TOWARDS A HUMOUR TRANSLATION CHECKLIST FOR STUDENTS OF TRANSLATION

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Abstract: *If, as some theories suggest, humour comprehension and production are intuitive and talent-related, the challenges posed to translation students confronting a humorous text are myriad and complex. If translation students or translators cannot comprehend a humorous text, how can they possibly reproduce it? This paper intends to introduce emerging translators to the interdisciplinary field of humour translation and provide them with a prototype of a checklist for the translation of humorous texts. Essential to this task is a brief introduction to the most relevant theory of humour translation: Salvatore Attardo's adaption of the General Theory of Verbal Humour for translation. To this, the author has added four extralinguistic considerations, which account for factors which lie outside both the source and target texts. With this theoretical underpinning, and checklist in hand, students are asked to test the utility of the checklist through sample translations of humorous texts, in this case, cartoons.*

Keywords: translation, humour, General Theory of Verbal Humour, checklist.

Resumen: *Si la comprensión y la producción del humor se hallan en la intuición y el talento, los problemas para los alumnos de traducción a la hora de enfrentarse a un texto humorístico son variados y complejos. ¿Cómo es posible que reproduzcan un texto que no comprenden? Este trabajo tiene como objetivo introducir a futuros traductores en el campo interdisciplinario de la traducción del humor y proporcionarles un prototipo de "checklist". Para ello, es imprescindible acercarnos a la General Theory of Verbal Humour y su adaptación para la traducción de Salvatore Attardo. A esta propuesta, el autor ha añadido cuatro consideraciones extralingüísticas que tienen en cuenta factores ajenos a los textos. Con esta base teórica, y el mencionado "checklist", los alumnos pueden comprobar la utilidad de este último a través de traducciones de tiras humorísticas.*

Palabras clave: traducción, humor, General Theory of Verbal Humour, "checklist"

1. Introduction

For translation students, the challenge of translating a humorous text can prove daunting. If, as some theories suggest, humour comprehension and production are intuitive and talent-related, the challenges posed to translation students confronting a humorous text are myriad and complex. As opposed to the reproduction of humour, the grasp of humour and the understanding of the humorous effect or intention require no theoretical underpinning. Yet, if translation students or translators cannot comprehend a humorous text, how can they possibly reproduce it? This paper intends to introduce emerging translators to the interdisciplinary field of humour translation and provide them with a prototype of a checklist for the translation of humorous texts. Essential to this task is a brief introduction to the most relevant theory of humour translation: Salvatore Attardo's adaptation of the General Theory of Verbal Humour for translation. To this, the author has added four extralinguistic considerations, which account for factors which oftentimes lie outside both the source and target texts. With this theoretical underpinning, and checklist in hand, students are asked to test the utility of the checklist through sample translations of humorous texts, in this case, cartoons.

2. Defining Humour

The most obvious departure point would be to arrive at a working definition of what humour is. Yet perhaps the difficulty of defining humour, the elusiveness of its nature would allow instead for a parenthesis to be placed here to be filled in at a later time. Indeed, J. VANDAELE has noted that, with all humour's complexities, the monumental task of defining it "has driven some desperate scholars (e.g. ESCARPIT 1991) to give up on any attempt at defining humour." (J. VANDAELE 2002:153) And, as the purpose here is to provide translation students with solid building blocks with which to translate and analyze humour, it might prove wise not to get mired down in the conceptualization of a definition.

For translators, again according to J. VANDAELE, the "safest place to break that circle for humour "is when it becomes "tangible (in the form of laughter, for instance.")" (J. VANDAELE 2002:154) His "minimal `single´ operational definition of humour" will serve the purpose here as it requires translators to "return to and account for humour's `causal relations´ : (1) what is it that caused the humour effect and (2) what *further* effects does humour itself cause." (J. VANDAELE 2002:154) To answer the first question, one must interpret the specifics of the feeling of humour perceived, whether it be wordplay, slapstick, etc., as different types of humour elicit different interpretations. The second question can be addressed by looking at *other*, perhaps more subtle responses that may be produced, such as disgust, rejection, goodwill, disappointment, etc.

Establishing these two considerations, then, as the brunt of the focus of the translation of humour, we can set aside the thorny issue of defining humour and
move on to a look at theories regarding humour translation.

3. Theories of Humour

Though there are countless theories of humour, they all basically can be broken down into three sub-sections: 1) Functional theories, 2) Stimulus theories, and 3) Response theories. The functional theories, fascinating and rich in their psychological and physiological applications, certainly warrant further investigation by anyone captivated by humour research. Similarly, response theories, which look into when people will be amused, also offer an interesting perspective of humour theory. Indeed, Robert Latta has claimed that it is our response that defines humour. Within response theory, the idea of superiority arises, and dating back to Plato and Aristotle one can examine that for many researchers, laughter at the expense of others is an essential element of humour. However, for the purposes outlined above, focus here will be placed strictly on Stimulus theories.

The general undertaking of stimulus theories is to try to explain what makes something funny, and surprise and incongruity theories are, at present, those which are receiving the most attention. Surprise theories doubtless add a dimension to the investigation of the stimulus theories, yet as it has been pointed out, our laughing at longstanding comedy routines questions whether surprise is really an essential ingredient to the experience of humour (NILSEN 1990).

Incongruity theories, on the other hand, have generally been accepted as an integral part of humour, though there have been some dissenters and discrepancies to note. Latta, for example, claims that anything that we can resolve, never was incongruous anyway. (Latta, 1998) Another researcher, T. SHULTZ (1972), argues that incongruity by itself is not sufficient for laughter. He found that older children required much more of a surprising resolution to an incongruity than younger children who were prone to laugh at simple incongruity.

Perhaps no incongruity theory has had as significant an impact as Attardo's and Raskin's General Theory of Verbal Humour, which is itself an adaptation of Raskin's Semantic Script Theory of Humour (V. RASKIN 1985). With this theory the authors suggest that jokes may be broken down into six parameters, or as they call them, Knowledge Sources. As it will become an essential aspect of any attempt to translate humour, below then, is Attardo's *brief* comment on each Knowledge Source:

1. LANGUAGE (LA) "Contains all the information necessary for the verbalization of a text. It is responsible for the actual wording of the text and for the placement of the functional elements that constitute it. The concept of paraphrase is essential for understanding the type of variation that this Knowledge Resource accounts for: as any sentence can be recast in a different wording (that is, using synonyms, other syntactic constructions, etc.) any joke can be worded in a (very large) number of ways without changes in its semantic content."

2. NARRATIVE STRATEGY (NS) "…Accounts for the fact that any joke has to be cast in some form of narrative organization, either as a simple narrative, as a dialogue (question and answer), as a (pseudo) riddle, as an inside conversation, etc.

3. TARGET (TA) "The target parameter selects who is the `butt´ of the joke. The information in this Knowledge Resource contains the names of groups or individuals with (humorous) stereotypes attached to each. Jokes that are not aggressive (i.e., that do not ridicule someone or something) have an empty value for this parameter. Alternatively, one can think of this as an optional parameter. Some research has been done in this area, which has shown that the original definition of target group or individual needs to be broadened by the inclusion of *ideological targets* (KARMAN 1998), i.e. groups or institutions that do not have a clear constituency, but may nevertheless be made the subject of ridicule (examples include `marriage´, `romantic love´, `the establishment´, etc.)"

4. SITUATION (SI) "Any joke must be `about something´ (changing a light bulb, crossing the road, playing golf, etc.) The situation of a joke can be thought of as the `props´ of the joke: the objects, participants, instruments, activities, etc. Needless to say, the props of the joke will generally come from the scripts activated in the text. Any joke must have some situation, although some jokes will rely more on it, while others will almost entirely ignore it."

5. LOGICAL MECHANISM (LM) "The Logical Mechanism is by far the most problematic parameter. " In Attardo (1997), I argue that the Logical Mechanism embodies the resolution of the incongruity in the incongruity-resolution model, familiar from psychology. A consequence of that claim is that, since resolution is optional in humour (as in nonsense and absurd humour) it follows that that Logical Mechanism Knowledge Resource would also be optional."

6. SCRIPT OPPOSITION (SO) "This parameter deals with the script opposition/overlapping requirement presented in Raskin's Semantic Script Theory of Humour. Its main hypothesis is as follows:
A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying-text if both of the (following) conditions are satisfied:
-the text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
-the two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite: "The two scripts with which some text is compatible are said to overlap fully or in part in this text" (RASKIN 1985:99).
"The overlapping of two scripts is not necessarily a cause of humour *per se*. Ambiguous, metaphorical, figurative, allegorical, mythical, allusive and obscure texts, for example, present overlapping scripts, but they are not necessarily (if at all) funny." (S. ATTARDO 2002: 176-183)
    Perhaps the most difficult and abstract of all the Knowledge Resources, Script Oppositon is also, to be sure, crucial in that it is central to any   attempt at reproducing humour. Attardo continues by explaining that "Any humorous text will present a Script Opposition; the specifics of its narrative organization, its social and historical instantiation, etc., will vary according to the place and time of its production. It should be also stressed that each culture, and within it each individual, will have a certain number of scripts that are not available for humour (ie., about which it is inappropriate to joke). For example, medieval culture found it perfectly acceptable to laugh at   physical handicaps, while this is no longer acceptable in some modern (sub)cultures. So obviously any attempt to generate humour using one of the scripts not

available for humour will fail, or be marked (this is a possible explanation of gallows humour):" (S. ATTARDO Translation and Humour: 182)

4. Theories of Humour Translation

With the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GTVH), the first tools for analyzing humour translation are readily at hand. However, turning his attention to translation, Attardo, in his article "Translation and Humour. An Approach Based on the General Theory of Verbal Humour" (GTVH), provides useful clues as to how the Knowledge Resources might be used in decoding and later recoding humour. Below are some of his comments regarding translation and the Knowledge Resources:

1. LANGUAGE (LA): "..the Knowledge Resource most directly tied to the commonsensical notion of literal translation" (S. ATTARDO 2002: 185).

"…the General Theory of Verbal Humour *already incorporates a simple theory of humour translation*, if we limit translation to simple meaning correspondence: keep all Knowledge Resources (except Language) the same. So the simplest approach to translation is: substitute Language in TL for Language in SL" (S. ATTARDO 2002: 187).

2. NARRATIVE STRATEGY (NS) "There is little need to change the Narrative Strategy of a joke, since the ways in which the narrative is organized are language-independent".

If the format is unknown in other languages, "…the translator is left with the task of reproducing the joke using a different Narrative Strategy."

3. TARGET (TA) As ethnic and national groups invariably select different groups as the target of their humour, translation "can be done by substituting the appropriate group in the target culture."

4. SITUATION (SI) "If a translator should find him/her/itself in a situation in which the Situation is either non-existent in the TL or else unavailable for humour, a good solution is simply to replace the offending Situatio with another one, while respecting all other Knowledge Resources."

5. LOGICAL MECHANISM (LM) "There is little reason to believe that Logical Mechanisms will not always be readily translatable from SL to TL, with the all-important exception of the Cratylistic `same sound equals same meaning´ Logical Mechanism of puns."

"The reason for the ease of translatability is that non-verbal Logical Mechanisms involve fairly abstract logico-deductive processes which are obviously language-dependent and can be freely translated from one language to the other."

6. SCRIPT OPPOSITON (SO) "If there is a discrete cut-off line in the gradient of joke similarity, I believe that it will be found here. In other words, two jokes that differ by Script Opposition are, in all likelihood, *different* jokes.

"Therefore, it follows that the translator should refrain, as far as possible, from changing the Script Opposition. In what cases should the translator resort to changing Script Oppositions? Obviously, when the same Script Opposition is unavailable in the TL, since if the Script Opposition is available for humour, there is no reason not to use it ." (Attardo: Translation and Humour: 184-189).

5. Towards a humour translation checklist

Impatient to actually analyze and translate humorous texts, translation students might well think that, with Attardo's adaptation of the GTVH for translating what might be considered the "internal" elements, they have sufficient resources to get down to work, and indeed they just

might. However, just as a pilot could probably fly a plane *intuitively*, yet ensures herself of readiness by checking and rechecking all available data and instrumentation, students and translators alike would no doubt be helped by reviewing *all* of the essential available data involved in the translation. If, according to Jeroen, the "distance between the sender and receiver is not only material in nature, but often also cultural, social, institutional, attitudinal, etc.," and is "..hindered by a number of factors," it would behoove the translator to properly account for those factors and unhinder himself before getting down to work.

So what then are some *other* factors; indeed, just what should be included in any checklist that aims at helping to analyze and translate humorous texts? Here again, the analogy of the pilot might prove useful. Just as the pilot must check for external factors such as intemperate weather conditions, runway waiting time, etc., translators must take into account external, or extratextual and extralinguistic factors. Some of the most obvious factors listed below, it may be noted, arise directly from and perhaps overlap with the elements covered in Attardo's GTVH adaptation. Others, it may be argued, will infrequently be a consideration in the analysis or translation of a humorous text. Yet as the objective here is to provide the *beginnings* of a checklist, it might prove useful to include a broad sampling of items. Some "external" factors to be taken into consideration are:

▪ Time Frame Considerations (TFC) – If the Source Text contains references to events that are very recent (ie. satirical news programs or cartoons), the question arises as to whether the receiver in the Target culture will be aware of that information as a *real* event, news or otherwise, and thus be sufficiently prepared to grasp the humorous intention of the text.

▪ Social-class and Educational Considerations (SEC) – In many jokes and satirical texts there is, as Attardo points out, a Target. On a larger scale too,
the author of the text has a *target audience* in mind. A joke about Freudian psychology might be said to have a limited target audience, and one which would necessarily require some educational underpinning to understand the humour. A joke about the internet might find a wide target audience in a technologically advanced culture, and a very limited audience in a developing culture.

▪ Cultural Awareness Decisions (CAD) – Attardo makes reference to this in at perhaps all but the Language Knowledge Resources, but it bears repeating. If all other elements are readily found in the Target Culture, only the language will be required to change. It might be added, however, that at times this becomes a judgement call for the translator. A translator working from a text from a Spanish publication may decide, for example, *not* to change a humorous reference about "siestas" for an American publication, after reaching the conclusion that although siestas are not a mainstay of American life, most are *aware* of what a siesta is and would understand its connotation in the text.

▪ Publication Background Information (PBI) – As with serious texts, the ideological, political and editorial positions of media companies will certainly play a factor in the choice of the text to be translated, and may well influence the type of translation it requests from the translator. It might be interesting, then, to take a look at the publications involved to see whether any editorial influence has played a role in the outcome of the translation.

The next logical step is to combine all of the essential factors mentioned above to create the prototype of a checklist for analyzing translated humour. No doubt, future contributions in humour translation will add more insight and perhaps more elements to be included, however, at present the checklist below should prove to be a sound beginning for translation students.

6. Humour Translation Checklist

Item to be translated:

_____

External Factors:

▪ Time Frame Considerations (TFC) _____

▪ Social-class and Educational Considerations (SEC) _____

▪ Cultural Awareness Decisions (CAD) _____

▪ Publication Background Information (PBI) _____

Internal Factors:

▪ Language (LA) _____

▪ Narrative Strategy (NS) _____

▪ Target (TA) _____

▪ Situation (SI) _____

▪ Logical Mechanism (LM) _____

▪ Script Oppositon (SO) _____

Translation:

_____

7. Using the Checklist-Comics

Checklist in hand, translations students should be ready to analyze and even attempt to translate any humorous text. Humour in comics can prove a good point of departure as all essential elements are normally contained in a simple format. However, as Michaela Schnetzer has pointed out in her article *Problems in the Translation of Comics and Cartoons*, "translation of comics involves various kinds of problems, many of which are of a cultural nature and may apply only to specific language pairs. Other problems, on the other hand, are of a more linguistic or technical nature and apply to most comics translations, irrespective of the source and target languages. " (M. SCHNETZER:1) Technical issues such as limited space in "thought balloons and narrative boxes, as well as in the form of sound effects (onomotopoeias) and verbal inscriptions.." (M. SCHNETZER:10) are nearly exclusive to comics and cartoons, though the example chose below does not pose such a problem. Here then is an example of how one might use the humour checklist to analyze and if need be, actually translate a humorous text, in this case, a comic by Spanish satirist Andrés Rábago, whose work is found in the daily Spanish newspaper EL PAIS:

Item:

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External Factors:

▪ Time Frame Considerations **(TFC)** – *none, humour is perhaps "seasonal", regarding the end of Summer and the return to the workplace*

▪ Social-class and Educational Considerations **(SEC)** – *not really pertinent, as the intended humour would find a wide audience among anyone who dreads returning to work after a long holiday*

▪ Cultural Awareness Decisions **(CAD)** – *perhaps difficulties might arise in less developed countries where workers are afforded less vacation time, thus do not have the experience of returning to work after vacation, and even in highly developed cultures like Japan and the United States where a "long" absence from the workplace is uncommon*

▪ Publication Background Information **(PBI)** – *in this case, the Target publication is unknown; the Source publication, EL PAIS, is considered a liberal leaning newspaper in Spain; however, any influence on the translation would be severely limited as the content is quite straightforward*

Internal Factors:

▪ Language **(LA)** - *no major obstacles; perhaps only matching the tone in "Tus muertos" would pose any difficulty*

▪ Narrative Strategy **(NS)** – *generally clear and simple; matches readily found in Target Culture*

▪ Target **(TA)** - *no obvious target*

▪ Situation **(SI)** - *situation existent in TL*

▪ Logical Mechanism **(LM)** - *no Cratylistic use*

▪ Script Oppositon **(SO)** - *Script Opposition available in TL*

Translation:

Long Time No See!   Screw You!!
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8. Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, there really is no substitute for intuition; and indeed intuition itself is oftentimes honed over a long period of time. As a starting point, then, translation students will need to meld their own intuitive capabilities of (re) producing humour with tools which will help them identify the essential elements in any humorous text. This proposal has established the beginnings of one such set of tools, a checklist of "internal" and "external" factors which should help in analyzing and translating the essential elements of a text. Humour Translation is a relatively young discipline, yet important research is being done, and students interested in this field would do well to examine work being done by scholars such as Jeroen Vandaele, Dirk Delabastita, Victor Raskin, Salvatore Attardo, Carmen Valero, Charles Gruner, among others, to get a fuller survey of many of the areas of interest and to broaden their understanding of humour and translation studies.

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