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Humor and Translation

Delia Chiaro

Anyone who has ever tried to tell a joke in a language other than his or her own will know how easy it is for it to get lost in translation simply because what often seems so amusing in one language may just not be funny in another. The reason for this, of course, lies in the fact that verbal humor, amongst other things, depends on incongruities that are present in both the language in which it is couched and on a series of cultural features that are often specific to the source culture alone. If the joke plays on the ambiguity of a word or phrase with two or more meanings and you have the good fortune to find that the same word or phrase in the target language has exactly the same meanings as in the source language, your luck is in and your task is almost accomplished. However, in the unlikely event that the words themselves do translate in exactly the same way, the culture-specificity of the joke may well remain an insurmountable challenge. Owing to the fact that good jokes play on the combination of linguistic specificity and highly specific cultural references, recipients need to be knowledgeable enough regarding events, history, people, customs and values of the source culture to be able to know what you are talking about and recognize your attempt at non-seriousness. If you do manage to overcome all these problems with an adequate translation, whether your interlocutor will find it funny or not is yet another problem. Whichever way we look at it, verbal humor does not travel well.

Yet, challenging as it may seem, verbal humor is indeed translated, and copiously. Suffice it to think of literary translation. A gargantuan task, but the witty verbal dexterity of authors such as Boccaccio, Shakespeare and Joyce has been successfully translated into dozens of languages. The same is true of the translation of humor on screen. From the Marx Brothers

to Woody Allen, despite the added challenge of having to deal with wordplay that is frequently visually anchored, too, thanks to translation, Hollywood's comedians have successfully travelled the world as have, over the years, innumerable TV comedy series from Britain and the USA (#cross-ref Bucaria this volume).

Historical perspectives

Like many other “studies” that emerged in the mid-seventies, including Humor Studies, Translation Studies is a fairly new discipline. Generally accepted to have been established following a seminal paper by Holmes (1988; 2004), Translation Studies grew out of the fields of comparative literary studies and linguistics and, to begin with, research in the field was limited to the study of translations of biblical, historical and literary texts. Undoubtedly, studies regarding prestigious written texts gave weight and gravitas to the new discipline and it took some time for studies in oral translation, such as interpreting, screen translation and multimedia translation, as well as automatic translation and computer-assisted translation to emerge as serious objects of study. As for writings on the translation of humor, until the mid-nineties they were virtually non-existent, and the few studies that did appear, that were not anecdotal, tended to approach the subject from a literary viewpoint, focusing very much on puns. While closely related to humor, puns can often be more clever than they are amusing. Extensive studies on literary puns include Redfern (1984) and Delabastita's work on Shakespeare's puns (1993). It has only really been since the turn of the new century that studies on the translation of humor have truly ventured beyond the kudos of the literary pun. Slowly but surely, special issues of renowned journals that have been dedicated to the subject have included studies on translating humor beyond literary contexts and have involved analyses of humor in the context of simultaneous interpreting and screen translation, and, of course, jokes, (see Delabastita, 1996; Vandaele, 2002; Chiaro, 2005). More recently,

translating humor in previously unexplored areas such as advertising, comic books, videogames and global news has also been explored (Chiaro, 2010; Abend-David, 2014). In fact, from its position of near-invisibility, humor has gradually become a popular subject in Translation Studies, emerging as a widespread subject of postgraduate dissertations, while a glance at the programs of any Translation Studies conference will reveal numerous presentations on the subject, too.

However, what exactly do we mean by the term “translation”? “Translation” is a far-reaching term that principally refers to the transfer of a message from one language into another language; e.g., Greek into Latin, Chinese into English, Spanish into French, etc. Translating between different languages, or “interlingual translation,” is part of a well-known tripartite definition of translation advanced by Roman Jakobson:

1. Intralingual translation or *rewording* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs in the same language.
2. Interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.
3. Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems. (1959/2004, p. 139, emphasis in original)

As we can see, translation is not limited to the transmission of a message from Language A to Language B but includes rewording within a single language as well as the notion of the alteration of non-verbal signs.

The word used for “translation” in many Romance languages derives from the Latin term *transductio* (e.g., French *traduction*, Italian *traduzione*, Portuguese *tradução*, Rumanian *traducere*, etc.) meaning “transposition.” Significantly, the same term, *transductio*, also designates a rhetorical device that refers to “figures of moderate similarity” (Lausberg 1967, p. 147). Lausberg actually glosses the term *transductio* with the French terms *jeu de mot*, *calambour* and the English word “pun.” Therefore, a close etymological relationship emerges between translation and wordplay. However, this connection is not exclusively etymological. If translation creates a text that is similar and reflects another pre-existing text in another language, by a stretch of the imagination we could argue that, in a sense, a translation contains two texts in one. In other words, the translated text overlaps and corresponds to the underlying source script from which it originates.

Eighteenth-century essayist, Joseph Addison, also saw a link between verbal humor and translation, arguing that a pun is

...a Conceit arising from the use of two words that agree in the Sound, but differ in the Sense. The only way to try a Piece of Wit is to translate it in a different language: If it bears the Test you may pronounce it to be true but if it vanishes in the Experiment you may conclude it to have been a Punn. ([1711], 1982, p. 343)

According to Addison, translation is the test of a “Piece of Wit,” of verbal humor. In other words, if a term stands the test of translation, it is in itself ambiguous, a pun, a “Piece of Wit.” Therefore, both Addison, who uses translation to test verbal ambiguity, and Lausberg with the “moderate similarity” of both translation and verbal humor think in a like manner. Again, linguist Charles Hockett (1960) also uses translation as a benchmark of verbal humor with regard to jokes that he labelled “poetic.” According to Hockett, poetic jokes that rely

heavily on linguistic ambiguity defy translation and goes as far as defining such jokes in terms of “layman’s poetry.” It is then Sherzer, by defining the pun as “a projection of the paradigmatic onto the syntagmatic,” (1978, p. 341) who comes full circle by adding that this definition of the pun is “precisely the Jakobsonian definition of poetry.”

Core issues and topics

Although this chapter is mainly concerned with interlingual translation, it is well worth considering the other types of translations in Jakobson’s definition, which is, however, far from being unproblematic. To begin with, the concept of the interlingual translation of “some other language” raises the question of whether language varieties are considered fully-fledged languages or whether they fall into the category of “other signs in the same language.” Would Afro American Vernacular English or Cockney, to quote two varieties of English often adopted for humorous purposes, require intra- or interlingual translation? Consider the following example of Cockney repartee from the film *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*:

A few nights ago, Rory’s gone to the local battle-cruiser to catch the end of his *footer*.

Nobody is watching the custard so he turns the channel over. A fat man’s north opens and he wanders over and turns the Liza over. ‘Now fuck off and watch it somewhere else.’

Rory knows *claret* is imminent, but he doesn’t want to miss the end of the game; so, calm as a coma, he stands and picks up a fire extinguisher and he walks straight past the jam rolls who are ready for action, then he plonks it outside the entrance. He then orders an Aristotle of the most *ping pong tiddly* in the nuclear sub and switches back to his footer (Ritchie, 1998).ⁱ

Cockney rhyming slang is an anti-language created by replacing an everyday word with a phrase of two words that rhymes with it. When uttering the rhyming phrase it is usual to omit the final, rhyming word so that it remains implied. Extremely cryptic, rhyming slang probably originated in the markets of London's East End where it was used by both barrow boys and criminals so as not to be understood by the police forces. The omission of the rhyming word, or *hemiteleia*, renders the phrase even more incomprehensible to those not *au fait* with the slang. The passage contains several expressions in Cockney rhyming slang (underlined) that would not be intelligible to those unacquainted with it, including most people living in the British Isles.

Table 29.1. Standard English translations of Rhyming Slang terms from *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*.

Cockney Rhyming Slang	Literal and Complete Form	Standard English
Battle-cruiser	Boozer (from the verb “to booze”; i.e. to consume plenty of alcohol)	Pub
Nuclear sub		Pub
Custard	Custard and jelly	Telly (television)
North	North and south	Mouth
Liza	Liza Minelli	Telly (television)
Jam rolls		Arseholes
Aristotle		Bottle

Apart from the rhyming slang itself, the passage also contains local inner London terms (in italics) such as “footer” for football match, “claret” for blood and “ping pong tiddly” for champagne, as well as the verb to “plonk,” meaning to put or place - a slang term that is not

restricted to Cockney. For most English speakers living outside London or belonging to the upper-middle classes, this passage requires translation. The question is, have I translated these expressions from English into English? Surely if that were the case, translation would not have been necessary. In other words, whether my translations of this slang are inter- or intralingual renditions is highly debateable, but, whatever the category, this case illustrates the difficulty involved in understanding humor outside our particular culture. Where understanding humor is concerned, the concept of culture extends beyond time and place to include gender, social class, education, religion and a wide range of interests that could range from sociolinguistics to knitting (see Chiaro, 2009, p. 213). Interaction that includes verbal humor creates a sense of empathy and comity. It would appear that we laugh thirty times more often in company than when we are alone (Provine, 2000, p. 45), so the creation of inclusion through common ground that may lead to shared laughter is a feasible notion, whatever that common ground may be.

Screen translation modalities such as dubbing and subtitling also cross Jakobson's boundaries, as do sign languages for the deaf and hard-of-hearing and audio descriptions for the blind. All these categories of translation fall between the classifications of interlingual, intralingual and intersemiotic. In other words, the lines between one type of translation and another are blurry, especially today, where new technologies are constantly replacing traditional translation modalities. Humorous texts no longer travel via word of mouth or in writing alone. Cyber humor travels via smartphones and tablets and often contains as much visual content as it does verbal content. When a comic meme goes viral, what type of translation is involved? Is an interlingual translation of the verbal content sufficient, or will the meme also require an intersemiotic translation of its non-verbal content? These issues are especially complex when they concern humorous discourse.

The interlingual translation of non-serious discourse, namely, the transfer of verbally expressed humor from one language to another, manifestly touches upon two important tenets of translation theory, those of equivalence and translatability. Formal equivalence refers to a Target Text (i.e. the new language *into* which a text is translated, henceforth TT) that follows both content and structure of the Source Text (the original text in the original language, henceforth ST) as closely as possible (Munday, 2009, p. 191). The concept of translatability refers to the capacity of transferring meaning from one language to the other, i.e. from ST to TT, without it undergoing radical changes (Chiaro, 2008a pp. 580—7). Paradoxically, radical changes are, however, inevitable simply by virtue of the fact that every language is different and translation will be physically diverse from the original. If the two languages were the same, there would be no need for translation. And humor is bound to be where most radical changes occur.

Previously we saw that linguists Hockett and Sherzer had linked humorous language to poetry; this parallel is not fortuitous. With respect to both formal equivalence and translatability, the translation of humor shares many problems with the translation of conventional poetry. Poetry breaks with linguistic conventions: word order will tend to differ from orthodox norms, lexical items tend to have unusual collocations and repetition may be present at the level of sound, lexis, syntax and meaning. Poetry stretches language to its extremes. The visual impact of poetry is also significant both in conventional poetry and, especially so, in concrete poetry. All these features render poetry untranslatable. Lewis Carroll's well known "The Mouse's Tale" is a poem, but also an especially complex pun. It is a tale about a tail that happens to be typeset in the shape of a tail, making it both a verbal and a pun that is visually anchored. Carroll's pun does not stop at the polysemy of tale/tail/visual tail. The poem is also structured in tail rhymes, thus giving the pun a further layer of

meaning. Complex and untranslatable as it may be, the poem from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* exists in countless translations, even though it would be impossible to echo the tale to perfection in other languages. Where would we find a language in which the same term is used to mean both “story” and “appendage”? Even the most experienced literary translator will have to relinquish the task in the face of the formal features of Carroll’s “Tale” that are bound to differ in the TT. Over and above the most obvious pun of “Tale/Tail” upon which the visual pun and rhyme scheme depend, the formal features of the poem are unlikely to be identical in the TT. Translators and readers have to arrive at a functional compromise of sorts.

“Fury said to
 a mouse, That
 he met in the
 house, ‘Let
 us both go
 to law: *I*
 will pros-
 ecute *you*.—
 Come, I’ll
 take no de-
 nial: We
 must have
 the trial;
 For really
 this morn-
 ing I’ve
 nothing
 to do.’
 Said the
 mouse to
 the cur,
 ‘Such a
 trial, dear
 sir, With
 no jury
 or judge,
 would
 be wast-
 ing our
 breath.’
 ‘I’ll be
 judge,
 I’ll be
 jury.’
 Said
 cun-
 ning
 old
 Fury:
 ‘I’ll try
 the
 whole
 cause
 and
 con-
 demn
 you
 to
 death.’”

Figure 29.1. “The Mouse’s Tale”.

“Furia disse a un topino Incontrato al mattino: ‘Facciamo un tribunale, E poi anche il
 processo! E non ti rifiutare, Ti debbo condannare! Oggi è un giorno noioso E mi sento
 depresso.’ Il topo all’imbroglione: ‘Che storia da burlone! I processi si fanno Con giudice e
 giuria!’ ‘Son giudice e giuria!’ Fu del can la follia: ‘Son io tutta la legge; e ti condanno a
 morte!’” (Carroll, *Le avventure di alice nel paese delle meraviglie*)

This Italian version of the poem is different from the original in several ways. First, visually
 the poem is not in the form of a tail because the Italian word for “tail,” *coda*, does not have a

corresponding homophone that also denotes a tale - the Italian term for “tale” is *racconto* and bears no resemblance to the English term. In fact, the translator has chosen the layout of a piece of prose. Second, in order to retain a rhyme scheme, the translator has made some changes, such as with “mouse/house” that is substituted with *topino/mattino* (little mouse/morning) and “cur/Sir” with *imbroglione/burlone* (trickster/joker). However, the Italian poem does retain the “jurisprudence” storyline, albeit substituting and juxtaposing terms such as “law,” “prosecute,” “trial” etc. to fit in with the different rhyme scheme. For example, “Let us both go to law: I will prosecute you” becomes *Facciamo un tribunale, E poi anche il processo* – “let’s have a hearing and also a trial.” The poem remains on the same illogical topic as the original, it shares some formal similarities, but, at the same time, it is different. In other words, it remains a nonsensical poem, but a new nonsensical poem.

Readers accept the poem to be a faithful translation even though its equivalence is vaguely reduced to subject matter and general form alone. This is an extreme example of linguistic dexterity and a well-known one. Can we be certain that readers will be aware of the changes that have taken place from ST to TT? Apart from translation scholars, most readers will resort to translations because they are unfamiliar with the source language, and, rather than comparing the text with another, they will presumably be interested in appreciating it for what it is.

A translation can only exist in virtue of a previous pre-existing text considered the original from which it stems. The consumer of a translation trusts the translation to be a bona fide copy of a pre-existing original, but at the same time, should be aware that a translation can never be an exact copy. As a philosopher, Burge explains through hermeneutic logic that translation is forced to adopt the principle of “necessary sacrifice” (1978, p. 137). Burge argues that the utterance, “The first word of this sentence has three letters” cannot be translated into French owing to the fact that the first word of that sentence can only have two

letters, i.e. *Le premier mot...* According to Burge, an acceptable translation could be *Le premier mot de la phrase en anglais a trois lettres*, hence adopting the principle of necessary sacrifice. Poetry is forced to engage in necessary sacrifice if it wishes to remain within the realms of poetry; that is, if it wishes to retain its functional or dynamic equivalence. The same is true of humorous discourse.

What has fifty legs and cannot walk?

Half a centipede.

(Laurian 1989, p.6)

How can we translate this riddle into French or Italian, languages in which centipedes are respectively known as *mille-pattes* and *mille piedi* – literally “thousand peds”? Mathematics provides a feasible solution:

Qu'est-ce qui a cinq-cent pattes et qui ne peut pas marcher?

La moitié d'une mille patte.

Che cosa ha cinquecento piedi ma non può camminare?

Mezzo mille piede.

By giving the continental centipedes 500 feet, rather than 50 legs, our riddles have lost their formal equivalence in exchange for what Koller (1989, pp. 100-4) labels “connotative equivalence.” What in English are denoted as legs, in French and Italian become feet; what in English possesses a hundred limbs, in French and Italian possesses a thousand. Yet both Source Text (ST) and Target Text (TT) refer to the same insect in the real world; they trigger the notion of the same pest in the minds of both source language and target language recipients. Furthermore, the riddle format also exists in the ST and TT cultures, thereby answering to Koller’s concept of “text normative equivalence.” Finally, the riddle produces the same pragmatic or dynamic effect in ST and TT recipients, what Nida calls “dynamic

equivalence” (1964). The words are different and the content is different but the joke is the same.

Scholars in Translation Studies have produced a number of dichotomies regarding equivalence. Among these dichotomies, we find Nida’s distinction between “formal” and “dynamic” translation (1964, 1969, 1975) and Newmark’s difference between “semantic” and “communicative” translation (1982, 1988, 1991). Focusing on the process of translation and given that equivalence cannot be absolute, these labels are strikingly similar to one another. Dynamic and communicative equivalence replicates Cicero’s concept of translating *ad sensum* (according to the meaning) that he supported against translations that were *ad verbum* (word for word). As long ago as 46 BCE, in order to help fill the divide between Greek and Roman worlds, Cicero moves away from the word-to-word translations of Greek into Latin that were so common, towards a more persuasive kind of language that communicated the gist of the ST even though forsaking exact formal equivalence (see Robinson, 1997, p. 9). Cicero attempts to provide a user-friendly translation rather than a strict reflection of the ST that we can compare to an early attempt at today’s notion of dynamic equivalence (see Chiaro 2008a, p. 576; Munday, 2009 pp. 1—3).

The subject of equivalence is especially relevant to the translation of verbal humor because humor, like poetry, takes language to its extremes so that interlingual solutions are difficult to find, thus giving strength to arguments by theorists like Toury who consider equivalence to be “any target language utterance which is presented or regarded as such” (1985, p. 20). This notion dispenses with the issue of equivalence and favours a TT-oriented approach in which function is paramount. In the case of humor, when the going gets tough the translator could insert a completely new instance of verbal humor.

Vermeer's (1989) concept of *Skopostheorie* is perfectly in line with this way of thinking. If the TT text functions like the ST, never mind fidelity, what is important is that it works. In the case of humor, as long as recipients recognize the text as being non-serious in scope, then its *Skopos*, its purpose, has been achieved.

Nick Hornby's 1992 autobiographical novel is entitled *Fever Pitch*. The book is about the author's experiences as a fan of Arsenal football club. The title is a pun on Hornby's (a) state of extreme excitement and activity and his (b) obsession for football that is played on a pitch – in this case Highbury. The Italian translation *Febbre a 90'* – "Fever at 90 minutes" is an interesting and successful compromise. The Italian title dispenses with the original pun but retains the incongruous idea of extreme excitement at a football match that lasts ninety minutes, thus conveying a similar sport-oriented metaphor as in the ST. The translator has succeeded in maintaining the title's "invariant core." According to Popovič (1976), different translations of the same ST will all contain the same "invariant core" that represents its basic ingredients. In Carroll's "Tale" the discourse of law represents the poem's invariant core, while football is the core meaning of the title of Hornby's novel. Equivalence is slightly skewed because the "pitch" is substituted with "90 minutes," but the replacement is functional and therefore acceptable; in other words, the *Skopos* is retained.

An essential mechanism to bear in mind when translating verbal humor such as jokes, gags, witticisms etc. is the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) proposed by Attardo and Raskin in 1991. This theory, an extension of the Semantic Script Theory, asserts that any instance of verbal humor consists of a single script that contains two perfectly overlapping,

yet concurrently opposing scripts. While one script is evident, another script is hidden and not immediately apparent to the listener or reader. In other words, the single script of a typical joke will contain two scripts, one of which is so inconspicuous that it will only become ostensible when the punchline is revealed. In order to create humor, this “hidden” script will oppose the more apparent script in such a way as to create incongruity.

Want to hear a dirty joke? A kid jumped into a mud puddle.

This elementary canned joke contains two scripts. The first, more evident script regards a “dirty” joke that leads the recipient to expect a joke based on vulgar subject matter. The punch line, however, reveals the second “hidden” script. By referring to “dirty” in the sense of physical “grime” rather than sexual content, the punch line exposes the two scripts. In this joke the more manifest notion of coarseness overlaps with the less apparent notion of dust and grime, also because of the common collocation of dirty + joke. Such a joke presents no particular problems in terms of translation as long as the target culture also uses dirt as a metaphor to describe jokes with specific sexual content as in its Italian and German translations:

Vuoi sentire una barzelletta sporca? Un bambino si è gettato in una pozzanghera di fango.

Möchten Sie einen schmutzigen Witz hören? Ein Kind sprang in eine Schlammpfütze.

Italian and German reflect the witticism in both form and content. Both cultures recognize the question-and-answer format and both cultures adopt the concept of dirt to denote lewd subject matter in a joke as well as dirt in the sense of “matter out of place.” In fact, script oppositions are present in both TTs, and Italian and German recipients, like English speakers, will also possess five other “knowledge resources” or KRs (Attardo, 1994) necessary to identify the text as being humorous in intent. As well as script opposition, recipients will recognize the non-serious narrative strategy in the question-and-answer format. The joke’s

target, situation and logical mechanisms are discernible, furthermore, thanks to translation, as is the language. Attardo (2002), in fact, suggests that translators adhere to a hierarchy of KRs according to a metric of similarities between ST and TT.

Greater problems arise when wordplay is either extremely language-specific, or extremely culture-specific, or in the case of the worst scenario, a combination of both.

Sample analysis

Q: Why did the computer go to the doctor? A: Because it had a virus!

Everyone who owns a computer knows that computers are prone to catching viruses. When we humans catch a virus, we are likely to turn to a doctor; equally, in the world of the suspended disbelief, a prerequisite of humor where incongruity reigns, sick computers go to the doctor, too. This joke presents no particular translational difficulty. However, if we take this argument up a notch, we find that most jokes are not so straightforward to translate:

Sum ergo cogito. Is that putting Descartes before the horse?

The KRs required by recipients in order to get the gag do not stop short at the realization of the reversal of Descartes' proposition. Recipients would also need to be aware of the fact that René Descartes conceived the phrase, that he was French and that the stereotypical French pronunciation of the name "Descartes" in English (according to the common imaginary) would be /dɪkɑrt/. Finally, recipients would need to be familiar with the idiom "to put the cart before the horse." The famous rejoinders to this gag, usually found in graphic form are "To do is to be" (Rousseau) and "Do be do be do" (Sinatra), two gags that defy formal translation that simultaneously echoes the "cogito."

According to Chiaro (2010, pp. 11—12) translators generally adopt one of four strategies to deal with the translation of verbal humor. First, they may leave the wordplay unchanged; second, they may replace the source humor for a new, but different instance of humor in the target language; third, they may replace it with an idiomatic expression; and, lastly, they may simply ignore the source humor altogether.

i) Leaving the verbal humor unchanged

“Tenez, allez voir ma mère, ella a une memoir d’éléphante de mer!” (Back-translation ‘You’d better go and see your mother, she has a memory like an elephant. She’s an elephant seal.’)

This line is from the 2001 film directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, *Le fabuleux destin d’Amélie Poulin*, and plays on the homophone *mère/mer* – mother/sea, as well as the idiom *avoir la mémoire d’éléphant* (lit. “to have the memory of an elephant”). In the Italian version of the film, the translator opts for a literal, formal translation that ignores the pun.

“Le conviene andare a trovare mia madre. Ha una memoria da elefante mia madre. E un elefantessa.”

This is a word-for-word rendition of the ST utterance; the problem is that the Italian text is not humorous as there is no overlap, no opposition and no pun. However, this is not to say that recipients necessarily found the utterance in any way strange. In all likelihood, it simply passes unnoticed. It is unlikely that it passed as an attempt at humor.

ii) Replacing the verbal humor with a fresh, different instance of verbal humor

The translator can choose to replace the source of wordplay with an example of wordplay in the target language. This is of course the ideal strategy, as the recipient will have the

satisfaction of experiencing verbal humor. Naturally, the choice of invariant core may well lead to a more adequate result in terms of equivalence. In the English version of *Amélie*, the translator chose to invent a blend in place of the pun:

“Go and see my mother. She’s got a memory like an elephant. Mum-ephant.”

This sort of portmanteaux clearly points at an attempt at non-seriousness that is very much in line with the ST.

George Carlin’s famous one-liner “I knew a transsexual guy whose only ambition is to eat, drink and be Mary” is also apparently beyond translation unless the target language happens to have an expression like “to eat drink and be merry” that includes a near homophone of a female name that means “happy.” The feminine of the Italian term for “lively,” *allegro*, is also a girl’s name, so an acceptable translation of the gag could be:

Una volta ho conosciuto una ragazza le cui uniche aspirazioni erano mangiare, bere ed essere Allegra.

However, by accepting that the invariant code of the text to be transsexuality, by making the object feminine, a more satisfying solution could be:

Una volta ho conosciuto un ragazzo le cui uniche aspirazioni erano mangiare, bere ed essere Felice.

“Felice” is a proper noun for a male (Felix), so the translation retains not only dynamic equivalence by maneuvering the subject’s gender but also the concept of “merriness” which is closer to the source gag than “liveliness.”

iii) Replacing the verbal humor with an idiomatic expression

This may appear to be an odd strategy but one which is used frequently, especially in the case of screen translation (#cross-ref Bucaria, this volume). The example from *Amélie* could be translated with reference to the idiom “an elephant never forgets”:

“Go and see my mother. An elephant. Never forgets.” (My translation)

Idioms are not actually funny per se, but possibly jazz up the TT in a similar way to wordplay.

Did you hear about the shrimp that went to the prawn’s cocktail party? He pulled a mussel.

In order to translate this homophonic one-liner by British comedian Ken Dodd, the target language would need to use the same term for pulling a muscle as the slang term meaning getting together with a person of the opposite sex. Furthermore, while prawn cocktail is a universal starter, the “cocktail party” is not:

Hai saputo del gamberetto che è andato al cocktail party dell’aragosta? Ha preso un granchio!

(Back translation “Did you hear about the shrimp that went to the lobster’s party? He caught a crab” [lit. something he did misfired].)

The Italian translation is formally equivalent in terms of narrative strategy but has to overcome a number of hurdles. First, although the term and concept of “cocktail party” exists in Italian, people more commonly refer to this kind of gathering as an *aperitivo*. While “prawn cocktail” - *cocktail di gamberi* - exists as a dish, *il cocktail party di un gambero* (lit. “a prawn’s cocktail party”) does not have the same resonance as in the ST. Second, there is the issue of the play on muscle/mussel. For this reason, the translator inserts an idiomatic

expression that remains within the field of “seafood.” Of course, the result is slightly odd but recognizable as an attempt at humor.

iv) Ignoring the wordplay altogether

This, of course, is a feasible (and frequent) strategy as the target reader is unlikely to know that the ST contained verbal humor. However, the translator is free to use a compensatory strategy and insert an instance of verbal play elsewhere in the text.

Purely linguistic ambiguity, however, is only half the story. Things get complicated when linguistic specificity combines with one or more highly specific cultural references. As Cicero pointed out, “there are two types of wit, one employed upon facts, the other upon words...people are particularly amused whenever laughter is excited by the union of the two” (*De Oratore* II LIX, & II LXI).

Patient “I’ve got a peanut stuck in my throat.”

Doctor “Then take a cup of drinking chocolate when you go to bed tonight.”

Patient: “Will it get rid of it?”

Doctor “No, but it’ll go down a Treet.”

Treets are the brand name for chocolate-covered peanut sweets marketed by the Mars multinational in the UK.ⁱⁱ A homophone of “treat,” ideally, the translation should include the same or similar idiomatic expression to refer to both a) swallowing and b) something that is very enjoyable. Furthermore, how can this be translated if in most countries in the world the same product goes by the name of M&Ms? One strategy could be to replace the joke with a joke about another, different product. In Italy, Pierino is the protagonist and target of stupidity jokes. In a well-known Pierino joke, he goes to the grocer to buy some jam. The

grocer asks him if he wants “*Arrigoni*,” a well-known brand name which can be deconstructed to “*a + rigoni*”- “with wide stripes,” to which the boy replies “*No, tinta unita*” – “just one colour.” Jam replaces candy and a grocer replaces the doctor but placing the invariant core on a commercial product efficiently solves the problem.

A famous UK advertising slogan for Typhoo tea is a one-liner that plays on the homophone “tea/T”; namely, “Who puts the tea in Britain? Typhoo.” This slogan has traditionally generated the following one-liners:

If Typhoo puts the “T” in Britain who put the “Arse” in Marseilles?

If Typhoo put the “T” in Britain who put the “cunt” in Scunthorpe?

The gags work on pseudo-word formation that extracts the words “arse” and “cunt” from the name of two cities. These one-liners too would require radical changes in translation. For example, Molise and Basilicata are very small Italian regions that young people tend to joke about with the expressions: *Molise doesn’t exist. Molisn’t* and *Basilican’t*. Formally, they work on pseudo-word formation, too. However, the Italian jokes, while being possible substitutes for the Typhoo joke, contain no element of taboo language. Clearly narrative strategy changes along with the specific target, but the TTs retain dynamic function.

Translation itself can also be a source of humor. The Internet is full of translational errors. These translations are usually posted by travellers who find them in signs and menus in restaurants and hotels around the world. Readers laugh at the person who botched up while trying to write in English. From the famous “Guests are encouraged to take advantage of the chamber maid” translated from Japanese to the Parisian dress shop’s “Dresses for street walking,” it is all too easy for an amateur translator to presume that English lexis and syntax work in the same way as they do in the source language. Someone will typically take a

snapshot of the placard or sign with the unfortunate translation and post it on a social networking site for it to be forwarded via smart phone or tablet for the benefit of others. However, not all humor based upon translation is accidental, although much is probably accidental-but-on-purpose. Hockett famously describes how slips of the tongue can be seen as linguistic accidents that occur when sounds or words resemble each other, leading us to create linguistic “blends.” Of course, people laugh at the unfortunate originator of the Freudian slip, but, at the same time, we also laugh with the person reporting the slip. The lack of an apostrophe and an “s” make a pot of Homemade Blackcurrant Jam turn into something cannibalistic that “tastes just like Grandma.”ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly, “translation fails” reported on the Internet exemplify people who are inviting others to laugh with them at someone else’s linguistic ineptitude – except in the case of translation, the other is more “other” than the autochthonous offender.

In his discussion of cross-language puns in Shakespeare Delabastita (2005, pp. 162 – 73) does not classify puns that work on more than one language as an “undifferentiated concept” and provides four subdivisions:

1. Bilingual (or multilingual puns (*stricto sensu*);
2. Translation-based monolingual source-language wordplay;
3. Translation-based monolingual target-language wordplay;
4. Interference-based monolingual target-language wordplay.

1. Bilingual Puns

Delabastita provides the following example from John Fowles’ novel, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, to illustrate a pure bilingual pun:

What was happening was that Sam stood in a fit of the sulks; or at least with the semblance of it.

“Now what is wrong?”

“*Er, sir.*”

“*Ursa?* Are you speaking Latin now? Never mind, my wit is beyond you, you *bear*.”

Now I want the truth. Yesterday you were not prepared to touch the young lady with a bargee’s tool of trade. Do you deny that?” (as cited in Delabastita 2005, pp. 163-4) .

The pun plays on the phonetic and semantic similarity of the English “her, sir” pronounced with the accent of an uneducated person, hence with a dropped “h” and the English way of pronouncing the Latin term *ursa* for “bear.” The speaker, Charles, is a Victorian gentleman who is aware that his pun is beyond Sam’s understanding, yet twists the knife in the wound by insulting him with the term “bear,” hence triplicating the pun.

2. Translation-based monolingual source-language wordplay

Delabastita reports an example from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* that recounts how Sir Charles Napier, after having won a major battle conquering Sindh in present-day Pakistan, dispatched the word *Peccavi* , the Latin word for “I sinned,” to his superiors in London. The back-translation would be “I have sinned,” playing on “I have captured Sindh” (the province) and the verb “sinned,” as both are pronounced identically (/sInd/).

3. Translation-based monolingual target-language wordplay

Q. What do you get when you cross a condom with a Torah? A. A safer Torah.

(“Sefer Torah” is a handwritten Torah scroll)

Q. According to Freud, what comes between fear and sex? A. Fünf.

These riddles play on words in another language that become puns in the target language. The puns are only puns by virtue of their phonetic “double” that exists in the source language.

The first plays with the sounds of English and Hebrew, the second on those of English and German. The joke about Freud is especially complex because, in terms of the GTVH, the more apparent script implies a dirty joke because of the associations of Sigmund Freud with the notions of fear and sex. The hidden script reveals that the reader or listener had simply given a sexual meaning to the German numbers *vier* and *sechs* – which clearly need to be pronounced less than perfectly in order to retain the English meaning. This could only be translatable into another language by radical substitution with another joke.

4. Interference-based monolingual target-language wordplay

Interference of the articulatory habits of one group of speakers from one language to another is a well-known source of humor. “The Italian Man who goes to Malta” is available on the Internet both as a written and audiovisual text. It is a joke about an Italian in Malta, who, owing to his stereotypically Italian, is continuously misunderstood by others:

One day an Italian man went to a restaurant in Malta and wanted two pieces of toast, and the waiter gives him one, and the Italian man says “I want two piece.” The waiter says “go to the toilet.” The Man says, “You no understand I want two piece on my plate,” then the waiter says, “You better not piss on the plate you son of a bitch!” The man says, “I did not even know her and she calls me a Son of a Beach?” Then he goes to a bigger restaurant and finds himself with a spoon and a knife but no fork. He says “I want a fock”; the waiter says “Everybody wants to fuck” and he says “You no understand I want to fock on the table” and the waiter says “You better not fuck on the table you son of a bitch!” Then later

he goes to a hotel and in bed he doesn't have a sheet. "Call the manager and tell him I wanna sheet!" says the Italian man. The other guy says "Go to the toilet" and the Italian man says, "You no understand I wanna sheet in my bed!" and the other guy says, "You better not shit in the bed you son of a bitch!" The Italian man goes to the check-out corner and the check-out man says "Peace on you" and the Italian man says "PISS ON YOU TOO, YOU SON OF A BEACH! I'M GOING BACK TO ITALY!"

The difficulty of Italian speakers to distinguish between /l/ and /i:/ (piece/piss; sheet/shit) and to articulate the /ɔ:/ sound in the word "fork" gets the Italian man into plenty of trouble in Malta. Similarly, he himself feels insulted by the check-out person who wishes him "Peace on you" which he misinterprets as "piss on you."

Table 29.2. Explanation of phonetic misunderstanding in *The Italian Man who goes to Malta*

WHAT THE ITALIAN MAN SAYS	WHAT THE ITALIAN MAN MEANS	WHAT OTHERS UNDERSTAND
"I want two piece" /PIS/	"I want two pieces..."	"I want to piss"
"I want a fock"	"I want a fork"	"I want a fuck"
"I wanna sheet" /ʃIt/	"I want a sheet"	"I want to shit"

New Debates

New debates around humor and translation involve technology. Starting with instances of humor in audiovisual products such as movies, sitcoms, advertisements etc., these will create more translational difficulties than humor that is simply written or spoken, because the verbal content is likely to be anchored visually or acoustically (Bucaria, 2017). These products are made for an international market, so it is vital for stakeholders to bear the issue of translation in mind in order to guarantee its success. For example, verbal humor on stage and screen may depend on a particular accent or variety of the source language; how can dubbing and subtitling convey variation? Substituting a Brooklyn accent in the source product with a

Sicilian accent in the target product, as often happens in the transfer of comedy from the USA to Italy, may achieve the same comedic effect, but it will radically change intended meaning (Chiaro, 2008b). Another issue regarding screen translation involves censorship. Humor may revolve around salacious subject matter or the use of taboo language. This raises the question of how to deal with such materials in a target culture that may not be open to offensive subject matter (for an in-depth discussion on humor in audiovisual products see (Bucaria, 2017)).

Above all, the Internet is an important player in the production and dissemination of humor. The Internet is also a place where humor can be translated by users themselves rather than professionals. This means that video clips available on YouTube as well as other audiovisuals containing humor (e.g. *Ted Talks*) may be translated and subtitled by anyone and especially by so-called fansubbers. Using computer assisted translation (CAT) tools alone may not yield good results humor-wise. Or, rather, these translations may yield the kind of failed translations discussed earlier.

Finally, new research is pointing towards investigating screen translations from the point of view of viewer reception. A protocol developed to measure audiences' humor responses to translated verbal humor on screen has been tested in several language pairs (e.g. Chiaro, 2007; Bucaria & Chiaro, 2007; Rossato & Chiaro; Amarossi, 2011; Chiaro, 2014). Results show that translation does have an impact on audiences' humor response.

Translation can be seen as a problem-solving activity that, in itself, as a process, is riddled with problems. This chapter has set out to explore translational problems that particularly

apply to humorous texts, which, like poetry, present especially challenging difficulties. These difficulties are due to the extreme exploitation of linguistic features that are often combined with a series of highly specific socio-cultural references. The strategies taken to overcome these hurdles have been examined and, untranslatable as it may seem, we have seen that humor is indeed translated. Where possible, the target humor will resemble the source humor as closely as possible. Clearly, the target text can never be a perfect equivalent. In the worst scenario, the humor will be replaced by a very different instance of humor in the target language. However, only a very unimaginative or lazy translator is likely to give up the challenge and omit the instance of humor altogether.

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ⁱ Much of the rhyming slang in the film was subtitled into Standard English.

ⁱⁱ The brand was dropped in the UK in 1988 to be replaced by M&Ms but was reintroduced in 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Available at: <http://indy100.independent.co.uk/article/17-splendid-translation-fails--x1DZnp0y6g>.