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The Sound of Humor: Linguistic and Semantic Constraints in the Translation of Phonological Jokes*

1. Introduction

Combining humor research and translation studies, this brief study opens a debate on the analysis of a type of joke that has as yet not been studied in depth. It is meant as an introductory overview of the research that we are currently carrying out on this subject. Although there is vast literature dealing with the translation of humor, it is interesting to note that not much research has been done on the fact that sound can function as a semantic unit that constricts the translation process itself.¹

We have found that the kind of joke that is the subject of our inquiry exists across multiple languages and cultures. To date, through interviews with native speakers in direct contact with their respective cultures, we have collected as many as 80 such jokes in 15 different languages.² This article presents several samples that serve to illustrate the widespread nature of this verbal phenomenon. In essence, these jokes are formed by

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¹ On a related topic, Don Nilsen writes on the translation of humor and coins “the term ‘homonoid’ to describe words which are almost homonyms, but not quite, especially when these ‘homonyms’ occur in different languages” (1989: 113). On the other hand, Delia Chiaro characterizes as “bilingual puns” sounds that represent “anglicized versions of the ‘foreign’ sound” (1996: 39). Anne-Marie Laurian also notes the interrelationship between humor and phonetics and describes this phenomenon as “the most difficult to translate” (1992: 114).

² These languages are: Danish, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Macedonian, Polish, Portuguese, Serbian, Spanish, Swedish and Turkish.

using the words or phonemes of one's own language to imitate and parody the sounds of another language. Let us consider the following example:

- (1) *What do you call an overweight person in Chinese?*
Wei Wan Tan

The first sequence in jokes of this type is always an interrogative that follows one of these patterns: "What do you call X in Y?" "How do you say X in Y?" or "What is the name of X from country Z?" X stands for the word or phrase that the speaker purports to translate into Y, the language parodied. In the example above X corresponds to "overweight person," whereas Y identifies the Chinese language. The answer is constructed with a series of semantic units representing sounds identifiable as characteristic of language Y. However, in spite of appearing to be genuinely Chinese, these sounds only have meaning in the language of the joke, in this case, English. The Anglophone listener readily recognizes that the expression *Wei Wan Tan* is a parody of the monosyllabic feature of the Chinese language, but corresponds phonologically to the English words "weigh one ton."

We establish two principal characteristics that identify the linguistic structure of these jokes.³

- A question-answer format that follows one of the patterns described above
- A sequence of sounds within the answer that attempts to represent and parody the language mentioned in the question

The linguistic uniqueness of this type of joke has led us to coin a new term in order to identify it. We originally named these jokes "fake puns" since we first thought that they would operate semantically in the same way as a "pun," i.e., the humorous use of a word that emphasizes different meanings or applications. Puns are constructed of words that are alike or nearly alike in sound but different in meaning, and this constitutes a play on words. To be more precise, we also had to add the word "fake," meaning not genuine or authentic, since the jokes analyzed in the present study do not possess an

³ These jokes can also be classified as belonging to the broader group of jokes where we find a first part, "which can vary greatly but which is accepted as 'normal' by the hearer and understood as such, and a second one, which completely disrupts the world created by the first part" (Bernárdez 1984: 114).

explicit ludic purpose, but merely a humorous one. In addition, the words in these jokes need not have more than one possible literal interpretation, whereas in a pun, multiple meanings can be found.

Due to the fact that the term “fake pun” did not adequately represent the phonological aspect of the sequences, we added the word “phonological” to show that the morphological sound component plays a central role in both the syntactic and semantic structure of the joke. As the name suggests, the term “phonological joke” embodies the phonological and humorous aspects. We keep the word “joke” to portray the comic intention readily recognized by any listener, while the term “pun” is more ambiguous. The term *phonological joke*⁴ has been used (Lew 1996 & 1997) to identify jokes that possess a phonological feature that is inherent to the linguistic structure of the text, “any joke in which the ambiguous fragment of a joke’s text might typically have non-identical phonetic forms for the two interpretations” (1997: 133). However, this categorization has not been applied to represent the type of joke presented in our study, which underlines the coexistence of phonemes that reproduce understandable sequences in a language. By their disposition in parody form they evoke the sound, or attempt to reproduce phonemes easily identifiable by a listener as pertaining to a different language. According to our point of view, in a phonological joke, as opposed to a pun sequence, only one interpretation can be inferred.

If we agree that laughter implies an established communication of sorts, we can presume that to laugh at a phonological joke—one that attempts to reproduce the sounds of a specific language—means that the interlocutor, who reacts to the stimuli and laughs, possesses the necessary knowledge to retrieve the encoded cultural information.

This prerequisite makes phonological jokes semantically inaccessible, a constraint that prevents them from being readily translated into other languages. Thus, if we try to decode one of these humorous sentences by means of translation into a new code or language, the product will not necessarily be the same. The effectiveness of the joke depends on its wit, the core of which is a sequence of untranslatable sounds whose semantic

⁴ This term is also used in scientific jargon in contrast with semantic and non-verbal jokes. In psychological studies, phonological jokes are somewhat like puns, semantic jokes identify a type of joke beyond wordplay, while non-verbal jokes identify texts such as cartoons and slapstick.

association causes laughter, “a universal experiential response to jokes” (Wilson 1970: 2).

Many scholars have noted the strong link between culture and language. It frequently happens that a kind of humor that belongs to a specific culture or country may be of no interest to another culture. Therefore, translating that particular type of humor from one culture and language into another may bring with it the challenge of an “added requirement that the translation must be better than the original” (Nilsen 1989: 123). Such being the case, the translator has to preserve the sense of the source language (SL) in such a way that the target language (TL) also preserves the same wit that causes humor. Additionally, the translator has “to convey a whole store of added meaning belonging to the culture of the original language” (Chiaro 1992: 77). If this is not done, the listener is not likely to find the joke to be humorous. A viable translation must enable the recipient to at least retrieve the semantic aspect of the joke. In other words, a mere literal translation would only constitute an explanation of how the joke is syntactically constructed, instead of functioning as an effective and successful translation of humor:

Translation is not a mechanical process of decoding the message of the source text and then re-coding it in equivalent terms. If there are social reasons for the misunderstanding and misreadings inscribed in any communicative and translative situation, there also exist linguistic reasons for the fundamental inadequacy of the textual structures to the referentialized reality. (Tack 2000: 224)

As Tack points out, the process of decoding from the SL into the TL is impacted by a series of cultural and linguistic factors. Therefore, a literal translation of this type of joke would not encapsulate both aspects to represent the original.

2. Analysis of phonological jokes

We have selected four examples in order to represent how phonological jokes operate in different languages and cultural backgrounds. A literal translation (LT) of each joke has been added to show its syntactical structure. As mentioned above, it is important to note that there is no translation that can keep intact the meaning from the SL into the TL. The following are four representative phonological jokes in Finnish, German, Spanish and Swedish:

Finnish

- (2) *Mikä on japanilainen autokorjaamo?*
Hajosiko tojotasi
 L. T.: What do you call a Japanese car repair?
 Did your Toyota break down?

In this example, as in the others that follow, the humorous effect is created by the use of words present in the source language similar in form and sound to those in the language imitated. The sequence *hajosiko tojotasi* attempts to reproduce the combination of graphemes and sounds in Japanese. However, it is a sequence of utterances constructed in perfect Finnish with the meaning *did your Toyota break down?* Yet this joke makes no sense in translation, because the phonological aspect of the original is not preserved. Therefore, its full meaning cannot be retrieved by people whose language is not Finnish.

German

- (3) *Was heisst Sonnenuntergang auf Finnisch?*
Helsinki!
 L. T.: How do you say sunset in Finnish?
 Helsinki!

The German term *Sonnenuntergang* means *sunset*. The comic effect lies in the sense of the different parts of the word *Helsinki* in that language. *Hell* is a German adjective used to refer to something *bright*; *senken* is a verb, which means *to sink / go down*. Anyone coming across the word, *Helsinki*, would automatically think of the capital of Finland. Only a German speaker could deconstruct this word into two words to uncover another meaning, i.e., *sunset*. As a result, there is a loss in the transmission of meaning from the SL to other languages.

Spanish

- (4) *¿Cómo se dice embarazo en swahili?*
Bombo
 L.T.: How do you say pregnancy in Swahili?
 Bass drum

In this example pregnancy is identified with an object such as a *bass drum*, a humorous play on the fact that this type of drum is carried just like a baby during pregnancy. In addition, the word *bombo* is used colloquially in Spanish to describe a woman in advanced stages of pregnancy. The presence of [b] and [m]—homorganic segments with the same point of articulation—represents the Spanish speakers' idea of what an African language sounds like.

Swedish

- (5) *Vad heter Finlands näst bästa skidåkare?*

Hakki Hälinen

L.T. What's the name of the second best Finnish endurance skier?

To follow at one's heels

This joke can only be understood by Swedish speakers who are familiar with the patterns of the Finnish language. This example also illustrates how "joking relationships are common among neighbouring and culturally similar countries" (Gundelach 2000: 121). In this sense, Patrick Zabalbeascoa (1996) speaks about dubbed jokes in the visual media and refers to a type that he defines as the national-sense-of-humor joke and that he characterizes as:

Certain joke types and joke themes that are apparently more popular in some countries or communities than in others and constitute a kind of tradition or intertextual frame of understanding. For example, some communities like to make fun of themselves, whereas others do not and prefer to laugh at somebody else's expense. Local preferences of this kind may depend on culture, religion or historical and political connections with neighbouring nations. This category of jokes still needs a lot of research and is probably the most controversial. (Zabalbeascoa 1996: 253)

As in previous examples, people from other cultures would need an explanation in order to decode the meaning of this joke. In Swedish *hack häl* means *on / at one's heels*. Taking these two Swedish words as a basis, there is a process of transformation into something that appears to be a Finnish proper name. In Finnish there are many first names that end in *-i*, so that *hack* (whose final graphemes *-ck* correspond to Finnish *-kk*) has become *Hakki*. Besides, the suffix *-nen* is common in many family names, and following that rule *häl* has changed into *Hälinen*. The combination of

the resulting words, *Hakki Hälinen*, seems at first glance to simply be a Finnish proper name, yet in Swedish it means *to follow at one's heels*.

3. Conclusion

According to Henri Bergson's seminal book, *Le Rire: Essai sur la signification du comique*, a distinction has to be made between the humorous effect that any language expresses, and the humorous effect that the language itself creates:

Mais il faut distinguer entre le comique que le langage exprime, et celui que le langage crée. Le premier pourrait, à la rigueur, se traduire d'une langue dans une autre, quitte à perdre la plus grande partie de son relief en passant dans une société nouvelle, autre par ses mœurs, par sa littérature, et surtout par ses associations d'idées . . . C'est le langage lui-même, ici, qui devient comique. (Bergson 1914: 105-106)

In Bergson's opinion the first type of effect may be translated into any language, as is the case in many translations of comic texts. The second one, which hinges on the restrictive use of the language, is not translatable.

Besides the cultural component present in each joke, due largely to the many sociolinguistic references contained therein, there is inevitably a humorous sound constraint that makes the linguistic sequence untranslatable. Moreover, because of the exclusivity of these linguistic sequences, we observe that this feature is shared among many different languages that do not belong to the same group, origin or linguistic branch.

It can be concluded, based upon a wide range of samples collected to date, some of which have been presented here, that there is no substantive difference in the structure of phonological jokes, regardless of the language. Similarly, these sounds are representative of the way in which humor is organized in one culture, while also crossing intercultural boundaries. Therefore, this type of parody in languages and about languages could be considered a universal linguistic feature. In other words, the inherent sounds of a joke and the culture portrayed in parody form have a fixed structure. Notwithstanding, in order to confirm this principle of linguistic universality, we believe that a larger, more detailed and quantitative analysis of crosslinguistic data needs to be undertaken.

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