

ARE SITCOMS AS FUNNY IN BOSNIAN AS THEY ARE IN ENGLISH – A CASE OF TRANSLATION OF PUNS IN “HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER”

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Abstract: This study focuses on the analysis of puns in the American situational comedy *How I Met Your Mother* (Kako sam upoznao vašu majku in Bosnian). The paper aims to categorize the puns and then classify the employed translation strategies in the subtitling process of the noted puns from the source language English into the target language Bosnian. The categorization of puns was conducted on the basis of Delabastita's (1996) division of puns into homonymic, paronymic, homophonic, and homographic. Similarly, Delabastita's (1996) classification of translation strategies was used to analyze their Bosnian translation equivalents. This classification includes three translation strategies: pun-to-pun, pun-to-zero, and pun to a related rhetorical device. The created corpus consists of transcripts of the first two seasons of the aforementioned TV show. The findings, presented descriptively and numerically, reveal that homonymic and paronymic puns are the most frequent, while homophonic puns are somewhat less common. Moreover, homographic puns are absent altogether. Omission (pun-to-zero) is the dominant translation strategy (56%), leading to a significant loss of humor, while the use of related rhetorical devices and direct translations (pun-to-pun) are present in 26% and 18% of cases, respectively. Homophonic puns are most frequently translated using the pun-zero strategy, reflective of their complexity. The study indicates potential challenges of translating humor, which in turn reveals a need for more creative approaches to humor translation. Therefore, potential further research focusing on the exploration of translation strategies used across different languages could help preserve the intended humorous effects of wordplay.

Keywords: puns, translation, strategies, humor, Bosnian.

Field: Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

In the realm of cross-cultural communication and translation studies, the adaptation of humor poses a unique and intriguing challenge. As humor is inherently bound to cultural nuances, translating comedic elements from one language to another involves not only linguistic precision but also a profound understanding of cultural context (De Linde & Kay, 2016). Sitcom has become the widest reaching comedy form, with remarkable popularity and longevity (Mills, 2005), which is why this research paper delves into the intricate process of translating puns, with a specific focus on the popular situational comedy “How I Met Your Mother” (HIMYM), exploring the dynamics of humor transfer in the Bosnian language. Television series such as HIMYM serve as rich sources for linguistic analysis, offering a plethora of linguistic features and cultural references embedded in humor. The American sitcom, known for its witty dialogue, clever wordplay, and cultural references, has gained a global fan base. However, when such content is translated for international audiences, the challenge arises in maintaining the comedic essence while ensuring clarity in communication.

1.1. HUMOR

Humor is a wide, often subjectively treated concept. Despite insights from various fields of study, it is still very difficult to fully encapsulate, in theory, how humor works (Gardner, 2008). As it is a complex matter, it has been studied from different perspectives. Humor can be regarded as extralinguistic phenomenon, which is the case with humor produced visually or musically (Attardo, 2017). However, a great deal of humor is linguistic in form. Green and Pepicello (1978) were among the first to discuss the linguistic types of humor, ranging from the one based on cultural categories or politics, to the one based on cognitive categories. According to Buijzen and Valkenburg (2004), different types of humor have been distinguished. Some of these types include irony, sarcasm, banter, wordplay, slips of the tongue, jokes, pranks, pratfalls, satire, teasing, slapstick, parody, nonsense, cynicism, physical humor, minor mishaps, etc. This paper will primarily focus on wordplay among the various subcategories.

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1.2. WORDPLAY

In the broadest sense, wordplay employs or manipulates linguistics material in a playful manner to create humor. Therefore, wordplay is understood to be “the general name for the various textual phenomena in which structural features of the language(s) used are exploited in order to bring about a communicatively significant confrontation of two (or more) linguistic structures with more or less similar forms and more or less different meanings” (Delabastita, 1996, p. 128). It is also defined in terms of the use of words in such a manner that two or more meanings can be expressed, a result of which is humorous effect (Winter-Froemel, 2009). Some of the types of wordplay are wellerism, spoonerism, and palindrome. Linguists disagree on the difference between a wordplay and a pun. Some consider these two terms synonymous (Delabastita, 1996), while others classify puns as a subcategory of wordplay (Chiaro, 2008). In this paper, puns will be viewed as separate entities with separate categorizations.

1.3. PUNS

There is no generally accepted definition of pun, which is a result of its linguistic complexity and the variety of linguistic units and categories which can be used in its forming. Pun is defined as “a textual occurrence in which a sequence of sounds must be interpreted with a reference to a second sequence of sounds, which may, but need not, be identical to the first sequence, for the full meaning of the text to be accessed” (Attardo, 1994, p. 323). As a result of different definitions of pun, there are also different approaches to how they should be classified. Delabastita (1996) classifies puns into four categories: puns having elements with identical sounds and spelling (homonymic puns); puns including different sounds but identical spelling (homographic puns); puns including identical sounds but different spellings (homophonic puns); and puns with nearly the same spelling and sound (paronymic puns). Giorgadze (2014), however, employs the following classification of puns: homonymic pun; lexical meaning pun, which involves polysemantic words; understanding pun, in which the implied meaning of a sentence is revealed through a particular context; figurative pun, which uses metaphors and similes as its surface meaning; and logic pun, in a form of a rhetorical device (Giorgadze, 2014, p. 273).

1.4. TRANSLATING PUNS

Translating wordplay in general while maintaining humorous effect is rather challenging. In fact, verbal puns stand out as particularly complex to translate, as they often rely on elements rooted in culturally specific conceptual structures (Kovalenko & Martynyuk, 2021). Therefore, very often, there is a lack of equivalent linguistic unit to be rendered from the source (SL) to the target language (TL). Consequently, the humorous effect achieved at semantic or pragmatic level is sometimes lost. This, in turn, leads to the conclusion that the role of translators is of even greater importance in the process of humor translation as the actual equivalence between the source and target language does not seem to be the most crucial factor at play (Pilyarchuk, 2024). However, despite such challenges, efforts have been made to create strategies and techniques for translating puns. Gottlieb (1997, p. 210), for example, proposes the following strategies for translating puns in subtitles, which can be employed to maintain the effect of humor: verbatim rendition, during which humorous effect may or may not be maintained; adaptation to the local setting so as to preserve the effect of humor; replacement by a phrase which does not contain a pun; replacement by a similar rhetorical device; and non-rendition, in which case the space is used by the text that follows. Additionally, Delabastita (1996) describes the following three strategies for translating puns: pun to pun translation, where the SL pun is translated by a TL pun, however, the rendition may slightly differ in terms of form, semantics, or textual function; pun to related rhetorical device, where a related rhetorical device employed may be repetition, alliteration, rhyme, referential vagueness, irony or paradox, and the rendition succeeds in maintaining humor; and pun to zero pun, where the text in the SL that contains a pun is completely omitted. Of course, the process of translation of puns, and humor in general, will differ based on the actual source and target languages employed. Certain languages, such as Arabic (Obeidat, 2023), have already been the focus of extensive research focusing on the translation of humor to and from these languages.

In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, studies exist which analyze other linguistic forms in the context of translation, such as collocations, phrasal verbs (Bureković et al., 2024), and anglicisms (Šukalić et al., 2022), however, studies involving puns specifically and their translation equivalents and strategies are lacking. This is why the results of this study have a potential to be used in English language teaching and translation studies, particularly because of the authenticity of the corpus, and the challenges the translation of puns poses.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study is embedded in the theoretical framework of translatology. It examines the linguistic approaches applied in the process of translating puns from English to Bosnian language. Specifically, it examines the degree of equivalence by drawing on Delabastita's (1996) classifications of puns and their translation strategies. The results are analyzed both descriptively and numerically, using percentages. The corpus from which examples of puns are retrieved is the popular American sitcom “How I Met Your Mother” (HIMYM), which abounds in puns due to its clever and witty writing style. The sitcom aired from 2005 to 2013 and consisted of 9 seasons, each with 22-24 episodes approximately 22 minutes long. For this paper, the focus was specifically on seasons 1 and 2 retrieved from <https://hdtoday.tv/tv/watch-how-i-met-your-mother-hd-39439> and <https://onlinesaprevodom.net/how-i-met-your-mother/>. The corpus included a total of 50 puns identified in both transcripts in English (SL) and subtitles in Bosnian (TL) of the first two seasons of the show. The show is rich in various forms of jokes and wordplay, however, only the forms that fit the definition of puns were selected and analyzed. After identification, the SL puns were first classified into types based on the effect by which humor is achieved into homonymic, paronymic, homophonic, and homographic puns. Then the overall translation strategies employed were also analyzed. Finally, to determine which type of puns were the most difficult to translate, the translation strategies were analyzed for each pun type. The results are presented in percentages. Additionally, for each strategy, suitable examples of the SL and TL text are presented and accompanied by an explanation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the findings presented in Table 1, it is evident that homonymic puns are predominant (38%), followed closely, however, by paronymic puns (34%). This seems to be consistent with similar studies of translation of wordplay in entertainment shows into Danish, indicating a high presence of homonymic wordplay (40.4%) (Gottlieb, 2017). Homophonic puns make up 28% of the puns. Interestingly, no instances of homographic puns were found.

Table 1. Types of puns in Episodes 1 & 2 of HIMYM

Type	Number of puns	Percentage
Homonymic	19	38%
Paronymic	17	34%
Homophonic	14	28%
Homographic	0	0%

Source: Author's research

Further, the results in Table 2 demonstrate that the most frequently used strategy in translation is the omission of puns, accounting for a significant 56% of cases. This indicates that sitcoms translated to Bosnian are not as humorous as their English original. The reason might be that translators prioritized clarity and precision in conveying meaning over humor, that the puns were difficult to translate while retaining humorous effect, or that there were no suitable equivalents in the Bosnian language. In 26% of translations, a different approach was taken by employing related rhetorical devices to convey the intended meaning of the pun. In the remaining 18% of cases, translators opted for a direct translation of the pun. Despite being less frequent, this choice indicates a deliberate effort to uphold linguistic humor in the face of potential linguistic challenges.

Table 2. Translation strategies employed

Translation strategy	Number of puns	Percentage
Pun-zero	28	56%
Pun-related rhetorical device	13	26%
Pun-pun	9	18%

Source: Author's research

As can be seen in Table 3, the translation of homonymic puns into Bosnian presents a challenge, as it requires a careful conveying of multiple meanings. A significant majority of 19 homonymous puns (57.9%) were translated by omitting the pun altogether (pun-zero). It is worth noting that approximately 21.05%

of homonymic puns were translated using related rhetorical devices. The adaptation allows translators to maintain the essence of the pun when a direct translation is not possible. The remaining 21.05% of homonymic puns were translated using a direct pun-pun strategy. Hence, despite their complexity, a significant percentage of homonymic puns (42.1%) were translated to Bosnian while preserving the humorous effect.

Table 3. Translation strategies in homonymic puns

Translation strategy	Number of puns	Percentage
Pun-zero	11	57.90%
Pun-related rhetorical device	4	21.05%
Pun-pun	4	21.05%

Source: Author's research

The findings regarding paronymic puns presented in Table 4 mirror those of homonymic puns. In the case of paronymic puns, approximately 41.18% are omitted in translation, which also indicates that in the process of translation of puns, humorous effect is lost to a significant extent. Further, 41.18% of paronymic puns are translated using related rhetorical devices to convey their intended meaning. Only 17.64% of paronymic puns are translated using a direct pun-to-pun strategy.

Table 4. Translation strategies in paronymic puns

Translation strategy	Number of puns	Percentage
Pun-zero	7	41.18%
Pun-related rhetorical device	7	41.18%
Pun-pun	3	17.64%

Source: Author's research

The results regarding the distribution of various translation strategies in the third category of puns are consistent with the first two categories. The predominant approach for translating homophonic puns (71.44%) involves omitting the pun in the target language. 14.28% of homophonic puns are rendered using related rhetorical devices. Finally, an equal percentage of homophonic puns (14.28%) are translated using a direct pun-pun strategy, as indicated in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Translation strategies in homophonic puns

Translation strategy	Number of puns	Percentage
Pun-zero	10	71.44%
Pun-related rhetorical device	2	14.28%
Pun-pun	2	14.28%

Source: Author's research

Examples of homophonic puns and their translation strategies are the following:

1. Pun to pun zero

Barney: “You keep going to the same bar. You’re in a rut.”

Ted: “It’s not a rut, it’s routine, and I like it.”

Barney: Ted, what’s the first syllable of “routine”? (S1E2, 01:42, “Purple Giraffe”)

Bosnian translation:

Barney: “Stalno ideš u isti kafić. Upao si u kolotečinu.”

Ted: “To nije kolotečina! To je šablon, i meni se sviđa.”

Barney: “Ted, tako se drugačije kaže kolotečina.”

Explanation: Barney remarks to Ted that he keeps going to the same bar and suggests that Ted is in a rut, implying a repetitive and unchanging pattern. Ted disagrees, stating that it’s not a rut but a routine, and that he likes it. Barney then points out the phonetic similarity between “rut” and the first syllable of “routine”, implying that there is no difference between those things. However, in the Bosnian translation, the word “rut” is replaced with “kolotečina,” which may not carry the same direct association or phonetic similarity with “šablon” as “rut” does with “routine” in English. As a result, the direct wordplay linking “rut”

and “routine” is not preserved.

2. Pun to related rhetorical device strategy

Barney: “Wow, Jackie, you make a really good first impression. I have a feeling that tonight you might end up being Jackie...oooh.” (S1E8, 18:42, “The Duel”)

Bosnian translation:

Barney: “Jackie, ostavljaš stvarno sjajan prvi utisak. Sve mi se čini da ćeš na kraju noći završiti kao Jackie...oooh.”

Explanation: In this dialogue, Barney’s remark about Jackie making a good first impression and potentially ending up as “Jackie...oooh” could be interpreted as a playful reference to Jackie O, the stylish and iconic former First Lady of the United States, whose name has similarity with the sound someone might make when experiencing pleasure or excitement. By saying “you might end up being Jackie...oooh,” Barney is implying that Jackie’s actions or behaviour could lead to an enjoyable or exciting outcome. The Bosnian translation retains this wordplay by maintaining the phonetic similarity between “Jackie O” and “oooh,” ensuring that the joke is preserved for the audience.

3. Pun to pun strategy

Ted: “You know, ever since college, there’s been Marshall and Lily and me. Now it’s gonna be Marshall and Lily, and me.” (S1E1, 01:54, “Pilot”)

Bosnian translation:

Ted: “Još od faksa, uvijek smo bili Mashall, Lily i ja. A sada ćemo biti Marshall i Lily, i ja.”

Explanation: Ted reflects on the changing dynamics within his social group due to Marshall and Lily getting married. He points out that previously, it was “Marshall and Lily and me,” but now, with Marshall and Lily becoming a couple, it will be “Marshall and Lily, and me”. The joke plays on the ambiguity created by the punctuation in the second instance, specifically the comma after “Marshall and Lily,” While still sounding the same, the punctuation mark in the joke implies that Marshall and Lily are now viewed as a single unit, separate from Ted.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, in the analyzed sitcom, with reference to the distribution of the different types of puns, homonymic and paronymic puns are more present than homophonic puns, while homographic puns were not found. Further, the analysis of translation strategies revealed that related rhetorical devices and direct translations of puns were employed in 26% and 18% of the cases, respectively, while the most commonly employed translation strategy was the omission of puns (56%). This implies that according to the subtitles, English puns in HIMYM are certainly not as funny in Bosnian, and that humor gets significantly lost in translation. With regard, to the translation strategies of different types of puns, there is some variation. For instance, when compared to homonymic and paronymic puns, homophonic puns are more inclined to be translated using the pun-zero strategy.

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