que l’on fait marcher à la baguette, nous voudrions pourtant bien que ces boulangers, pour avoir voulu nous faire manger notre pain blanc, ne se retrouvent pas ensuite dans le pétrin.

Quoi qu’il en soit, nous leur devons d’avoir, au moins pendant un moment, penser que la tartine pouvait ne pas tomber du côté du beurre, et, ne serait-ce que pour cela, nous avons envie d’embrasser ces boulangers ... comme du bon pain. (Michel Caste, *Le Monde*, 24 December 1980)

This text contains 10 expressions, here underlined, which originated in baking but have become dead metaphors – except that here they are used self-consciously. Now the article *does* comment on the price war, but that’s not the correct diagnosis – the *point* of this text is to be a medley of ludic language. My skopos as translator was therefore to replicate the wittiness of the text, and the obvious strategy was to seek English metaphors related to baking. I tried to render the literal meaning too, but what I *focused* on was the humorous effect. As one researcher says: ‘Jokes must never be treated as if they were serious statements’ (Davies, 2008, p. 177). Indeed – a joke is an operative text, not an informative text. The operation is either to tickle ribs or to split sides. Here we go:

#### A FLOURY COMPLIMENT!

There are bakers selling bread at one franc a loaf, and it’s going like hot cakes, according to their competitors ... But they’re taking risks offering long loaves for little dough: they may end up on the breadline among the poor and kneady.

Since we, for once, are not being sold short or getting crumbly treatment, we’d be sad if these well-bred bakers, after buttering us up so nicely, were to finish in a jam.

Whichever way the cookie crumbles, we owe them a momentary debt for thinking we can have our cake and eat it; so we offer them hearty kisses, to salute their currant abundance!

In that case, the resources of English proved quite adequate. My puns on ‘dough’ and ‘kneady’ do not render specific French phrases, yet they would surely have tempted the original author, had he been writing in English. Therefore I really was replicating his effects – translating, not just adapting freely.

Actually, the task of translating humour is facilitated by one fact: you can get away with unnatural wording. Although one normally follows a rule that states ‘Write normally in the TL’, here one can flout it. It is common for writers of humour to transgress the norms of *bona fide* communication, by their lying, misleading and trick-playing (Grice, 1972, pp. 45–46). Translators can play the same tricks, especially with outrageous jokes. Incongruity can even be a bonus (for example, a

far-fetched rhyme, a bold coinage, a deviant pronunciation, or a wayward spelling like ‘kneady’ – even when the ST contains no false spellings).

Here are my proposed tools for tackling puns, some of which I used in that exercise.

- (1) *Replicate* the ST pun, when that is possible (you’d be wrong to say it never is). This is the square model.
- (2) *Create a new pun* connected verbally with the ST, thus achieving a kind of dynamic equivalence. Make a pentagon or hexagon.
- (3) Use *a different humorous device*, particularly where the humour is more important than the meaning.
- (4) Use *compensation in place*, to ensure there is wordplay somewhere near the pun.
- (5) Give an *expanded translation*, explaining the pun though sacrificing the fun. This is a good option for informative texts which are not humorous in essence.
- (6) *Ignore the pun*, rendering only one meaning of the ambiguous phrase, and omitting the wordplay.

If you can’t have the first option, don’t immediately fall back on the sixth! As Delabastita says (summing up work by Landheer and Ballard): ‘excellent solutions can be found for many puns, *if only* the translators use to the full the linguistic resources and textual leeway available to them in recreating the pragmatic function of the original wordplay’ (Delabastita, 1994, p. 233).

### **Culture-specific jokes, obscurity and obscenity**

The second problem area is cultural specificities. Some jokes are more difficult because they are embedded in a specific culture or subculture. Much humour gains bite by taking subject-matter in socio-cultural reality, and parochialism is popular with authors and audiences. Often an allusion is quite limited in time, place and audience. ‘In-jokes’ are not meant for outsiders.

Now the problems of culture-specific jokes are not distinctive problems. They are essentially similar to the many other culture-specific problems which may occur in translating serious literary or even political texts – for example, allusions to national history or nursery-rhymes. If I find it hard to translate effectively a West African joke about traditional polygamy, or a Chinese one about bird’s nest soup, the key reason is not that they are humorous but simply that they are not part of my culture.

Consider again the ‘Super-Sarko’ joke quoted above. References to Superman were once obscure cultural allusions, but now pose problems only in languages sheltered from US influence. The statesman in question is widely known too, as is the quirk which these jokes all highlight – the politician’s boastfulness and ambition, which asks to be mocked, perhaps with some grudging respect.

Consider another example:

God said ‘Let there be light!’ and Nicolas Sarkozy answered: ‘Say please!’

This is surely comprehensible to millions of people. Yet in some contexts a translator may spell out the allusion:

There's an error at the start of the Bible. It records God saying: 'Let there be light!' but fails to record Nicolas Sarkozy replying: 'Say please!'

It is more difficult, however, to deal with an example like this:

Nicolas Sarkozy saved Alstom and freed Ingrid Betancourt.

This might be called 'culture-specific obscurity'. One could easily google the names and learn why it was funny in France in 2008, but could one make an amusing translation? Many jokes depend on prior knowledge possessed only by audiences in the SL culture.

This is unsurprising: most humour is addressed to people who know things. The author assumes that they know not only the source language, with most of its words, meanings, famous quotations, idioms and fixed expressions – and they also know the country they live in, its leaders, its customs, its institutions. Some jokes even allude to recent events, popular TV shows, and personalities – audience knowledge permits the author to refer to these with a sort of shorthand.

Generally speaking, a good approach to obscure allusion is expansion or explicitation. Such obscurity is common also in non-humorous writing, of course. In sports journalism the name 'Tiger' actually denotes 'the famous golfer Tiger Woods', and all those words may need to be made visible in a translation. In academic texts, the translator can insert a footnote.

With humour, however, expansion and explicitation are harder to operate, because with humour you want *neither obscurity nor obviousness* – since either of those can kill a joke. Ideally the translator will judge the new audience perfectly and achieve the optimal spark. This means assessing what the target audience knows, and being willing to give people a little more information if necessary. It also means judging carefully where to place that information, as I will explain presently.

A particular cultural issue that arises with some humour is obscenity. Notions of indecent behaviour and taboo words differ greatly from place to place, because they are culturally constructed. For the same reason, much humour plays with these notions, enjoying the *risqué* world of vulgarity, and exploiting the argots best understood by speakers of specific times and places. With the colloquial Irish-English of Roddy Doyle, for example, it may be difficult to pin down the primary meaning, or to judge the level of offensiveness – or even to understand all the jokes. Obscenity compounds the normal translation challenges.

This issue involves some tricky decisions which must be made by a translator very aware of the target culture. One danger is to turn a mild vulgarity into something very offensive in the TT. But the converse danger is excessive caution: in most circumstances *risqué* jokes need to be *risqué*, and calculated insults need to remain insulting. Without accepting Orwell's claim that all humour is subversive, I consider it normal for comic writers to test the boundaries of decency.

Thus in *Gulliver's travels* when Swift's hero – in the land of Lilliput where the people are tiny – encounters a burning village and decides to urinate on it, competent translators will identify the humour as vulgar and Rabelaisian, and will try to replicate it as such, even if it becomes a little more offensive in the TL. A translator once made Gulliver fetch water in his hat – thus sacrificing the fun, betraying the author, and making the character seem stupid. I like to think that travesty was imposed by a timid publisher.

It may be useful to view every obscene sentence, in whatever kind of text, as if it were a dramatic gesture in a play or TV programme. That may make it easier to find the best pragmatic option, which is likely to be a similar speech-act but having a different semantic content, for example, violating a different taboo from the one in the ST.

### Conclusion

To translate a joke in a way that cannot elicit a smile is a betrayal, no matter how semantically accurate it may seem (just as, conversely, it is not acceptable to translate tragic dialogue in a way that provokes laughter). For wordplay, then, I recommend tools that play with the TL. For cultural specificity I recommend tools like cultural transplantation, compensation in kind, and compensation in place.

Here I will introduce a new distinction: most jokes comprise *preparation and delivery*. A good joke needs both. Humour is not ordinary communication; it is tight and vigorous. Its punch comes from concision and perfect phrasing. The best comic writers don't simply deliver good punchlines, they prepare the punchlines so as to maximise the impact. That is why comedy duos work better than solo comedians – the straight guy leads the horses to water; the funny guy pushes us in.

This distinction is evident in some common forms of joke. The riddle form uses a question to prepare an answer – a delayed answer; the 'knock-knock joke' has four lines preparation before the punchline; so do many limericks; and good repartee takes a given line as a cue onto which a riposte can be improvised. But the pattern is actually very subtle: the preparation or 'set-up' *prepares the joke by un-preparing the audience*, in fact by putting us off our guard. The preparation helps to build a mental structure in our heads which will collapse with the punch, which will crash on delivery.

This distinction has immediate implications for the translator of humour. A punchline needs great tightness and maximal punch. For example, Churchill's punchline above began with the if-clause and ended with 'drink it'. Any translator who put the if-clause at the *end* would be weakening the punch, and *betraying* the style that makes the line so excellent. That would be the written equivalent of poor comic timing. Similarly, in the 'instant dislike' joke, it would be wrong for the preparation to end on the word 'instant'. A French translation beginning *Pourquoi les gens me prennent-ils en grippe immédiatement?* would be a travesty, since the joke requires the notion of immediacy to seem incidental, thereby *un-preparing* us for the punch that comes.

The preparation stage, by contrast, can afford to be less tight. Therefore any explicitation required for cultural reasons should be inserted at this point, and not in the punchline.

### Eight strategies for translating jokes

- (1) *Delivery, then preparation*. You translate the punchline first, *and then* you rework the preparation. This may mean making the punchline tighter and punchier. And you may need to expand the preparation section to explain certain details which were merely implied. This just means lifting an explanatory phrase out of the subtext, so as to put the audience in the position to be punched (Davies, 2005, pp. 56–57).

- (2) *Compensation in kind*. You can compensate in kind, using other forms of verbal humour if necessary. If you can't replicate an anagram, use a pun or a spoonerism or a silly mixed metaphor... Any statement can be made amusing just by adding an exaggeration, a malapropism or a simile as silly as a sausage.
- (3) *Compensation in place*. You can, for example, insert a witty or *risqué* allusion in the adjacent sentence.
- (4) *Dilution*. In longer texts you can vary the quantities – you don't have to translate 10 puns with 10 puns; seven may do quite nicely.
- (5) *Explicitation*. Maybe a one-liner is best translated as a two-liner. For example, the ST says that 'Consumerism has made invention the mother of necessity', and you translate it in two clauses, as if it had said 'Consumerism has reversed the old proverb and made invention the mother of necessity'. That's less amusing, but it's better than nothing.
- (6) *Exaggeration*. One Super-Sarko joke didn't work on my first attempt in English: 'Nicholas Sarkozy can tag the sound barrier'. It was better when I amended it to 'Sarkozy can leap over the sound barrier and tag both sides'.
- (7) *Signalling*. This is a fallback tool. You signal the presence of a joke which you can't really handle. This is a good option for interpreters, who have little time to be clever, but who can at least say: 'That's very droll in Chinese' or 'Here the speaker would like you to laugh'. The latter option may get more laughs than the speaker's words merit.
- (8) *Substitution*. You can 'substitute a completely different humorous text which will be equally entertaining' (Munday, 2009, p. 196). I don't count this as a form of translation, but I do condone it.

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