

Linguistic Joke Translation Strategies and Methods

Stratégies et méthodes de traduction des blagues linguistiques

Strategii și metode în traducerea glumelor lingvistice

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Abstract:

The purpose of this research is to examine which strategies and methods are used by translators when dealing with the transferring of linguistic jokes from one language into another. We study examples represented in English and Russian linguistic joke traditions. In order to support such an approach a corpus of more than one thousand English and Russian linguistic jokes has been compiled. The study is also intended to identify the most problematic cases of linguistic jokes translation and the influence of the pun creating mechanism nature on the translation strategies and methods.

Résumé

Le but de cette recherche est d'étudier les stratégies et les méthodes utilisées par les traducteurs des blagues linguistiques. On étudie les exemples présentées dans les traditions des blagues linguistiques anglaises et russes. Pour supporter l'étude plus qu'un mille blagues anglaises et russes ont été analysées. La recherche est aussi consacrée aux cas problématiques de traduction des blagues linguistiques, aux mécanismes de création des blagues linguistiques et leurs influences sur la qualité de traduction.

Rezumat

Scopul acestei cercetări este de a examina strategiile și metodele care sunt folosite de traducători, atunci când se ocupă cu transferul de glume lingvistice dintr-o limbă în alta. Noi studiem exemple reprezentate în tradiția glumelor lingvistice în limba engleză și rusă. În scopul de-a susține o astfel de abordare a fost alcătuit un dicționar cu peste o mie de glume lingvistice în limba engleză și rusă. Studiul este, de asemenea, destinat să identifice cazurile cele mai problematice în traducerea glumelor lingvistice și de asemenea influența jocului de cuvinte privind strategiile și metodele de traducere.

Keywords: joke, pun, translation, translation strategy, translation method

Mots clé: blague, jeu de mots, traduction, stratégie de traduction, méthode de traduction

Cuvinte cheie: traducere, joc de cuvinte, traducere, strategie în traducere, metodă de traducere

Introduction

Linguistic jokes (jokes based on pun/wordplay) are very popular in the contemporary society. This fact may be caused by the wide spread occurrence of pun in different areas (advertisements, newspaper title entries etc.) Linguistic jokes are often used in multicultural communication and need to be translated. Translation of linguistic jokes is one of the most interesting moments of artistic translation.

A structural and typological dissimilarity of source and target language increases the untranslatability of linguistic jokes, but this article asserts that almost all verbally expressed humour is translatable.

We distinguish two possible ways of transferring of linguistic jokes from one language into another: 1) to try to translate them or 2) to find the equivalent represented in the culture.

Often the second way is considered as more appropriate, as in the case with other preemies such as idioms and proverbs. But this is not as easy as to translate idioms which are represented in dictionaries, because when dealing with jokes the translator may lean only on his own knowledge of jokes represented in different cultures.

Similar jokes often appear in different culture joke traditions. This fact may be caused by the development of the Internet where jokes become international after being translated.

Big number of translated jokes existing in Russian tradition is caused by the rapid development of joke publishing in 1990th, which led to the lack of jokes. Publishers solved this problem by getting new jokes from foreign editions.

Then the translated jokes were adapted to the new cultural features, new genre specifics and new language norms. They were also adapted to the new stereotypical situations, national mentality, society values. Then these texts started to function in the new culture as original texts. The relationship between culture and translation has taken extremely complex forms in contemporary Translation Studies [1].

In this article similar Russian and English jokes that are supposed to be translations are compared in order to examine which methods are usually used when dealing with the transferring of linguistic jokes from one language into another. The choice of the best translation method has always been the most problematic task for translators.

Corpus and Methodology

In order to support such an approach a corpus of more than one thousand Russian and English linguistic jokes has been compiled. Then pairs of similar linguistic jokes were distinguished among them.

A comparative analysis of similar jokes based on linguistic mechanisms represented in Russian and English traditions is carried out in this article.

Results

Linguistic jokes – jokes based on linguistic mechanisms can be classified according to the semiotics principles, which are often divided into three branches: 1) Semantics: Relation between signs and the things to which they refer; their *denote*, or meaning; 2) Syntactics: Relations among signs in formal structures; 3) Pragmatics: Relation between signs and the effects they have on the people who use them.

Thus, we classify the linguistic jokes according the nature of mechanism that causes their comic effect into semantic, syntactic and pragmatic jokes.

1. The most difficult linguistic jokes to translate are the jokes based on *semantic* mechanisms such as polysemy, paronymy, homonymy, metaphors, idioms etc.

Literal translation or “**word for word translation**” (transferring spoken language (SL) grammar and word order as well as the primary meanings of all SL words) followed by a **commentary** is used for the most difficult cases. For example:

The Russian version:

“ТутикеттуДаблин!” – “Куда, блин?” – “ТуДаблин!”

The English version:

*Irishman: I need two tickets to **Dublin**.*

*Russian: **Куда, блин?***

Irishman: To Dublin.

Commentary:

The Irishman's first utterance sounds like Russian for "to there, damn it" (with "to Dublin" being interpreted as "tudablyn"). The Russian responds, "Where, damn it?" The Irishman repeats "Туда, блин!", sounding in Russian as if he is annoyed: "There, damn it!"

Renditions (translation by using explanation of something that is not immediately obvious) are also used when the joke is “untranslatable”. The following one is based on the paronymy of words *classes, lasses and asses*:

Once William Thomson (Lord Kelvin) had to cancel a lecture and wrote on the blackboard: "Professor Thomson will not meet his classes today". The students decided to play a trick on the professor and erased the letter "c" in the word "classes". Next day, when Thomson saw the inscription, he did not become confused, and, having erased one more letter in the same word, left the classroom.

This joke was represented in the Russian joke edition in the following version:

«Томсон (лорд Кельвин) однажды был вынужден отменить свою лекцию и написал на доске: “Professor Tomson will not meet his classes today” (Профессор Томсон не сможет встретиться сегодня со своими учениками). Студенты решили подшутить над профессором и стерли букву “с” в слове classes. На следующий день, увидев надпись, Томсон не растерялся, а, стерев еще одну букву в том же слове, ушел (classes – классы, lasses – любовницы, asses – ослы)» [2].

Foreign inclusions become popular nowadays. This is caused by the fact that most of people have some basic learning in foreign languages. The pun represented in the following joke was not translated:

*Two German tourists went to Paris, France, and they decided to speak English because their French wasn't good enough and talking German would not make them very popular. So they went to a bar and called the waiter. “Two martinis, please,” said the first in perfect English. “Certainly sir,” the waiter replied, “Would you like **dry** martinis?” And then the other bellowed: “**Nein, zwei!**”*

ДванемцаприехаливПариж. Но поскольку они были большими снобами, то решили выдать себя за англичан. Заходят в кафе на Елисейских полях и заказывают гарсону:

- *Twomartinis, please!*

- *Dry?* – уточняет гарсон.

А один из немцев отвечает:

- *Nein! Zwei!*

This joke is based on the interlinguisticparonymy of English adjective *dry* and German numeral *drey*.

These ways of translation don't let to preserve the jokes pragmatics, its communicative effect. To preserve the comic effect translators use adaptations, generalizations and equivalence.

Adaptation (the replacement of a situation of the spoken language (SL) by an analogous situation of the translated language (TL) when communicative situations are difficult to understand in the culture of TL, or when the situation of the SL does not exist in the TL - a cultural gap - and therefore another equivalent situation has to be created). This method is also used to replace a socio-cultural reality from the SL with a reality specific to the target culture in order to accommodate for the expectations of the target audience is used to keep the joke and its comic effect:

- *What is your favorite music group?*

- *I love U2!*

- *I love you too, but what is your favorite music group?*

- *Какая у тебя любимая музыкальная группа?*

- *Я люблю «Чай вдвоём».*

- *Я тоже люблю чай вдвоем, но какая у тебя любимая группа?*

This joke is based on the paronymy of the name of Irish rock band from Dublin *U2* (by the name of the Lockheed U-2, a single-engine, very high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft operated by the United States Air Force) and expression *you too*. But in the Russian version the preference is given to the name of the well-known Russian group “*Чай вдвоем*” (tea together). The use of the name *U2* in the Russian version would not be appropriate. The joke mostly benefit from such adaptations. If the adaptation is not possible it would be difficult to popularize the joke in the new culture.

Adaptation usually occurs when something specific to one language culture is expressed in a totally different way that is familiar or appropriate to another language culture. It involves changing the cultural reference when a situation in the source culture does not exist or not very common in the target culture, as it was made in the previous example.

Generalization – the replacement of the word with a more narrow value in a word with a broader meaning is represented in the following joke based on polysemantic mechanism:

*Passenger: Guard! **How long** will the next train be?*

Guard: About six carriages, sir.

*Пассажир: Проводник! **Какой** будет следующий поезд?*

Проводник: Вагонов шесть, сэр.

English joke is based on the polysemy of the word *long*: 1) measuring a great distance from end to end; 2) lasting or taking a great amount of time. The Russian version uses the pronoun *какой* (*what*) which has a broad meaning.

Equivalence (the substitution of a SL statement by a TL statement which accounts for the same situation, even though there is no formal or semantic correspondence) is usually used when the joke is based on idioms:

- *Does the animal trainer in the circus get much money?*

- *He surely does. He gets the **lion's share** of the money.*

- *Много ли денег получает дрессировщик в цирке?*

- *Конечно! Он получает **львиную долю**.*

Such cases rarely appear in real translation practice, most of jokes based on idioms will be difficult to translate.

Idioms are like metaphors; their meaning is hidden, and the translator needs to know what idea the whole idiom carries because dissecting it into words and trying to work out their meaning will not give you any clue.

The translator uses the same strategy for the metaphors if similar metaphors could exist in compared languages:

- *Don't you know drinking is **a slow death**?*

- *So who's in a hurry?*

- *Знаете ли вы, что курение – **медленная смерть**?*

- *А мы и не торопимся...*

2. Most of jokes based on **syntactic** mechanisms can be easily translated from one language to another. The following jokes are based on zeugmas (a figure of speech in which a word applies to two others in different senses or to two others of which it semantically suits only one) were easily translated:

*Never let a **fool kiss you**, or a **kiss fool you**.*

*Никогда не позволяйте **дураку целовать себя**, иначе **поцелуй вас одурчит**.*

Sometimes the translator uses **transpositions** and **grammatical agreements** in order to follow the language norms.

3. The easiest linguistic jokes to translate are the jokes based on pragmatic mechanisms:

How much time will it take us to fly from London to New York?

– **Just a minute...**

– *Thank you.*

Чукча спрашивает в кассе Аэрофлота:

– *Самолёт до Чукотки сколько летит?*

– **Минуточку...**

– *Спасибо.*

The expression *just a minute/ минуточку* was interpreted by the joke character not as a strategic answer but as informative answer.

The same strategy is used in the following joke:

- *Name two pronouns?*

- *Who? Me?*

- *Назовите два местоимения.*

- *Кто? Я?*

The questions *Who? Me?/Кто? Я?* Are supposed to be accepted as answers.

Conclusions

To sum up, it can be pointed out that the method of translating linguistic jokes is caused by the mechanisms of creating comic effect.

Jokes with pragmatic mechanism can be successfully translated without any transformations.

Most of syntactic mechanisms based jokes are also easy to translate in case when the mechanism is common for both languages. Sometimes the translator may use transpositions and grammatical agreements in order to follow the language norms.

It is not always easy to translate the jokes with semantic mechanism. For the most difficult cases the translator may use literal translation with commentaries, foreign inclusions, or renditions without preserving the comic effect.

Adaptation, generalization and equivalence are usually used in order to keep the comic effect. Jokes based on idioms, metaphorical and metonymic mechanisms can be easily translated if there are the same semantic structures in two languages. Polysemantic jokes can be translated when played up meanings are represented in both languages.

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