

## Translating Linguistic Jokes for Dubbing

### La traduction des blagues linguistiques pour doublages de films

### Traducerea glumelor lingvistice pentru dublaj

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#### Abstract

*This study has attempted to establish the possible ways of translating linguistic jokes when dubbing. The study is also intended to identify the most problematic cases of screen translation and the factors which cause these problems. In order to support such an approach a corpus of 7 American and British films has been compiled, including as many as 16 as their various dubbing translations into Russian. In the films, almost 12 instances of original linguistic jokes have been identified.*

#### Résumé

*Dans cette étude, l'on établit les modes possibles de traduction des blagues linguistiques au cours des doublages de films. L'on y étudie les cas problématiques de traduction et certains facteurs qui conditionnent les problèmes. Pour étayer l'étude, sept films américains et britanniques, contenant seize de leurs traductions en russe, ont été analysés. Douze exemples de blagues linguistiques ont été identifiés.*

#### Rezumat

*În acest studiu se încearcă stabilirea unor posibile moduri de traducere a glumelor lingvistice în cursul dublajului de film. De asemenea, studiul dorește să identifice cazuri problematice ale subtitrării, precum și factorii care cauzează aceste probleme. În sprijinul acestei abordări, au fost analizate 7 filme americane și britanice, conținând un număr de câte 16 variante de traducere în limba rusă. În aceste filme au fost identificate 12 exemple de glume lingvistice originale.*

**Key words:** *Screen translation, dubbing, linguistic joke, pun.*

**Mots-clés:** *Traduction des films, doublage, blague linguistique, jeu de mots.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *traducere de film, dublaj, glumă lingvistică, joc de cuvinte.*

#### Introduction

Wide use of linguistic jokes (jokes based on pun/wordplay) in folklore, literature, cinema, and advertisements, and agnosticism of researchers toward the problem of puns translation, which are often considered as untranslatable, provokes the necessity of developing translations strategies for the phenomenon of linguistic joke.

Translation of humorous and ironical texts is one of the most interesting moments of artistic translation.

Luthe is one of those who think that there can never be a perfect translation of anything, but

in connection with linguistic humour he explains the impossibility of a perfect translation as being due to “linguistic as well as historical-cultural difference” (Luthe 1995: 64). Fitt declares that “[a] joke can be a nuisance”, particularly when needs to be translated (Fitt 1959: 39), Boyer refers to humour as an “obstacle intercultural” (Boyer 2001: from the title).

Translator plays roles of the recipient of the source text and the sender of the translated text by turns, that is why he needs abilities first to decipher, decode the pun and then to reproduce it using means of the other language.

Only very talented translators are skillful enough to keep the joke and its comic effect, caused by wordplay.

In most of cases linguistic jokes can be omitted or commented. But comments are not so much interesting as search of an appropriate variant of translation is.

There are some special cases when linguistic jokes cannot be omitted or commented, and one of them is screen translation: subtitling or dubbing. Linguistic jokes used in films have strong pragmatics, they have some important functions in films. Jokes help to develop the dialogue, to alleviate tension in conversation, to characterize the characters, to show awareness discrepancy of characters, to evoke audience response (laughter), to ridicule serious objects and events etc.

In Russian film translating tradition dubbing is more popular than subtitling, and often perception of the whole product depends on the quality of translation and audio dubbing.

Needless to say that, choosing a translation strategy involves a decision-making process when various factors mentioned throughout the study come into play.

Screen translation is connected with the most problematic aspects of language. Translator should mention many different extra linguistic and technical details, which are not important for literature translators. Screen translator have to take into consideration different options such as length of cues, their connection with pictures, intonation must correspond to gestures and facial expressions etc. The problem of screen translation is aggravated by the requirement of lip synchronization in dubbing.

According to Vandaele, the appreciation of humor may vary individually and so does the appreciation of a well or poorly translated text (Vandaele 2002: 150).

The translator often must choose what to save when translating linguistic jokes.

This study has attempted to establish the possible ways and identify the problematic cases of translating linguistic jokes for dubbing, and factors that influence the translator’s choice.

### **Corpus and Methodology**

This research is based on linguistic jokes represented in contemporary American and British films and their Russian versions. In order to support such an approach a corpus of 7 American and British films has been compiled, including as many as 16 as their various dubbing translations into Russian, made by different film companies and television channels.

Thus, the following films have been considered:

*“Jurassic Park” (1993) Universal Pictures*

*“Pulp fiction” (1994) Miramax Films*

*“Ransom” (1996) Touchstones Pictures*

*“The Boondock Saints” (1999) Indican Pictures*

*“Undertow” (2004) MGM*

*“Guess who” (2005) 20th Century Fox and Columbia Pictures*

*“The break-up” (2006) Universal Pictures*

In the films, almost 12 instances of original linguistic jokes have been identified.

For results description we cite examples of linguistic jokes represented in the film *“Guess who” (2005) 20th Century Fox and Columbia Pictures* and their more and less successful screen translation versions in Russian language.

## Results

In the course of research we have established several possible ways of translation linguistic jokes for dubbing, which depend on various factors.

The following example represents the case when the original joke with linguistic mechanism is changed in Russian language version by another joke with linguistic mechanism:

1. *-Why don't black people like country music?*

*-Why?*

*- Cause every time they say «hoe-down», they think someone shot their sister.*

The comic effect of the original joke is based on the paronymy of the word *hoedown* (a lively folk dance) and phrase *whore* (a prostitute or promiscuous woman) *down* (an adverb used as a command to a person or animal).

This joke was replaced in the Russian version by the following one:

*Почему черные не любят анекдоты про ведьм? (Why don't black men like jokes about witches?)*

*Потому что, услышав про ведьм, они вспоминают о своих сестрах. (Because when they hear about witches, they remember about their sisters.)*

Russian joke is based on the metaphorically polysemantic mechanism. The word *ведьма* (*witch*) has two meanings in Russian: 1) a woman thought to have evil magic powers, popularly depicted as wearing a black cloak and pointed hat, and flying on a broomstick; 2) an evil, cruel and ugly woman.

The only common thing in these two jokes are the key words *black, sister* (derided objects). The context represents the situation of telling “black jokes”, and this is the main factor that causes the translator’s choice. But in this case the translator goes beyond the scope of “translation”.

The following example of translation represents the case when the original linguistic joke was changed in one of the Russian versions by another non-linguistic joke (joke without linguistic mechanism):

2. *So, what do you call...one black man being chased by 300 white men?*

*-What?*

*-The PGA Tour.*

*- I get it. Tiger Woods. There it is.*

*Что обычно говорят черному, одетому в костюм тройка? (What do people usually say to a black man dressed in business suit?)*

*Что? (What?)*

*Подсудимый, встать, суд идет. (Defendant, rise for the court).*

Here the translator goes beyond the scope of the “translation” keeping just a key word *black* (referent, deriding object) as in the previous example.

In the other version of dubbing this film we found more appropriate translation version, where the joke and the pun were kept (see ex. 3). In the above mentioned case the translator’s choice might be caused by the attempt to make the joke clear to the Russian audience, which doesn’t have much awareness about famous golfer *Tiger Woods* (*U.S. golfer, who has won several championships, including the Masters (1997, 2001, 2002), the PGA (1999, 2000), the U.S. Open (2000, 2002), and the British Open (2000).*

The most successful translations appear when the translator tries to keep the joke and the pun.

The most important aspects of pun are the playing element and the mechanism of creating pun.

In the following examples the translator keeps the linguistic mechanism of creating the comic effect of the joke but changes the element:

3. *So, what do you call...one black man being chased by 300 white men?*

*What?*

*The PGA Tour.*

*I get it. Tiger Woods. There it is.*

*Итак, как назвать то... когда 300 белых пытаются догнать одного черного? (So, what do you call...when 300 white men are trying to catch up one black man?)*

*Как? (What?)*

*Турнир по гольфу. (The golf tournament.)*

*Это хорошо! (That's good). Верно, Тайгер Вудс. (That's right, Tiger Woods.)*

These two jokes have the same linguistic mechanism - polysemy, but different elements. The English joke contain the verb *chase*; the Russian one – the verb *догнать* (*catch up*). Both verbs realize their literal and figurative senses at the same time.

Sometimes the translator has to change both the linguistic mechanism and the element as it was made in the following example:

4. *What do you call 100 black men...buried in the ground up to their neck?*

*-What?*

*-Afro-Turf.*

This joke is based on the word building of two components *afro* (relating to Africa and *turf* (informal) an area regarded as someone's personal territory).

In the Russian version we have another linguistic mechanism and another element, but we can say that this is a successful translation, because the joke, the pun, and pragmatics are kept.

*-Что получится, если взять сотню черных и закопать их по шею в землю? (What will happen if a hundred of blacks will be buried down up to their neck?)*

*-Что? (What ?)*

*-Чернозем. (Chernozem/ black earth.)*

The comic effect of this joke is based on the use of the same root usage in words *черный* (*chërn-yĭ* 'black') and *чернозем* (*chern-ozem* 'a fertile black soil rich in humus, with a lighter lime-rich layer beneath').

In the same film we found one more linguistic joke which was translated be keeping both the linguistic mechanism and the element.

5. *-How do we know that Adam and Eve weren't black?*

*-How?*

*-You ever try to take a rib away from a black man?*

*- Откуда мы знаем, что Адам и Ева не были черными. (How do we know that Adam and Eve were black?)*

*- Откуда? (How?)*

*- Вы пробовали отобрать у негра ребрышко? (Have you ever tried to take away a rib from a black man?)*

Here we deal with polysemantic word *rib*: 1) each of a series of slender curved bones articulated in pairs to the spine (twelve pairs in humans), protecting the thoracic cavity and its organs (in Russian *ребро*); 2) a rib of an animal with meat adhering to it used as food; a joint or cut from the ribs of an animal (in Russian *ребрышко* derivative from *ребро*). English and Russian words are cognate words, which are usually easy to translate.

The following example also represents the successful translation example, when both linguistic mechanism and element are kept in the Russian version:

*What are three things that a black man can't get?*

*A black eye, a fat lip, and a job.*

*Чего ни у какого черного не будет никогда в жизни? (What a black man will never get in his life?)*

*Распухшей губы, синяка под глазом и работы. (A fat lip, a black eye, and a job.)*

It is well known that most of syntactic figures, which are common for both languages, for example zeugma represented in the abovementioned texts, can be successfully translated. The changing of elements is caused by the necessity of lip synchronization when dubbing.

### **Conclusive remarks**

In conclusion we can say that not all the cases of jokes translation are successful when dubbing.

In some cases the translator goes beyond the scope of the “translation” (keeping just a key word/s, which usually name derided objects), using other forms of representing the text. The most successful variants of translation appear when the translator tries to keep the joke and the pun in it. When keeping the pun the translator can keep its linguistic mechanism or/and linguistic element.

Jokes based on homonymy and paronymy are the most difficult to translate, while jokes with polysemantic, word building mechanisms, and syntactic mechanisms can be successfully translated.

Finally, the choice of a translation strategy depends on the necessity of lip synchronization, keeping the joke pragmatics, and the key word/s (deriding object/s), also the translator should take into account the specificity of linguistic systems (cognate words, standard linguistic means).

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