Relevance, humour and translation
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Introduction: Humour and relevance

Humorous texts, for instance ‘jokes’ that, for practical reasons, will be the focus of analysis in this chapter, are pieces of evidence of the speaker’s underlying intentions. As such, they are enriched inferentially by the hearer, turned into fully contextualised propositions and combined with contextual information to yield humorous implications. Also, as analysts, we can use jokes in order to track down how the speaker predicted that the joke would be relevant in generating the expected humorous effects.

On the hearer’s side, when interpreting a joke, although expectations of relevance differ, we resort to the same inferential strategies that are used in the processing of other discourses, initially aimed at turning the schematic logical form of the joke into a fully contextualised and relevant interpretation (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995). As such, it is a sort of gap filling activity between what is coded in the joke and what the speaker intends to communicate with its text, and also between what is coded and what is finally interpreted by the hearer, both gaps linked by a higher or lesser level of resemblance.

On the speaker’s side, there is certain control over what inferential paths the interlocutor is expected to take. Specifically, with the aid of our evolved mind-reading ability, the speaker can predict that certain background information from the hearer’s memory is likely to be retrieved and used during the processing of the joke, that a number of inferences are likely to be drawn and, more generally, that one interpretation is more likely to be selected as the intended one, following the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure of computing interpretations in order of accessibility and stopping when one is satisfied.

A subset of the speaker’s predictions include guesses about the hearer’s cognitive environment. Indeed, the same joke can turn out humorous or disgusting depending on the interlocutor’s environment and also on his beliefs, his current mood and even on how disruptive the joke is for the activity that he or she is currently engaged in. Jokes are often sexist, racist and reinforce unfair stereotypes that are still pervasive in most societies, and hence the speaker has to predict the hearer’s willingness to be told the joke and derive its humorous effects.

Although relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995) offers an interesting cognitive framework for the analysis of jokes (Yus 2003), humour poses a number of challenges for a relevance-theoretic analysis. Firstly, when someone tells us a joke, we often have to stop the current context of interpretation and the assumptions brought to bear in the processing of preceding stretches of discourse and be ready to be given an utterly uninformative text that will probably demand more mental effort that one would be ready to devote in normal circumstances. The relevance of a joke may not fit the normal sources of cognitive satisfaction, that is, relevance resulting from inputs that connect with background information available to yield conclusions that matter to the hearer. Secondly, in humorous communication the speaker often engages in some form of covert intentionality that is not straightforwardly made manifest, for the sake of generating humorous effects. One of the consequences of this covert communication is that very often the most relevant interpretation, the one that the hearer is entitled to select due to an optimal balance of cognitive effects and mental effort, turns out to be disconfirmed and replaced with a more unlikely, but eventually correct interpretation. Finally, jokes often demand a supplementary amount of mental effort that can only be compensated for by the promised humorous effects. But the satisfaction with these effects is never guaranteed.

The organisation of this chapter is as follows: Firstly, I will summarise a proposal of classification of jokes depending on the type of inferential activity that the hearer is expected to go through when deriving its humorous effects. Secondly, I will propose a relevance-based chart of translatability of jokes resulting from the combination of three parameters called ‘scenarios’. Next, I will exemplify several cases of the chart with specific translations of jokes from and into Spanish. Finally, I will propose a ‘translator’s itinerary’ for the translation of jokes following a relevance-theoretic criterion.
1. A chart of joke types

In Yus (in press) a chart of jokes is proposed based on the kind of inferential procedure that addressees are expected to go through in the interpretation of the joke, but all of them fitting the general relevance-theoretic inferential strategy (figure 1).

Before commenting on the types of jokes, it should be stressed that the chart does not presuppose that these types are mutually exclusive, since very often several of them are intertwined in the objective of generating humorous effects. Besides, it is not always crystal clear to what category the source of humour can be ascribed. Some jokes pose challenges of ascription to a certain inferential strategy. Consider this example:

(1) A doctor began his examination of an elderly man by asking him what brought him to hospital. The old man looked surprised and said "Well, of course it was an ambulance!".

The humorous effect of this joke seems to arise either from two senses of ‘bring’ or from two ad hoc concepts of the coded verb ‘bring’. My intuition is that it involves two ad hoc concepts of the typical meaning ‘A causes B to go to X’ conceptually adjusted to fit the two scenarios, the likely one and the unlikely (but eventually correct) one. But as Deirdre Wilson (pers. comm.) points out, there are multiple possible sources of humourous effects in this joke, since the range of options include (1) the possibility “that ‘bring’ is polysemous, with a range of related senses (e.g. ‘carry to a certain place’, ‘cause to be in a certain place’), which are first disambiguated and then (as always) further broadened or narrowed in context; (2) that ‘bring’ has a single, concrete sense which yields a wide range of different ad hoc concepts via broadening or narrowing; and (3) that ‘bring’ has a single, general sense (‘impel towards a certain place’, where the source of the impulse can be physical or mental) which can again be narrowed to yield different more specific ad hoc concepts in different contexts”.

The chart starts with a differentiation between intentional jokes, told to a person on purpose, and humour that arises beyond the communicator’s intention. Examples of unintentional humour are the following parochial announcements in (2) and the advertisement in (3), which can be interpreted humorously without a prior intentionality:
“Until further notice, please refrain from bringing clothes to the church”.

“The group session for recovering self-esteem is next Thursday at 8. To enter the church, please use the back door”.

“The fee to register for the course on praying and fasting includes all the meals”.

“Don’t kill yourself in the garden. Let us do it for you”.

On the intentional side, a further distinction has to be made between jokes that are fully integrated in the ongoing conversation (and therefore catch the hearer by surprise), as in joke (4), or are framed by markers that warn the hearer of the intended humour of the next stretch of discourse, as in the common ‘have you heard the one…?’, as in joke (5), an example of canned joke. In the first case, the hearer has to make ex post facto hypotheses on the intended humorous quality of the preceding utterance, whereas in the second case the hearer has to suspend the context constructed so far during the interaction and re-shape it for the subsequent stretch of discourse:

(4) Luis: I am worried because I have realised that I can’t hear very well... Maybe I should go to the doctor...
Juan: The same happened to me some months ago. But I was really angry with the doctor.
Luis: Really? Why? What happened?
Juan: Well, my problem had no easy solution so I went to an experimental doctor in Sweden. But, after the operation, I realised that the doctor had given me a woman’s ears.
Luis: Really? How did you know?
Juan: Because I could hear everything, but I couldn’t understand a thing!
Luis: Veeeeery funny! Stop it! I’m not in the mood for jokes!

(5) Luis: I am worried because I have realised that I can’t hear very well... Maybe I should go to the doctor...
Juan: Of dear! Still, I can cheer you up a bit. Have you heard the one about a guy who was deaf and a doctor gave him a woman’s ears?

In both cases, jokes can be broadly divided into those which base their humour on the inferential steps taken to develop the joke’s logical form into fully relevant interpretations, and those jokes that have a more cultural connotation (with possible combinations of both, of course). For the former, several models have been proposed. In the chart, two of them are cited: the famous incongruity-resolution pattern by Suls (1972) and the ‘multiple graded interpretations’ model by Yus (2003). Suls’ model is defined as follows:

the perceiver finds his expectation about the text disconfirmed by the ending of the joke ... In other words, the recipient encounters an incongruity -the punchline. In the second stage, the perceiver engages in a form of problem solving to find a cognitive rule which makes the punchline follow from the main part of the joke and reconciles the incongruous parts (Suls 1972, 82).

My proposal is more restrictive, since it applies only to a specific type of joke that involves the identification of two areas, an initial one with multiple interpretations but graded in terms of relevance (one interpretation is the one we would invariably expect to select), and a final part that has a single covert interpretation that fits the whole joke but not the initially selected interpretation by the hearer, thus causing incongruity, the realisation of having been fooled and, eventually, the desired humorous effects, as illustrated in joke (6), in which the most likely referent for ‘it’, ‘drinking alcohol’, is invalidated at the end of the joke and replaced with a more unlikely ‘doctor’s inability’.

(6) A doctor thoroughly examined his patient, and said, “Look, I really can’t find any reason for this mysterious affliction. It’s probably due to drinking”. The patient sighed, and snapped, “In that case, I’ll come back when you’re damn well sober!”.

For both models, ‘incongruity-resolution’ and ‘multiple graded interpretations’ (and others that have been proposed, see for instance Ritchie’s (2004) forced reinterpretation model), we can predict that the source of
humour will arise from one of these three possibilities: (a) from the development of the logical form of the joke into an explicature; (b) from the boundary between explicit and implicit interpretations of the joke; or (c) from the hearer’s accessibility to contextual information to obtain implicated premises and conclusions.

(a) In the first case, there are multiple possibilities related to the otherwise multiple ways in which a logical form can be inferentially enriched and turned into an explicature in a specific context. During this process of enrichment, the speaker can force the interlocutor into several humour-generating inferential strategies, among them the resolution of (a) homophony; (b) phonetic similarity, as ‘lying’ and ‘lion’ in joke (7); (c) conceptual adjustment, as in joke (8), where the coded concept ‘streak of lightning’ has a number of related features which are adjusted differently by the hearer (fastness) and speaker (unpredictability); (d) sub-sentential utterances with elided coded content that can be exploited for humorous purposes, as in joke (9), where the sub-sentential utterance ‘Family?’ is typically developed into ‘do you want a family-sized pizza’ in the context of the conversation, but is later invalidated and replaced with a more unlikely ‘Are these girls family of yours?; (e) syntactic organisation, as in the dual options for ‘stick it on myself’ in joke (10); (f) polysemy, as in the two meanings of ‘pound’ in joke (11); and (g) reference assignment, as in the need to find a referent for ‘that’ in joke (12), again one of them highly accessible and later replaced with a more unlikely referent. The list is, of course, not exhaustive, and we could extend it to free enrichment, for instance, or to the identification of the speaker’s propositional attitude, among others.

7) A guy walks into a bar with a giraffe and says, “A beer for me, and one for the giraffe, please”. They proceed to drink. Finally the giraffe passes out on the floor of the bar. The guy pays the tab and gets up to leave. The bartender shouts out, “Hey! You’re not going to leave that lying on the floor, are you?” The guy replies “That’s not a lion... it’s a giraffe”. (“that lying” +/- = “that lion”)

8) -How is your daughter doing with her piano lessons?
-Good!, her fingers are like streaks of lightning.
-Because they are so fast?
-No, because you don’t know where they are going to fall.

9) A customer enters a pizzeria with two women and says to the person in charge:
-“3 pizzas, please”.
The man asks: “Family?”
The customer replies:
-“No, they are prostitutes but they are hungry”.

10) Postmaster: Here’s your five-cent stamp.
Shopper: [with arms full of bundles]: Do I have to stick it on myself?
Postmaster: No. On the envelope.
(a) Do I have to [stick it] [on myself]?
(b) Do I have to [stick it] [on myself]?

11) After successfully delivering the first child of a Canadian couple visiting Scotland, the doctor popped into the waiting room to tell the anxious husband the good news. “It’s a boy -eight pounds exactly!”. “Oh”, replied the flustered father. “Will you take a check?”

12) Lucy, aged 11, was walking down the street leading a cow by a rope. She met the vicar who said, “Little girl, what are you doing with that cow?” Lucy said: “it is my father’s cow and I am taking her to the bull”. “Disgusting,” said the parson, “can’t your father do that?” “No,” said Lucy, “it has to be the bull”.

(b) Secondly, concerning the boundary between explicit and implicit communication, the typical strategy is to play with an accessible explicit interpretation of an utterance and replace it with a more unlikely implicit interpretation, as in joke (13), where ‘to have the balls’ in the context of a sports shop is likely to be processed literally instead of as an idiom meaning ‘to have the guts’. Similarly, the opposite strategy is also frequent: to invalidate a likely implicit interpretation and force a literal reading of the utterance, as in joke (14):

13) A man enters a sports shop and asks the man in charge:
-Excuse me, but do you have the balls to play tennis?
-Yes, of course!
-Then, tomorrow at 10.
(14) -Oh dear, what with one thing and another I spent 500 euros!
   -But what did you spend so much money on?
   -250 on one thing and 250 on another.

(c) Thirdly, very often humorous effects are obtained from the audience’s access to contextual information for the derivation of implicated premises and conclusions. In joke (15a), for example, the humorous effects lie in obtaining a number of implications on the woman, her husband, her lover and the relationship existing among them (e.g. 15b-f), none of them explicitly communicated in the joke:

(15)  a. A woman in bed with a man. The phone rings and she answers it.
   -“Yes darling... No problem... OK... See you later”.
   -The man: “Who was it?”
   -The woman: “It was my husband. He said he’s going to come home very late today because he is in an important meeting with you”.
 b. The man and the woman are lovers.
 c. The woman’s husband has a lover.
 d. She knows that her husband has a lover.
 e. Her lover and her husband know each other.
 f. Her husband does not know that this man is his wife’s lover.

Similarly, in joke (16) the implication that the man dislikes his wife is the main source of humour but it is not part of the explicit content of the joke:

(16) One night, a guy walked into a bar and asked for a drink. Then he asked for three more. The bartender got worried. “What’s the matter?” he asked. “My wife and I got into a fight,” explained the guy, “and she vowed not to talk to me for 31 days...” He took another drink, and said, “And tonight is the last night”.

On the right hand side of the chart we find jokes based on cultural stereotypes including typical examples on sex roles, for instance joke (17); on race and social minorities (joke (18)); on particular professions (joke (19)); on connoted places (joke (20)); and on features of the interlocutors’ own community or nation (joke (21)). Some stereotypes are inter-culturally valid, others are valid in one community but there are equivalent stereotypes in the target community, and we can also find cultural stereotypes that are not transferrable to other communities and posit a real challenge for the translator.

(17) Recently scientists revealed that beer contains traces of female hormones. To prove their theory, the scientists fed 100 men 12 pints of beer and 100% of them talked excessively without making sense, became emotional, couldn’t drive, and refused to apologize when wrong. No further testing is planned.

(18) A gipsy man is leaving a trial and his wife calls him on the mobile.
   -She: What did the judge say?
   -He: He said “either €6,000 or six months in jail”.
   -She: Don’t be stupid! Choose the money!

(19) Q: How can we know that a lawyer is lying?
   A: Because he is moving his lips.

(20) An Irishman went into a hardware store to buy a sink.
    “Would you like one with a plug?” asked the assistant.
    “Don’t tell me they’ve gone electric!!!”, said the Irishman.

(21) Q: Why was Jesus Christ Spanish?
    A: Because he lived with his parents until he was 33 and didn’t have a proper job.
2. A chart of translatability from combined ‘scenarios’

Translation, from a cognitive pragmatics perspective, can be explained as an inferential gap-filling activity in which the translator has to infer the intended interpretation, context accessibility and predictions of mutuality between the source-language communicator and the source-language addressee, all that framed in the source-language culture, and then transfer all this information to a target audience with a different language and a more or less different way of coding information, and possibly different social values, norms and stereotypes. The initial gaps between what the speaker intends to communicate and what he or she codes, and between what is coded and finally interpreted, both gaps related in terms of interpretive resemblance, increase in the task of humour translation, since now there are gaps (a) between the source-language author’s intended interpretation and the coded source-language humorous text; (b) between the source-language joke and the translator’s interpretation; (c) between the translator’s interpretation and the translator’s target-language humorous text; and finally (d) between the coded target-language joke and the target-language audience’s selected interpretation, all of these gaps related to each other, again, in terms of resemblance. To make matters more difficult, similar resemblance needs to be obtained between the intended humorous effects predicted for the source-language audience and the ones obtained by the target-language audience.

As Gutt (2000: 214-215) points out, “the text comes with a promise or presumption of interpretively resembling the original text, but the original text does not reach the target audience”. Gutt (1991: 107) stresses that “a translation will come with the presumption that its interpretation resembles that of the original closely enough in relevant respects... Using his knowledge of the audience, the translator has to make assumptions about its cognitive environment and about the potential relevance that any aspects of the interpretation would have in that cognitive environment”. In the translation of humour, these assumptions include ways in which the inferential strategies leading to the source-language intended effects can be preserved or maintained for the target-language audience.

To achieve these effects in translation, very often a number of alterations to the joke have to be made, taking into account that, in my opinion, faithfulness to reproducing humorous effects is more important than faithfulness to reproducing coded content. Take, for instance, the following advertisement cited in Mateo (1998: 178):

(22) “List of features as long as your arm”.
Then we can see a picture depicting a sophisticated Hi-Fi set with several speakers and other electronic items. Just below the picture another line reads:
“But not an arm and a leg”.

Obviously, with this ad the brand wants to inform the readers of a number of qualities of the product and, at the same time, holds the covert intention of getting them to buy the product. To get that, the ad draws the readers’ attention by playing with an initial literal meaning of ‘arm’ that is later invalidated and embedded in the idiom ‘to cost an arm and a leg’ (to cost a lot of money). Part of the attention-drawing potential of the ad lies in the entertainment of these literal and idiomatic uses of ‘arm’.

The translator of this ad has to try to keep the content of the ad as much as possible, but faithfulness to this strategy of literal/idiomatic readings is more important than faithfulness to the semantic content of the ad, as long as similar information is conveyed. Of course, languages differ enormously in the way idioms are created, but at the same time some striking parallelisms appear. For instance, in Spanish we also have an idiom for ‘to cost a lot of money’ involving parts of the body: ‘costar un ojo de la cara’ (literally, to cost one of the eyes in one’s face) and in Italian we find a similar ‘un occhio della testa’ (one of the eyes in one’s head). Therefore, in Spanish and Italian we can maintain this play of literal/idiomatic meanings in the translation even if that means altering the coded text altogether, as in Mateo’s suggested translation, also possible in Italian:

(23) “Abra bien los ojos y descubra todas sus prestaciones”.
(Open your eyes wide and discover all its features).
“But sin costarle un ojo de la cara”.
(But that won’t cost you one the eyes in your face).
Is it always possible to translate jokes maintaining faithfulness to both content and pragmatic qualities? Of course not. Even the previous ad will not be easy to translate into a language that does not contain such parallelism of ‘body parts’ and ‘cost money’ in their coded idioms. In general, then, the quality of a translation depends on the applicability of three parameters that I will call ‘scenarios’, since these parameters cover different elements that we can metaphorically call the ‘linguistic props’ of the staging of a humorous strategy.

2.1. First parameter: Cultural scenario

All the members of a community share a number of cultural assumptions, with greater or lesser stereotypical quality, that belong to their mutual cultural environment and that, following the epidemiological model envisaged by Sperber (1996), spread in the population through communication so that a version of these cultural assumptions ends up stored in the minds of all the members of the community. This is what happens, for instance, with stand-up comedy monologues in which comedians do not usually resort to typical jokes but, rather, base the humorous effects on strengthening or challenging well-established cultural schemas that spread epidemiologically in the comedy venue (cf. Yus 2002, 2004). In these comedy shows, the audience arrives at the venue with a particular store of mental representations, personal and cultural. And one of the main sources of humour lies, precisely, in the audience’s realisation that many thought-to-be privately stored representations about the world, are actually collective cultural representations shared by most people in the audience. In this re-shaping of the audience’s attitude towards representations, cultural information spreads in a virus-like way, bringing out the collective in the individual.

In this sense, humour often relies on cultural schemas, stereotypes, etc. that have inter-cultural validity. Indeed, some topics seem to be inter-culturally valid or even pan-cultural and are easy to translate, as happens for instance with problems within marriages in Western societies:

(24) There is nothing wrong with marriage. It’s all that living together afterwards that causes the trouble.
(25) Husband: “For twenty years my wife and I were incredibly happy”.
  Friend: “And... What happened?”.
  Husband: “We met!”.

On other occasions, though, ‘intertextual winks’ and intra-cultural referents sometimes have no equivalent in the target culture and the translator has to decide whether this cultural information, taken for granted in the source-language culture, can be maintained in the translation or has to be substituted or modified so as not to generate alterations in the eventual balance of cognitive effects and mental effort, and parallel alterations in the humorous effects. Authors such as Martínez Sierra (2008: 130) claim that even the translation of apparently universal cultural topics can produce unwanted effects in the target-language audience. Take, for instance this joke:

(26) Q: Why does New Jersey have all the toxic waste dumps and California have all the lawyers?
  A: Because New Jersey got first pick!

It looks like the typical inter-culturally valid ‘lawyer stereotype’, but for Martínez Sierra the differing strength of the connotations affects the resulting validity of the translation into Spanish. In Spain, the reputation of lawyers is not as bad as in USA, and a good translation could involve changing the target into ‘politicians’, for instance, who have a similar bad reputation to the one lawyers have in USA. Similarly, the Spanish audience might not get the extent of the connotations of waste dumps in New Jersey or the connotations from the vast amount of lawyers in California, not necessarily part of the Spanish audience’s cognitive environment.

In any case, the translators’ intuition that certain intra-cultural referents might increase processing effort or affect the derivation of humorous effects (as intended by the source-language speaker) should lead them to replace these referents with more local and accessible ones in the target-language culture if necessary, preserving the balance of effects and effort, what Jaskanen (1999) calls ‘naturalisation’, as opposed to ‘exoticisation’ or preservation of the source-language cultural referent. An example is found in Chiaro (2008: 590):

(27) He’s so dumb he thought that the Gettysburg Address was where Lincoln lived.
She correctly points out that the Italian audience is likely to be unaware of the episode in the American Civil War with which British and American audiences are familiar, so in the Italian version the cultural referent is changed into a more familiar one but preserving the underlying intention:

(28) “E cosi stupido, credeva che Piccadilly Circus fosse un circo equestre“.
(“He’s so dumb he thought Piccadilly Circus was actually a circus”).

Of course, extreme naturalization is also dangerous, since the audience might react negatively to target-language intra-cultural referents if they become aware that these are impossible in the source-language culture, as claimed by Martínez Sierra (2006), among others.

2.2. Second parameter: Semantic scenario

This scenario refers to whether the source language and the target language exhibit similar ways of coding the information, parallel ways of coding idioms, metaphors, etc and similar options in the language for generating humorous effects, what Gutt (1991: 130) calls ‘semantic resemblance’. On some occasions, languages offer similar options for coding information, which makes translation easier. The parallelism between ‘cost an arm and a leg’ and ‘costar un ojo de la cara’ in the ad analysed above would be an example. On other occasions, though, the translator will have to find equivalents in the target language for words and expressions in the source language, and replace language-based humour strategies with alternative ones in the target-language in an attempt to preserve the initial humorous intention.

2.3. Third parameter: Pragmatic scenario

This scenario is utterly important and, in my opinion, the translator should do the utmost to preserve this scenario, even if that involves radically changing the semantic scenario and also, perhaps, the cultural one. Overall, this scenario has to do with all the inferential strategies leading to a relevant interpretation of the joke and the derivation of humorous effects, and also with the eventual balance of cognitive effects and mental effort as intended by the communicator of the source-language joke.

For practical reasons, I have divided this important scenario into two areas, ‘inferential steps’ and ‘balance of effects and effort’. This dichotomy aims at capturing the intuition that sometimes the inferential steps are replicated in the translation but, for some reason, the resulting balance of cognitive effects and mental effort is different from the one obtained by the source-language audience and, vice versa, sometimes the translator changes the inferential steps, but the resulting balance of effects and effort is, paradoxically, similar to the one obtained by the source-language audience.

(a) The ‘inferential steps’ are basically the inferential strategies of mutual parallel adjustment of explicit content, implicit import and context leading to a relevant interpretation. For the analysis of translations of humorous texts such as jokes it would be interesting to distinguish two limits of analysis of these inferential steps. On the one hand, what we can call ‘the upper limit’ of translating inferential steps would cover ALL the strategies to turn the schematic logical form of the joke into an explication, plus the strategies to retrieve information from context, and the ones needed to derive implications, all of which pose a challenge for the translator. However, for humour there is a more practical ‘lower limit’ consisting of ONLY the inferential steps taken insofar as they are part of the inferential steps predicted by the source-language speaker in order to generate humorous effects. This is the limit to which I will fit the proposal of a chart of translatability below.

(b) The balance of cognitive effects and mental effort is the one that the source-language speaker intended the interlocutor to obtain and that the translator should try to reproduce in the target-language audience. This means that an adequate transmission of relevance permeates all the translation process. Gutt (1992: 42) is correct when he stresses that “if we ask in what respects the intended interpretation of the translation should resemble the original, the answer is: in respects that make it adequately relevant to the audience - that is, that offer adequate contextual effects. If we ask how the translation should be expressed, the answer is: in such a manner that it yields the intended interpretation without causing the audience unnecessary processing effort”.
Again, we can distinguish an ‘upper limit’ of this balance referred to a similar balance to the one obtained in the interpretation of the explicit content of the joke, the derivation of implicatures and the access to the necessary contextual information, plus the effects and effort derived and demanded, respectively, from the humorous strategies of the source-language speaker. This upper limit exceeds my proposal of a chart of translatability of humour, and therefore I prefer to restrict this balance of cognitive effects and mental effort to a ‘lower limit’, that is, insofar as this balance of effects and effort is a direct result of the source-language communicator’s humorous intention.

An additional problem concerning the evaluation of cognitive effects and mental effort refers to the now classical debate on whether their measurement should be qualitative or quantitative. Wilson and Sperber (2002: 253) opt for a qualitative criterion, although there is also a quantitative notion of relevance, based perhaps on neuro-chemical mental steps taken during interpretation. But it is really difficult for analysts to assess relevance in purely quantitative terms. Faced with this comparative approach to the balance of effects and effort, I propose to accept balances of effects and effort in translated jokes insofar as they do not qualitatively depart radically from the one obtained with the source-language joke, acknowledging, at the same time, that there is a limit beyond which we can assert that the balance obtained in the translation is definitely incorrect.

The combination of these three scenarios yields the chart of 16 cases that can be found in table 1. Those cases with a high number of ‘yes’ represent translations that are faithful to the source-language joke. However, having a ‘no’ in some of the scenarios does not invariably mean that the resulting translation is bad or impossible but, rather, that the initial source-language quality of the scenario has not been followed faithfully and some adjustments or variations have to be made in order to reach similar humorous effects, as we will see below with a number of examples of translations of jokes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CULTURAL SCENARIO</th>
<th>SEMANTIC SCENARIO</th>
<th>PRAGMATIC SCENARIO (A) INFERENCE STEPS (AS PREDICTED)</th>
<th>PRAGMATIC SCENARIO (B) BALANCE OF EFFECTS AND EFFORT</th>
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Table 1.

|   | NO | NO | NO | YES | NO |

In general, this sixteen-case chart of translatability yields 3 types of translation of jokes:

1. 'Transferrable jokes', that is, easy-to-translate jokes with inter-culturally valid social stereotypes, parallel forms of coding the information and linguistic strategies for humour generation that can be found in both languages. Needless to say, a transferrable joke into one language may be difficult or impossible to translate into another language.

2. 'Replaceable jokes', that is, jokes that involve cultural referents that can be found, with greater or lesser similarity, in source and target cultures, and although the linguistic sources of humour are not the same, alternatives can be found in the target language achieving similar balances of cognitive effects and mental effort.

3. 'Challenging jokes', which pose real problems for a good translation due to very specific intra-cultural referents, linguistic resources that have no counterpart in the target language, etc.

Some examples of challenging jokes are found in the translation of multimodal jokes that base part of their humorous effects on the unavoidable denotive referent of a visual item. An example that is often cited in the bibliography is a scene from the film *Horse Feathers* by the Marx Brothers:

(29) [The Marx Brothers are making a contract]
   Groucho: Wait a minute. Wait a minute. This isn’t legal. There’s no seal on it. Where’s the seal?
   Harpo brings a seal (an animal).

   The visual impact of the animal as part of the pun in the polysemy of ‘seal’ makes it really hard to translate. In fact, the dubbed Spanish version avoids it altogether:

(30) Dubbed translation:
   Eh! Un momento. Un momento, aquí falta un testigo. Tiene que firmar un testigo.
   (Eh! Wait a minute, there’s no witness. A witness has to sign)
   (and then Harpo brings a seal, an animal)

   Again, the degree of translatability depends on the target language. For instance, Kaindl (2004) analyses panels from Asterix, in which the source language is French and part of the humorous effects depend on a picture. In one of the panels, Asterix’s words containing ‘white’ contrast with the visual information of him and Obelix sleeping on a ‘black’ heap of coal. The French original says:

(31) Oh, je suis inquiet pour Alambix. Je vais passer une nuit blanche!
   (Oh, I am worried about Alambix. I am going to spend a white night!)
   (‘to spend a white night’ means ‘to spend a sleepless night’)

   Fortunately, Spanish has the same idiom and hence the translation is very easy:

(32) ¡Estoy inquieto por Alambix! ¡Creo que voy a pasar la noche en blanco!
   (Oh, I am worried about Alambix! I think I am going to spend a white night!)

   But the same does not apply to English, and the translator is forced to substitute the idiom for another idiom also containing the word ‘white’. The contrast between ‘black coal’ and ‘white night’ is lost and hence the humorous effect of the source text is altered:

(33) Sorry I lost my temper earlier. You are a white man, Asterix.

   We can see how the same joke, translated into different languages, might be allocated to a different case of
the chart due to a cultural, semantic or pragmatic specificity.

In my opinion, for a good translation we need to be as faithful as possible to the pragmatic scenario and, consequently, good translations will be (a) the ones that reproduce the inferential steps, as predicted by the source-language speaker for the source-language audience, and obtain a similar balance of cognitive effects and mental effort; (b) the ones where the translator changes or substitutes the inferential steps for other inferential strategies but manages to yield a similar balance of cognitive effects and mental effort; and (c) the ones where the translator, preserving or altering the inferential steps for the source text, does not reach exactly the same balance of effects and effort but the target joke can still be considered a valid translation because the essential goal of transferring humorous effects has been achieved successfully.

3. Examples of translations of jokes fitting several cases of the chart

In this heading I will analyse some examples of translations of jokes following the combination of the three scenarios I have just outlined. All the translations of the jokes are mine except for the last example, which reproduces the real dubbing of a film dialogue. In the examples, ‘C’ means ‘cultural scenario’, ‘S’ means ‘semantic scenario’, ‘P(a)’ means ‘pragmatic scenario: inferential steps’, and ‘P(b)’ means ‘pragmatic scenario: balance of effects and effort’. Additionally, SL, TL and TRANS. stand for ‘source language’, ‘target language’ and ‘translation’, respectively.

(34) a. SL JOKE.
   Q: ¿Por qué Stevie Wonder y Ray Charles se llevan tan mal?
   A: Porque no se pueden ni ver.
   b. TL TRANS.
   Q: Why don’t Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles get on with each other?
   A: Because they can’t see eye to eye.
   c. BACK TRANS.
   Q: Why don’t Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles get on with each other?
   A: Because they can’t even see each other.
   (translation of SL joke)
   d. CASE IN CHART.
   C = yes; S = yes; P(a) = yes; P(b) = yes (case 1).

   The Spanish joke (34a) creates the humorous effect from the accessible interpretation of ‘no se pueden ni ver’ (literally, ‘can’t even see each other’), an idiom that means ‘they can’t stand each other’. The speaker makes this relevant interpretation be processed in parallel to a literal reading of ‘can’t even see each other’ since both characters are blind. There is no problem with the cultural scenario since both Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles are famous celebrities, although in certain cultures these might have to be substituted for other intra-cultural blind celebrities. Concerning the semantic scenario, we can see that there is a similar idiom in English: ‘to see eye to eye’, that makes it possible to preserve the strategy of playing with ‘blindness’ and ‘relationships’. Similarly, the pragmatic scenario is preserved, since the translation also plays with literal and idiomatic meanings related to human relationships and eyesight. Finally, the balance of cognitive effects and mental effort is, perhaps, not faithfully preserved, since ‘see eye to eye’ means ‘not to share a similar opinion’, whereas ‘no poder ni verse’ has a more intense meaning: ‘can’t stand each other’. But, as I said above, it is perhaps inside the range of possible balances of effects and effort that we can consider acceptable translations. The resulting case of the chart would be ‘case 1’.

(35) a. SL JOKE.
   A guy held his hand out the window to see if it was raining. As he held his hand out, a glass eyeball fell into it. He looked up to see a beautiful woman looking at him with one squat eye. “I’m sorry! If you return that to me, I’ll cook you a nice dinner for your trouble”. “Do you always cook for a guy on the first date?,” he asked. She replied, “only for those who catch my eye”.
   b. TL TRANS.
Un tipo sacó su mano fuera de la ventana para comprobar si estaba lloviendo. Al sacar su mano, un ojo de cristal cayó en ella. Él miró hacia arriba y vio una bella mujer trista. “¡Lo siento! Sí me lo devuelves, te haré una buena comida por el esfuerzo”. “¿Siempre cocinas para alguien en la primera cita?”, preguntó él. Ella respondió, “sólo a los que les echo el ojo”.

c. BACK TRANS.
A guy held his hand out the window to see if it was raining. As he held his hand out, a glass eyeball fell into it. He looked up to see a beautiful woman looking at him with one squint eye. “I’m sorry! If you return that to me, I’ll cook you a nice dinner for your trouble”. “Do you always cook for a guy on the first date?,” he asked. She replied, “only for those to which I throw the eye”.

d. CASE IN CHART.
C = yes; S = yes; P(a) = yes; P(b) = yes (case 1).

The same case 1 of the chart is obtained in the translation of joke (35a), in which the speaker plays with the idiomatic meaning of ‘to catch someone’s eye’ as ‘to draw someone’s attention’, very accessible as a unit, but with a parallel possible literal reading of catching the eye since the character literally catches the woman’s eye. Again, there is a similar idiom in Spanish, ‘echar el ojo a alguien’, literally ‘to throw the eye to a person’, meaning ‘to become interested in someone’. The translation preserves the three scenarios as intended for the source-language audience.

(36) a. SL JOKE.
Un hombre esperando que su mujer de a luz y cuando viene el médico el tío le pregunta:
-¡Doctor! ¿Cómo ha ido el parto?
-Bien, pero hemos tenido que ponerle oxígeno.
-¡Oh! ¡Que pena! ¡Con lo me hubiera gustado ponerle Mariano!

b. TL TRANS.
A man reading the paper and tells his wife about a newly born baby of the king.
-The man: “The king’s son has been born! It says here that he has already been named Prince”.
-The wife: “Oh! What a pity! He should have been named “John”, just like his father!”

c. BACK TRANS.
A man waiting for his wife to give birth and when the doctor comes he asks him:
-Doctor! How did everything go?
-Fine, but we had to supply oxygen on him.
-Oh! What a pity! I would have liked him to be named Mariano!
(translation of SL joke)

d. CASE IN CHART.
C = yes; S = no; P(a) = yes; P(b) = yes (case 5).

The Spanish joke (36a) is an example of how the goal of maintaining the strategies leading to humour are more important than maintaining faithfulness to the semantic content of the joke. This joke plays with different senses of ‘poner’ (to put), namely ‘poner oxígeno’ (to supply oxygen) and ‘poner un nombre’ (to name a person), both probably adjusted in context from an empty pro-concept ‘poner’ that acquires pragmatic meaning with the stretch of discourse that comes after it.

There is no such punning in English, and hence the semantic scenario of the joke has been changed into a royal birth so as to introduce an alternative punning, specifically the dual senses of ‘to name’ as either ‘to put a name’ or ‘to appoint’. The pragmatic scenario has been preserved, although ‘naming’ perhaps involves more a case of disambiguation than pro-concept filling as in the Spanish joke. The resulting case of the chart would be 5.

(37) a. SL JOKE.
Q: I’m two months pregnant now. When will my baby move?
A: With any luck, right after he finishes college.

b. TL TRANS.
Q: Estoy embarazada de 1 mes. ¿Cuándo lo sentiré?
A: Dentro de 8 meses, cuando le dé la factura.

c. BACK TRANS.
Q: I'm 1 month pregnant now. When will I feel it [the baby]?
A: In 8 months, when I give you my bill.

d. CASE IN CHART.
C = yes; S = no; P(a) = yes; P(b) = yes (case 5).

The same case of the chart is obtained in joke (37a), another example of a joke whose semantic content has been altered in order to reproduce the inferential strategies, as intended by the source-language communicator to generate humorous effects. This joke plays with two senses of ‘to move’: ‘physical movement’ and ‘changing residence’. The hearer, by following the relevance-seeking inferential procedure, is bound to select the meaning of ‘physical movement’ due to the processing of the previous stretch of discourse and the medical scenario that the joke depicts. There is no such equivalent in Spanish, and hence the semantic scenario has been altered so as to introduce an alternative verb in Spanish, ‘sentir’ meaning either ‘to feel’ (in this case the mother ‘feeling’ the baby) or ‘to regret’. The month of pregnancy has been reduced so as to accommodate the weeks of pregnancy in which ‘not feeling the baby’ is more likely. But in essence, the same humorous strategy applies: a more likely medical sense of ‘sentir’ as ‘feel’ and a less relevant but eventually correct sense of ‘sentir’ as ‘regret’, producing a similar balance of cognitive effects and mental effort despite the alterations in the semantic scenario.

(38) a. SL JOKE.
Q: Why did the bald man paint rabbits on his head?
A: Because from a distance they looked like hares!

b. TL TRANS.
Q: ¿Por qué los calvos van siempre a barrios peligrosos?
A: Porque allí les dan para el pelo.

c. BACK TRANS.
Q: Why do bald men always go to dangerous neighbourhoods?
A: Because there they are given for the hair.

d. CASE IN CHART.
C = yes; S = no; P(a) = no; P(b) = yes (case 7).

Joke (38a) is meant to produce humorous effects from the homophony of ‘hair’ and ‘hare’. Spanish is not as prone to homophonic punning as English and no equivalent can be found to this humorous strategy based on ‘hair’. So, a radical change in the joke has been undertaken to produce a similar balance of cognitive effects and mental effort. Firstly, the semantic scenario has been changed into ‘bald men going to dangerous places’ so as to accommodate the idiom ‘dar para el pelo’, meaning ‘to give a bashing’. The pragmatic scenario has also been changed from disambiguation to a literal/idiomatic duality in which the initial, more accessible sense of ‘to get a bashing’ as a unitary meaning is contrasted with the literal meaning of the words, ‘to give something for the hair’, also possible but much more unlikely. In a way, though, in my opinion the resulting balance of effects and effort seems to be similar, since in both cases the speaker plays with more accessible senses of ‘hare/hair’ in English and ‘dar para el pelo’ in Spanish, and then a more unlikely sense is forced into the interpretation, thus producing the desired humorous effects. The outcome of the translation fits case 7 of the taxonomy, since the cultural scenario is preserved, the semantic scenario is altered, the inferential steps have been changed, and the eventual balance of effects and effort is more or less preserved.

(39) a. SL JOKE.
The world is so full of problems that if Moses came down Mount Sinai today, two of the tablets he would be carrying would be aspirins.

b. TL TRANS.
El mundo tiene tantos problemas que si Moisés bajara del Monte Sinaí hoy, en lugar de los 10 mandamientos llevaría los 10 “manda-huevos”.

c. BACK TRANS.
The world is so full of problems that if Moses came down Mount Sinai today, instead of the ten
commandments he would be carrying the ten “it-is-outrageous”.

d. CASE IN CHART.
\[ C = \text{yes}; \ S = \text{yes}; \ P(a) = \text{no}; \ P(b) = \text{yes} \ (\text{case 3}). \]

Joke (39a) is based on the polysemy of the word ‘tablet’, that can either mean ‘plaque of stone’ or ‘pill’. The processing of the previous stretch of discourse including Moses and Mount Sinai makes the first sense much more accessible and relevant in the balance of effects and effort, and the speaker knows that ‘tablet as pill’ will not be considered by the hearer. Again, no possible equivalent can be found in Spanish. The only way to achieve similar humorous effects is to change the pragmatic scenario and the inferential steps taken to reach these effects. The translation I propose is one introducing the colloquial Spanish idiom ‘manda huevos’, that people in Spain use colloquially when they are very angry as a way to show how outrageous something is. ‘Manda huevos’ has the same beginning as ‘mandamientos’, the word in Spanish for ‘commandments’, and hence the translation suggests an alternative to ‘tablets as pills’ in the form of ‘mandamientos as manda-huevos’. The criticism on today’s world is maintained and the initial religion-connoted interpretation is invalidated in both cases and turned into a more unlikely interpretation. Although the English version with pills communicates ‘depression due to today’s world’ and the Spanish version communicates a more intense ‘anger with today’s world’, I think the resulting balance does no depart substantially from the source-language joke, and therefore the resulting case of the chart of translatibility would be 3.

(40) a. SL JOKE.
What did Bill Gates’ wife say to him on their wedding night?
“Now I know why you named your company Microsoft!”.

b. TL TRANS.
X

c. BACK TRANS.
X

d. CASE IN CHART.
\[ C = \text{yes}; \ S = \text{no}; \ P(a) = \text{no}; \ P(b) = \text{no} \ (\text{case 8}). \]

Joke (40a) is a typical example of untranslatable joke. The humorous effect is based on the sexual connotations of the word Microsoft, a world-famous company to which no alternative brand name can be found in Spanish. The resulting case in the chart would be 8, since only the cultural scenario would be preserved. If the target culture is not familiar with this brand name, then the resulting case would be 16.

(41) a. SL JOKE.
DREBIN: It’s the same old story: boy finds girl, girl finds boy, boy loses girl, girl remembers girl, girl dies in a tragic blimp accident over the Orange Bowl on New year’s day.
JANE: Goodyear?
DREBIN: No, the worst.
(The Naked Gun)

b. TL TRANS.
DREBIN: La historia de siempre. Chico conoce chica, chico pierde chica, chica conoce chico, chico olvida chica, chico recuerda chica, chica muere en trágico accidente en globo anunciando pescado en Conserva del Norte.
JANE: Bonito?
DREBIN: No, fue horrible.

c. BACK TRANS.
DREBIN: The same old story: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, girl meets boy, boy forgets girl, boy remembers girl, girl dies in a tragical blimp accident while making publicity for canned fish from the North (of Spain).
JANE: Tuna fish? (Or: Was it nice?)
DREBIN: No, it was horrible.
Finally, joke (41a) reproduces a dialogue from the film *The Naked Gun* and the actual dubbing into Spanish, as cited in Vandaele (1995). The dialogue tells the story of a girl that dies in a blimp accident. The source of humour lies in the sub-sentential utterance ‘Goodyear?’, that can either encode the explicature ‘Was the blimp
there is indeed a need for studies which set out to establish, all else being equal, how far language transfer equivalents in the target language that make the source-language inferential steps reproducible, but of course pragmatic scenario. This is, of course, a predictive activity in which the translator tries to find linguistic equivalents in the target language that make the source-language inferential steps reproducible, but of course there is no guarantee that duplication of effects and effort will be achieved. As Chiaro (2005: 140) points out, there is indeed a need for studies which set out to establish, all else being equal, how far language transfer.

4. Proposal of a relevance-theoretic ‘itinerary’ for the translation of jokes

I would like to end this chapter by suggesting a proposal of ‘itinerary’ for the translation of jokes (figure 2).

The itinerary starts with the translator processing the source-language joke and interpreting it in the same way as the source-language speaker intended it to be interpreted by the source-language audience. To do so, the translator will engage in the relevance-seeking mutual parallel adjustment of explicit content leading to an explicature, implicit import leading to implications, and the necessary amount of contextual information required to interpret the joke efficiently. This insight into the interpretation of the joke, as intended for the source-language audience in the source-language culture, is important, since success of any attempt to communicate the original interpretation will require that the language stimulus be processed using the context envisaged by the original author; otherwise there is no reason to expect that this interpretation will be optimally relevant to the target audience (Gutt 1992, 65).

The next step is central in any translation of jokes: to identify the inferential steps predicted by the source-language author insofar as they are intended to generate humorous effects in the source-language audience, the ‘lower limit’ of the pragmatic scenario that was proposed above. This step is essential if the translator wants to specify the conditions and linguistic choices that make the joke translatable to the target-language audience with efficiency. In my opinion, keeping similar inferential steps or substituting them for equivalent ones is the main objective of a translation of humorous texts.

In parallel, the translator should pay attention to significant cultural information that might play a part in the eventual humour of the joke, ranging from parallelisms of social stereotypes on professions, sex roles, races, etc to intra-culturally connoted places, names or historic events. This information might increase mental effort with no offset of effects in return if these intra-cultural referents are maintained in the translation and they are missing in the target culture.

Having obtained a good idea of the source of humour as intended for the source-language audience, the next step is to try to produce a target-language joke that resembles the original in relevant ways:

Firstly, the translator should seek parallel forms of transferring cultural information from the source culture to the target culture and substitute intra-cultural referents when necessary.

Secondly, the translator will look for semantic choices that allow for a similar coding of information in the source and target languages. Sometimes, as in the ‘catch my eye’ example, the parallelism will favour a straightforward translation. On other occasions, though, linguistic choices in both languages will make this task very difficult and replacements will have to be made.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the translator will study the possibility of preserving in the target-language joke the pragmatic scenario predicted by the source-language speaker, both in the quantity and quality of inferential strategies and in the resulting balance of cognitive effects and mental effort. The translator is expected to change, alter, substitute the source-language text as much as necessary to yield satisfactory outcomes in this pragmatic scenario. This is, of course, a predictive activity in which the translator tries to find linguistic equivalents in the target language that make the source-language inferential steps reproducible, but of course there is no guarantee that duplication of effects and effort will be achieved. As Chiaro (2005: 140) points out, there is indeed a need for studies which set out to establish, all else being equal, how far language transfer
influences the triadic behavioural, physiological and emotional response in individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

5. Concluding remarks

The most important task of a translator is the preservation of those inferential strategies that make the derivation of humorous effects possible in the source language, even if that involves changing the semantic content of the joke completely, as was suggested in the translation of several jokes in heading 3 above. In other words, even if that risks turning 'a translation of the joke' into what can be more adequately defined as 'an alternative to the joke'. I think it is a price worth paying in exchange for the preservation of humorous effects.

To sum up, it is commonly assumed in translation studies that the only way to be faithful to the original text is, paradoxically, to be unfaithful to it. In the context of the translation of jokes, if we are faithful to conveying the intended humorous effects to a different audience, why should we regret being unfaithful to the semantic content of the joke?

References


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