TRANSLATING HUMOR IS A SERIOUS BUSINESS

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By Marina Ilari

We all like to laugh regardless of what language we speak. But what makes us laugh varies tremendously from person to person, language to language, and culture to culture. Humor is dependent upon the use of various aspects of language to achieve its purpose (e.g., puns, regionalisms, wordplay, and cultural references). These devices can make the literal translation of humor a *joke* in itself, not to mention a seemingly impossible challenge for the translator! Often, a phrase that's humorous in one language doesn't work when it's translated into another, which means it will need to be transcreated entirely. Let's explore some of these devices in more detail to see why translating humor is a serious business.

It's Hard to Be Punny: Puns and Wordplay

Puns and wordplay are two of the most common forms of humor. Puns are jokes that make use of words that sound alike or nearly alike but have different meanings. Wordplay is verbal wit based on the meanings and ambiguities of words. And, of course, the way words sound and are written vary from language to language—hence the challenge for the translator.

Consider the joke told to me by my seven-year-old son. "What room does the ghost not have in his house? The 'living room!'" Funny, I thought. And as any translator obsessed with language, I couldn't help but wonder how I would translate that joke into Spanish. Translating it literally would make no sense, as the word "living room" in Spanish doesn't have the double meaning of "room of the house" and "alive" as it does in English. If I had to translate it, I would come up with a completely different joke while trying to preserve something of the original—perhaps the ghost asking a question but with an answer that would be funny in Spanish. An example could be "*¿Por qué el fantasma cruzó la calle? Para llegar al **otro lado**.*" ("Why did the ghost cross the street? To make it to *the **other side**.*") This solution would provoke the same emotional reaction from the reader—hopefully a chuckle.

Cradle Culture

Jokes can be an expression of the social and cultural environment in which they are created. As such, each culture can have its own special sense of humor that might be tied to its history, traditions, values, and beliefs. Oftentimes, this means that only people from that culture would understand a joke or find it funny.

For example, in Argentina we have a specific way of reciting certain jokes, introducing them with the expression "*aro, aro,*" which comes from the language of Mapuche, an Indigenous group inhabiting southern Chile and Argentina. This expression means "with your permission" and connects one joke to the next one—a sort of bridge between a series of jokes. These jokes tend to use the same structure: "Yesterday I passed by your house and you threw something at me." Usually what's being thrown is then reflected upon by some witty comment. For example, "You threw a juice at me. Tang!" This is a play on words between the juice brand Tang (very popular in Argentina in the 1990s) and the sound the juice carton would make if it hit a person's head. I can imagine that someone from a different culture would find this joke confusing or unamusing. One way to adapt it into English would be to use a different wordplay, such as: "Yesterday I was walking by your house and you threw a full block of cheese at me. That wasn't very *mature* was it? *Gouda* thing I wasn't hurt."

As translators, we have the difficult task of deciding how to handle a challenge like the example above. Depending on where the joke is used (e.g., in a nonfiction book versus a movie subtitle), one option would be to use footnotes or insert an explanation of the joke. However, we must be aware that although providing such an explanation could be interesting to the reader, we're essentially sacrificing the humor in the joke. It would also usually be the case that we wouldn't be able to provide an adequate explanation. So, as translators, we must find a way to adapt what's funny from one culture to something that would resonate and be funny in the target culture.

QUICK TIPS
for Translating Humor

WHEN TRANSLATING HUMOR THAT'S TIED TO A VISUAL:
Focus on finding something funny in your target language that includes the visual. Adapt the joke or wordplay to something that includes the imagery in some way, since the viewer won't be able to ignore what they see.

WHEN THERE'S A PUNCHLINE:
Time the punchline correctly so as not to ruin it for the audience. Remember that timing is everything in humor!

WHEN THERE'S A CULTURAL REFERENCE:
Know your target audience and try to find an equivalent in the target culture that will resonate with them.

WHEN THERE'S A PUN OR WORDPLAY:
You might need to transcreate this entirely, so think about something new that could preserve some of the essence of the original.

WHEN THE ORIGINAL JOKE IS BAD:
Think about the author's intention. Are they actually trying to make the audience laugh? Was the bad joke used on purpose to achieve some other comedic effect? Answering these questions will help determine if you should translate it into something funny or produce another "bad joke" in the target language.

Knock Knock, Who's There? Know Your Audience

One of the most important things to consider when translating humorous content is the target audience. For a language such as Spanish that has so many different variants, knowing if you're translating for a specific country or region, or if you need to use a "neutral" Latin American Spanish term, will determine what terminology you can and cannot use. For example, if you encountered a word like "cool" in English, it might be particularly difficult to translate into Spanish. This is because "cool" can be translated in many different ways depending on the context and the target audience (e.g., "*guay*" in Spain, "*chévere*" in Colombia, or "*copado*" in Argentina). If you're translating for a broader audience, you'll need to avoid using regionalisms. This adds an extra layer of challenge to the adaptation.

The age of the target audience will also need to be known, since the approach we take translating content for children is considerably different than translating for an older audience. For example, we wouldn't be able to use inappropriate language or intricate vocabulary.

Is This Thing On? Translating a Bad Joke

Another dilemma is when the joke that needs to be translated is bad (or very bad). Should the translator transcreate it into another bad joke or think up something funnier? How can you be sure you're translating something that will be funny to the target audience? Well, you can't. You can try your best to make someone laugh, but it's not up to you whether or not they think a joke is funny. You can, however, do your due research and try to cater to a specific audience (the more specific, the better) to produce the desired laugh. You can also examine the intention of the author. For example, perhaps the

author was purposely using a joke that's not funny for a reason. It's important for the translator to pick up on that.

The Bigger Picture: When It's Not Just About the Text

Depending on the type of humorous content you're translating, you might be faced with an additional challenge: the audio and visual references tied to it. This is particularly relevant in all forms of audiovisual translation. As a translator specialized in video game localization, I see this consistently: something that's supposed to be funny but also has an image connected to it that can't be ignored.

In this situation, we can't disassociate text from the visual and audio. For example, we can't transcreate a joke such as "Why the long face?" when it's tied to an image of a horse's face. This could actually be translated in a straightforward in Spanish, since we have the same expression ("*¿por qué esa cara larga?*") that has the double meaning of being sad and literally having a face with long features. However, if your target language doesn't have such an expression, you'll need to transcreate something that's funny that can be connected in some way to the image of a sad horse's face.

Pause for Laughter: Timing and Humor

It's widely known that timing is the secret to comedy. Punchlines are especially important when delivering a joke, so translators must be attentive to this. We've all seen this problem countless times in subtitles, when the punchline appears on the screen before the actor delivers it. This can be a letdown for the audience because it's essentially ruining the joke. Translators must be especially sensitive to subtleties in timing. It's not just about what words we're choosing, but also when they are shown or delivered that matters.

Not All Jokes Are Created Equal

The difficulty of translating a joke lies in the fact that humor is an integral part of the culture in which it was created. Perhaps the most difficult jokes to translate are those that rely on puns, wordplay, or cultural factors. Think of jokes like:

· "I meant to look for my missing watch, but I could never find the **time**."

· "I wondered why the baseball was getting bigger. Then it **hit** me."

· "Why does Peter Pan fly all the time? He **Neverlands**."

· "What happened to the guy who sued over his missing luggage?" Answer: "He lost his **case**."

As translators, we have the difficult task, dare I say the responsibility, of making such jokes work for the target audience.

As Mark Twain said, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is really a large matter—it's the difference between lightning and a lightning bug." Finding the right words to preserve humor in the target language is an art form and is a serious business, indeed. ⒶⓉⒶ

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