

Techniques of Subtitling Jokes from English into Arabic

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Received: 05.11.2023 • Accepted: 10.01.2024 • Published: 13.01.2024 • Final Version: 29.01.2024

Abstract: Translating jokes from English into Arabic is a challenging task since jokes are strongly related to their languages and cultures. The task is becoming more challenging due to the subtitling rules, conventions, and constraints. The present study endeavours to investigate the translating techniques used by different Arabic subtitlers in different films to solve the technical, linguistic, and cultural problems of subtitling jokes in different American films. To achieve this pursuit, we adopt Baker's [3] techniques for translating idioms and adapt them to meet the requirement of the subtitling of jokes' punchlines, using a qualitative research method. The study reveals that subtitlers always translate the setting of the joke literally except for joke N° 4. The subtitlers use different translation techniques to render the punchlines; however, some of them fail to trigger a laugh. Unlike universal jokes, linguistic and cultural jokes are difficult to render. Besides, the subtitlers omit (the entire or part) of the joke which is inappropriate and unacceptable in the host culture.

Keywords: Subtitling, cultural jokes, linguistic jokes, universal jokes, punchlines

1. Introduction

The translation of jokes is a very complex endeavor, in that the language used in their production is culture-bound. Failure to observe such cultural specificities leads to failure to render appropriate meaning of such jokes in their source text. The task of the translator therefore is to bridge the everlasting cultural and linguistic gaps; that is, between the source and target texts, especially since the subtitling of jokes is becoming harder and more challenging due to technical, spatial, temporal, cultural, linguistic, textual and cinematographical rules, conventions, and constraints. Being aware of all such complexities, subtitlers use different translation techniques for maximum comprehension and safe meaning.

The present study sheds light on such translation techniques used to subtitle one type of humor: jokes from American films into Arabic language. It aims to find out if the jokes in the English source are effectively subtitled into Arabic. The word effective in the context of this paper encompasses qualities of producing comprehensible, humorous, relevant, acceptable, appreciated and rhetorical ([15] Vandaele, 2002, p. 150) jokes in the Arabic language. On the other hand, the study endeavors to explore the effective subtitling techniques frequently used in the rendition of jokes in English movies, unravelling the fascinating means that Arabic subtitlers adopt to overcome the technical,

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linguistic, and cultural problems of subtitling jokes. Importantly enough, factors governing the decisions or choices of subtitlers are carefully tackled.

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, there is a severe scarcity of studies carried out on the subtitling of jokes from English into Arabic. Attempting to provide satisfactory conclusions regarding such a timely novel subject will undoubtedly contribute to the enrichment of scientific research in the way translation of jokes is being treated in audiovisual productions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Humor:

Humor is an important part of movies as well as in other TV programs. It is mostly characterized as "that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous : a funny or amusing quality" [10]. In terms of social interactions, it is defined as a message which is transmitted through different mediums such as action, speech, writing or image and it evokes a smile or laughter [5]. However, the nature of this message is complex due "to the complex interaction of the social, psychological, linguistic, philosophical, biological, historical, and etymological factors that characterize it." [2, p. 6]. There are different forms of humor such as jokes (canned jokes) wordplay, irony, parody, satire sarcasm, spoonerisms, putdowns and self-denigrating humor, retorts, teasing, banter, register clash and catchphrases [2, p. 7]. Although it is difficult to draw a clear outline between these types of humor, we will attempt tentatively to set some differences among them in the coming section.

Jokes.

Jokes are a common type of verbal humor. Although they take the form of oral conversation, yet they depend on the non-verbal communication cues of the person telling the joke. Sometimes, they can also be found in published collections. They are considered "any conscious and successful evocation of what comic is, whether the comic of observation or of situation" [11, p. 78]. Sherzer [15, p. 216] defines jokes as "a discourse unit consisting of two parts, the setup and the punch line". They often take two forms: *narrative jokes* and *question-and-answer jokes*. While a narrative joke is similar to a story, a question-and-answer joke always presents the punchline in the answer. Jokes are also subcategorized as shaggy-dog stories (long jokes with no punch lines), riddles (questions and silly answers) and one-liners (one-line-jokes) [6]. Raphaelson-West [13, p. 130] maintained that Jokes are also divided into three main categories: linguistic jokes (e.g. puns) cultural jokes (e.g. ethnic jokes) and universal jokes (the unexpected). He states that by going from linguistic jokes to universal jokes "the jokes are progressively easier to translate." [13]

In addition to Sherzer's [15] division of the internal structure of a joke, Hockett [9] divides it into three main components: build-up, pivot, and punch line. The 'build-up' refers to the body of the joke. In other words, it is the sentence(s) that introduce/s the joke. The 'pivot' represents a word or a phrase, around which the ambiguity in the joke is created. The 'punch line' is the part that concludes the joke with a surprise effect and provokes laughter [14, p. 65]. The punchline could be one word or several words. The following joke which is taken from the movie "*Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*" illustrates the structure of a joke:

- Perry: "Look up 'idiot' in the dictionary. Do you know what you'll find?"
- Harry: "A picture of me?"
- Perry: "No! The definition of the word 'idiot,' which you are!"

According to Hockett's [9] proposed internal structure of a joke, the three components of the above joke are as follows: the first sentence is the build-up, the second sentence is the pivot and the third one is the punchline. The build-up of the above joke includes the action that informs the audience about Perry being questioned by Harry (who is supposed to be his friend) about the definition of the word "idiot" in the dictionary. Harry's answer which is "A picture of me?" represents the pivot of the joke because Harry is really an idiot. Perry's reply is considered the punch line that concludes the joke and evokes laughter.

2.2. Subtitling

Subtitling refers to "the process of providing synchronized captions for film and television dialogue (and more recently for live opera)" [16, p. 161]. According to Spanakaki [17, par. 20], subtitles refer to

The textual versions of the dialogue in a film and in television programs, and are usually displayed at the bottom of the screen. They appear in two different forms: a) in a form of written translation of a dialogue in a foreign language, or b) in a form of a written rendering of the dialogue in the same language to help viewers with hearing disabilities to follow the dialogue.

Gottlieb [8, p.162] points out five characteristics of subtitling: they are 1) written, 2) additive (e.g., new verbal material is added in the form of subtitles), 3) immediate, 4) synchronous, and 5) polymedial (e.g., at least two channels are employed) form of translation. Moreover, subtitling is an important type of audiovisual activity. It can be intralingual, interlingual, bilingual and surtitling [7, pp. 2-4].

The difficulties in subtitling in films and sitcoms are related to certain technical rules and conventions, namely the subtitling constraints, synchronization, and visual elements. Subtitling "operates within the confines of the film and TV media and stays within the code of verbal language. The subtitler does not even alter the original; S/he adds an element, but does not delete anything from the audiovisual whole" [8, p. 105]. In the same vein, Shuttleworth and Cowie [16, pp. 161-162] enumerate four constraints of subtitling:

1. The addition of subtitles to a screen necessitates interfering with the visual image, at least to some extent. For this reason, subtitles are usually placed at the bottom of the screen and are generally limited to two lines of a maximum of about 35 characters each.
2. The time available for display depends firstly on the speed at which the material is spoken (which is generally faster than the rate at which a full transcription could be delivered), the viewers' average reading speed and the necessity of keeping a (short) interval between subtitles.
3. Subtitles are generally inserted simultaneously with the onset of speech and removed $\frac{1}{2}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ seconds after the speech segment has finished; however, this can be ignored if for example there is a danger of the subtitle "overlapping" a scene change.
4. It is important that the subtitles be displayed in a format which ensures their clear visibility and easy legibility, and that line-breaks be chosen in such way as to coincide with the natural breaks in sentence structure.

In addition, Linde and Kay [11, p. 3] discuss space and time constraints and argue that they oblige the subtitler to reduce the number of words on the screen. They also discuss the constraints of image on the screen "which is normally inviolable, and the soundtrack in the source language, which is retained. The subtitler must therefore try to respect aspects of the cinematography such as camera cuts and match the duration of the subtitles to the rhythm of the dialogue."

The Difficulty of Subtitling Humor

Along with the above subtitling rules and conventions, the task of the translator in subtitling jokes is very challenging and usually receives hard criticism. First, Jokes contain words and phrases which refer to “people, history, events, and customs of a particular culture” ([5, p. 1]. They are carriers of linguistic features and sociocultural references of a particular language and culture. Jokes (and humor in general) are treated as “a form of social play” on which the “rules, expectations, solutions and agreement” are essentially culture specific ([15] Vandaele, 2010, p. 149). They are understood and appreciated by the people (senders and recipients) who share similar background knowledge. So, while a joke could be funny, accepted, and appropriate for a group of people it could be rude for others. Therefore, their renditions across two different languages and cultures such as English and Arabic (where the cultural and linguistic gaps are big) require awareness of these boundaries. Another problem faced in the translation of humor is the translation of culturally unacceptable and linguistically untranslatable elements in the target culture, such as taboo language. The translator is required to use certain translation techniques so as not to offend the intended audience ([1] Al-Quinai, 2005, p. 491). While in literary texts, the translator has many choices and options, such as addition, explanation, and footnotes in order to guide the reader and help him/her get the message [4, p. 32], in subtitling he/she is confined to a list of restrictions. Zabalbeascoa [20, p. 248] concludes these restrictions in what follows:

Differences in the background knowledge of the original and prospective audiences; differences in cultural and moral values, customs and traditions; differences in conventional themes and techniques of joke-telling; the translator’s professional context; timing and lip-synchronization; [and] verbal humor depending strictly on features of the source language and/or on the visual context which defies manipulation.

Following Vandaele [19, p. 150] “humor translation is qualitatively different from ‘other types’ of translation and, consequently, one cannot write about humor translation in the same way one writes about other types of translation.” The difficulty confronted by the translator is that of achieving the intended effect of humor. According to Vandaele there are four elements which need to be mentioned and focused on: 1) the intended effect of humor is laughter which is very difficult to render. 2) there is a difference between receiving (comprehending and appreciating) and producing a joke. So, “translators may experience its compelling effect on themselves and others (laughter) but feel unable to reproduce it” [19] 3) Since “the *appreciation* of humor varies individually” [19]; therefore, subtitlers’ sense of humor is a crucial factor in the recognition of comic 4) Moreover, “the rhetorical effect of humor on translators may be so overwhelming that it blurs the specifics of its creation; strong emotions may hinder analytic rationalization’.

Techniques for subtitling jokes

As we have seen, a joke consists of three main parts: build-up, pivot and the punchline. In this study, we will focus on the subtitling of the punchline due to many reasons. First, in most of the jokes we studied, the build-up and pivot are translated literally using word-for-word translation techniques. Second, the punchline is the most important part of the joke. It is usually the part of the joke that stimulates laughter. It is defined as “the climactic conclusion of a story or joke that makes an audience laugh. It’s a short line that delivers a humorous reveal. Punchlines are often funny because they are the opposite of what an audience is expecting.”

To look for how punchlines are subtitled, it was necessary to look for translation techniques that operate beyond word level, such as collocations, metaphors, or idioms. Therefore, the researchers

chose the translation techniques proposed by Baker [3, pp 75-86] for translating idioms. She identifies seven translation techniques to be used when translating idioms. However, we adapted it to meet the structure of the punchline and the requirements of the study.

The first technique which is translating *a punchline by using a punchline of similar meaning and form* refers to translating a punchline by another similar punchline to that in the SL in form and meaning; in other words, word-for-word translation. The same form means using similar or almost similar lexically equivalent items. Similar meaning implies that the punchline should convey a similar or almost similar meaning to the punchline as used in the SL. In this technique, the use of punchlines in the translated language should be similar to the punchline in the source language as it may be possible to find punchlines that may be similar in form but might convey a completely different meaning. Second, a punchline may be translated by using *a punchline of similar meaning but dissimilar form*. According to Baker [3, p. 76], this technique includes using a punchline in the translated language, which is similar in meaning, but different in form. It involves the translation of the punchline by preserving the semantic equivalence without preserving its lexical items. This refers to sense-for-sense translation. The third technique is *translating a punchline by borrowing the SL punchline*, which is common in translating words. The fourth technique is *translating a punchline by paraphrase*, which is useful in translating an ST punchline which does not have a match in the TT. Since it may not be possible to find a suitable equivalent for a punchline, the translator may have to depend on the technique. Besides, the translator may employ two techniques of omission, either *omitting a part of the punchline* or *omitting the entire punchline*. Finally, a translator may *translate a punchline by compensation*. In this technique, an ST's punchline might either be omitted or played down at the point of its occurrence in the ST and bring it up elsewhere in the TT.

3. Method

The section unveils techniques deployed in the subtitling of jokes, the difficulties encountered while administering this study, along the solutions envisaged to overcome them. We conduct a descriptive approach which was elaborated by Toury [18], uncovering the way equivalence “has been realized in each case, e.g., in terms of the balance between what has been kept invariant and what has undergone transformation [18, p.113]. We compared between the replaced and replacing punchlines to identify, analyze, and explain how jokes are subtitled. Moreover, the study employs the qualitative research method which is generally understood as collecting and analyzing non-numerical data. We picked fourteen famous and funny jokes from different American movies, focusing, in the main, on identifying what was added or omitted. No word or expression, interpreter, channel, or translation technique is favored over the other. We Endeavor here to provide an in-depth description of this translation phenomenon making use of more qualitative data.

3.1. Data Finding and Analysis

To present data in a systematic way, the source text (ST) (characters' utterances) and the target text (TT) (Arabic subtitles) are presented in tables in two columns. The left column presents the ST joke, along with the film title and the right column presents the TT (Arabic subtitles) and their back translations.

Joke 1.

(ST) "Nick: Okay. What do you call a three-humped camel?"

Flash: I don't... know. Nick: **Pregnant.**"
(*Zootopie*)

(TT) ماذا تسمي جملا له ثلاث سنام؟
لا أعرف، ماذا تسمي جملا له ثلاث سنام ناقة حبلى

Joke 2.

(ST) The blind man's seeing eye dog

Pissed on the blind man's shoe

The blind man said, "Here Rover,

Here's a piece of beef for you."

His wife said, "Don't reward him.

You can't just let that pass."

The blind man said,

"I gotta find his mouth, so I can kick him in the ass." (*A Prairie Home Companion*)

رجل أعمى قابل كلبا
تبول على حذاء الأعمى
فقال الأعمى 'خذ أيها الشارد
خذ قطعة لحم
قالت زوجته لا تكافئه
ماذا تفعل هنا لا تدعه يفلت
فقال الأعمى لا بد أن أجد فمه لكي أركله في عقبه

Joke 3.

When God created woman, He gave not two breasts but three. When the middle one got in the way God performed surgery. Woman stood before God, With middle breast in hand. Said "What do we do, With the useless boob?" And got created man. (*A Prairie Home Companion*).

This joke is omitted

Joke 4.

(ST) When a beautiful young naked woman, stood up in front of the group. She offered gramps some super sex, And he said, "I'll take the soup!" (*A Prairie Home Companion*)

حينما تقف امرأة عارية جميلة
أمام الجماعة
تعرض مطارحة فاخرة
فيقول سأتناول الحساء

Joke 5.

(ST) Ole went to the neighbourhood dance, And he won the big door prize. Was a toilet brush, And he took it home. And the next week one of the guys, Said, "Ole, how's that toilet brush, The one you won from the neighbors?" Ole said, "**Oh, it works pretty good, but I prefer toilet paper.**" (*A Prairie Home Companion*)

(أولي) قصد المرقص /وربح الجائزة الكبرى / وكانت
فرشاة مرحاض / وأخذها إلى البيت / وأحد الرجال في الأسبوع
التالي / سأله "كيف حال تلك الفرشاة" التي ربحتها من المرقص
/قال أنها جيدة ولكنه يفضل مناديل المراض

Joke 6.

Farmer had a champion bull, Bred 200 times a year. Farmer's wife said, "200 times. Isn't that

كان لدى المزارع ثورا قويا / كان ينبغي 2 مرة سنويا / قالت
زوجة المزارع 2 مرة / !ليس ذلك رانعا يا عزيزي؟ / ربما

wonderful dear. Maybe you otta watch 'em
 Maybe he'll show you how." Farmer said, "**He's
 a heck of a bull, But it wasn't all with same
 cow.**" (*A Prairie Home Companion*)

عليك مراقبته / لعلك تتعلم منه فقال المزارع "إنه ثوراً شديداً"
 لكن ليس جميعهم من ذات البقر

Joke 7.

Perry: "Look up 'idiot' in the dictionary. Do
 you know what you'll find?"

يا إلهي ابحث عن كلمة "أحمق" في القاموس. أتعرف ماذا
 ستجد؟

Harry: "A picture of me?"

صورتني؟

Perry: "No! **The definition of the word
 'idiot,' which you fucking are!**" (*Kiss Kiss
 Bang Bang*)

لا ! ستجد كلمة "أحمق" وهو أنت

Joke 8.

A guy walks into a bar with a giraffe and
 proceeds to get pissed. The giraffe passes out on the bar floor. The guy
 gets up to leave and the bartender says, " OY!
 You can't leave that lying here!".
 The guys says, "That's no lion, it's a giraffe!" (*28
 Days Later*)

الرجل يدخل الحانة مع زرافة، يقوم بالتبول عليها.
 الرجل يترك الحانة ويناديه النادل. أنت لا تستطيع ترك هذا
 الأسد هنا.
 يجاوبه بأنه ليست أسد، إنها زرافة

Joke 9.

Andrew: Two cannibals were eating a clown. One turns to the other and says: "**Does this taste
 funny to you?**" (*Bicentennial.Man.1999*)

أكلا لجوم بشر كانا يأكلان مهرّجا. قال أحدهم: ألا تجد طعامه مضحكا؟

Joke 10.

A man with dementia is driving on the
 freeway. His wife calls him on the phone and
 says: "Sweetheart, I heard there's someone
 driving the wrong way on the freeway." He says,
 "**One? There's hundreds!**"
 (*Bicentennial.Man.1999*)

معتوه يقود سيارته. تنادي زوجته قائلة: "سمعت أن عناك من
 يقود بالاتجاه المعاكس"
 يجيب: "واحد فقط؟ مئات منهم"

Joke 11.

What do you call a blind dinosaur?
 I don't know.
 A **Do-you-think-he-saurus.**
 What do you call a blind dinosaur's dog?
 You got me.
 A **Do-you-think-he-saurus Rex** (*Jurassic Park*)

ماذا تسمي الديناصور الاعمي؟
 ماذا اسمي الديناصور الاعمي؟
 انتظن انه صورنا

Joke 12.

What is the difference between the Cub Scouts and the military? Bzzzzzt! Cub Scouts don't have
 heavy artillery! (*Good Morning Vietnam*)

ما هو الفرق بين الجيش وفريق الاستطلاع؟
فرق الاستطلاع لا تحمل مدفعية ثقيلة

Joke 13.

Three tomatoes are walking down the street - a **poppa tomato**, a **momma tomato**, and a little baby tomato. Baby tomato starts lagging behind. Poppa tomato gets angry, goes over to the baby tomato, and smooshes him... and says, "**Catch up.**" (*Pulp Fiction*)

3 ثمرات طماطم تسير في الشارع.
الثمرة الاب والثمرة الام و الثمرة الابن.
الثمرة الابن يتخلف وراءهما في السير
فانزعج الاب للغاية. فعاد اليه وسحقه وقال
"كاشب"

Joke 14.

Rocky: Knock knock
Rocky Jr.: Whose there?
Rocky: Tuna fish
Rocky Jr.: Tuna fish who?
Rocky: **You can tune a piano, but you can't tun-a fish!** (*Rocky V (1990)*)

- طك طك
-من على الباب؟
-سمكة التونا
-سمكة التونا من؟
-يمكنك ان تاكلني ان استطعت

The study reveals that out of fourteen jokes, there are six universal jokes (jokes: 1, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9), five linguistic jokes (jokes: 4, 8, 11, 13 and 14) and four cultural jokes (jokes: 2, 3 and 12). The subtitlers translate the settings in all the studied jokes literally. However, they use different translation techniques to translate the punchlines.

The subtitlers use different translation techniques to translate the punchlines in universal jokes. In joke 1, the subtitler translates the punchline "*pregnant*" into *ناقة حبلى /na:qah hubla/*, literally translated into "pregnant camel" using the technique of a punchline of similar meaning and form. The same technique is used to translate the punchline in joke 6 "He is a heck of a ball, but it wasn't all with the same cow" into *إنه ثور شديد لكن ليس جميعهم من ذات البقر /innahu thawrun shadidun lakin laysa jami'uhum min that al-baqar/*, literally translated into "It's a hard bull, but not all of them are the same cows". However, it would be better if the subtitler translated the punchline using a punchline of similar meaning but dissimilar form. That would be meaningful and foster laugh. In joke 5, the subtitler first puts the punchline which is in the direct speech into the reported speech. Besides, he omits the word *works* which reflects the humorous part of the joke. Although it is a universal joke being characterized with easiness in translation, yet the subtitler needs to be attentive not to omit keywords. The subtitler in joke 7 also translates the punchline by using a punchline of similar meaning and form. Although "the word "fucking" which is inappropriate and unacceptable in the host culture is omitted, yet the Arabic subtitling still conveys a funny joke. In jokes 8 and 9, the subtitlers successfully render the punchline by using a punchline of similar meaning and form techniques.

In linguistic jokes, the linguistic difficulties determine the use of different translation techniques to translate the punchlines, though they should focus on keywords. Concerning joke 4 the pronunciation of the word *super* /'su:pə/ is necessary to understand the joke. Translating the pivot of the joke "She offered gramps some super sex" literally into "تعرض مطارحة فاخرة" /ta'ridu mutarahan fakhirah/ produces an unclear joke. The word *super sex* would be better translated into *مطارحة عشاء /mutarahata 'asha/ supper /'səpə/ dinner*. Similarly, joke 8 depends on the pronunciation of the word

lying, which is essential to understand the joke. In joke 11, the subtitler entirely omitted the two punchlines in the joke: *A Do-you-think-he-saurus* and *A Do-you-think-he-saurus Rex*. This choice is most probably driven owing to linguistic difficulties. This technique fails to render this joke successfully. In joke 13, the subtitler retains the form of the word “catch up” translating it into “كاشاب” *Ketchup* to convey a funny joke. In joke 14, the subtitler uses the technique of translating a punchline by paraphrase to render “*You can tune a piano, but you can't tun-a fish!*” into “يملكك أن تاكني إن استطعت” /*youmkinaka an ta?kulani in istata't*/, which literally means “*You can eat me if you can*”; however, this does not produce a comprehensible and humorous joke.

Moreover, the subtitlers use different translation techniques. In joke 2, the subtitler translates “*I gotta find his mouth, so I can kick him in the ass.*” into “لا بد أن أجد فمه لكي أركله في عقبه” /*la:budda an ajida famahu likay arkulahu fi 'aqibih*/; the word “ass” which is considered as an inappropriate word in the host culture is substituted by *heel*. However, the subtitler in joke 3 does not provide any subtitling to the entire joke. The joke is entirely omitted most probably because it is cultural, including inappropriate language and religiously offending. Though joke 12 could be considered as a universal joke which is characterized with easiness in translation, yet to understand the joke there should be a common ground between the source and host audiences. Moreover, to successfully render the joke, the subtitler would better translate “Cub Scouts” as “شبل الكشافة” /*shibl al-kashafah*/ rather than “فريق الاستطلاع” /*fariq al-istitla*/. The subtitler should be consistent with the context.

4. Conclusion:

The subtitling of jokes in films is a defying task which requires effort, awareness, and competence. Subtitlers need to put into consideration the interfering factors and parameters such as the nature, type, and structure of the joke as well as the subtitling conventions and constraints. The current study analyzed fourteen jokes from different American films. Therefore, it helped us provide reliable and credible conclusions:

- Concerning the first and second research questions, the study revealed that the subtitlers use different translation techniques to overcome certain difficulties of subtitling jokes. Universal jokes are easier to translate, and literal translation is often effective. Linguistic jokes are very difficult to subtitle, mainly basically because the language of the ST and TT are structurally different. Therefore, the subtitler needs to pay attention to specific keywords. The Punchline with sexual connotations and religiously offensive jokes were omitted.
- Concerning the third research question, the outcomes are different. Some jokes are successfully rendered while others are not. In linguistic jokes, the subtitler needs to focus his/her attention on words that are necessary in setting the scene for the punchline or evokes laughter. In cultural jokes, ethical issues should be put into consideration.

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