

# Book Review:

## Humor Translation in the Age of Multimedia (2021)

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### ABSTRACT

The multimodal presentation of humour on digitalized networking platforms such as smart phones and live streaming has undoubtedly increased its degree of difficulty to translate. Humour translation in the age of multimedia is the latest collection of chapters devoted to this intriguing issue of how to communicate humour across cultures in the multimedia age. In their different ways, the 11 chapters in this collection center around the issue of “how the processes of humour translation may be influenced by the technology and means employed.

### KEYWORDS

Humour, Multimedia, Translation

*Humour Translation in the Age of Multimedia (2021)*

*Margherita Dore*

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Humour, as a pervasive phenomenon in human communication, has received concentrated theoretical attention from the linguistic community since the mid-1980s (Raskin 1985, Attardo 1994). However, the extent to which humour is translated has been hotly debated because the traditional means of humour, wordplay, puns, satire, parody, etc., are more associated than any other genre with forms of speech that are lost once they are converted to another form of speech. The multimodal presentation of humour on digitalized networking platforms such as smart phones and live streaming has undoubtedly increased its degree of difficulty to translate. How humour is created and spread via computer-mediated communication has attracted increasing research in recent years (Chiaro 2017, Dore 2019). *Humour translation in the age of multimedia* is the latest collection of chapters devoted to this intriguing issue of how to communicate humour across cultures in the multimedia age. In their different ways, the 11 chapters in this collection center around the issue of “how the processes of humour translation may be challenged or/and enhanced by the means employed and the technologies behind them” (p. 4).

Assuming that the duty of research is to inquire whether long-held notions about humour translation in history still hold true and will continue to work in the multimedia age, the value of this volumes lies chiefly in providing a positive answer to this question with fresh and solid empirical

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research on a wide array of multimodal genres. With exception of Chapters 1 and 2, the collection is devoted almost exclusively to the applications, effectively setting the tone of practice-based research. The examples range from audiovisual humour, the most researched, to therapeutic comedy, the least studied, encompassing literature, advertising, sports scandal, political satire, etc. The volume should also be credited for the large amount of data from English, Chinese, Dutch, Estonian, French, Italian, Spanish and Romanian, representing diverse cultures and perspectives on internet humour translation. This has ensured that this volume is international and interdisciplinary in scope.

Margherita Dore edits this book and offers some insights into humour translation in the same-titled Chapter 1. She argues that the fundamental change in the medium of humour communication has brought new challenges to humour translation and produced intriguing social and cultural consequences (p.1). In response to the controversial issue of (un)translatability of humour, Dore agrees with Delabastita (1994, p.223-243) that “pragmatic functionality” is a theoretical premise for the viability of humour translation, despite linguistic and cultural barriers (p. 2), a view reminiscent of Nida’s (1964) “functional equivalence”. The basic position is that a translation can be said to have achieved its purpose so long as it amuses or entertains the reader, even if it might lead to drastic departures from the original. That being the case, a high degree of creativity is called for and traditional label of “translation” seems too binding to describe the creative transfer of humorous memes on the internet. Dore then uses commercial translation and audiovisual translation from this collection to show how to employ technical and semiotic resources to cut across the linguistic and cultural idiosyncrasies of jokes and retain the original effect of humour.

The chapters in this volume are not thematically divided into parts, although there are some recurring themes. To varying degrees, Chapter 2, Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 offer anthropological and sociological reflections on the hegemony of English as lingua franca, since all online humour memes are produced in English.

From the broader perspective of global communication, Chapter 2 “Humour translation in the digital age”, written by Delia Chiaro, gives many interesting examples of English-derived online humour in which both the verbal content and the images are manipulated with a certain casualness. Chiaro describes verbal transformation as “cavalier rewording” that adapts more accurately to each lingua-cultural locality, with little attention to equivalence (p. 27). Relatively speaking, the images in original internet memes are always recognizable after multiple transformations botched by ordinary internet users. The author draws attention to the fact that the internet memes are largely result of multimodal translation from US or other Western templates, and that translation itself has become a means of humour across semiotic and cultural barriers. This phenomenon has raised a serious sociological and anthropological consequence: the world of humour will be the world of English. Chiaro warns that the quick spread of humour in the age of multimedia will only accelerate this process.

In Chapter 3 “Two cases of doping, two instances of humour: creative humour in cultural dialogue”, Liisi Laineste and Piret Voolaid explicate the mechanisms and directions of meme adaptation in the process of cultural translation in contemporary online communication. Like Chiaro, they note that the way new media influences humour translations is particularly evident in smaller languages that recycle texts from large pools of English “memes” (p.31). The authors consider two instances of humour in the two cases of doping scandals involving cyclist Armstrong in 2012 and two Estonian cross-country skiers in February 2019. The internet users’ humorous reactions to the two doping cases are compared from global and local perspectives so as to highlight repeating patterns and differences. The authors find that wordplay turned out to be the most frequently used and least translatable humour mechanism, which requires linguo-cultural translation, i.e., an adaptation that accommodates the sign system of the target setting. In the process of adaptation, “global and local narratives intertwine” (p.50). They put forward an interesting view that an important mechanism for adapting memes and meme topics is “the versatility of the semiotic associations of the source event” (p.51).

The next three chapters (4, 5 and 6) investigate the linguistic and cultural specificity of translating multimodal humour in advertising within a highly globalised communication framework. Apart from technical manipulation, functional manipulation is required to appeal to potential consumers, often with no regards to the faithfulness to the original text. In “From translation to transcreation of humorous items (memes) on Romanian social media channels”, Lako reviews the terms of *translation* and *transcreation* in relation to modality, proposes his own definition of meme and suggests several degrees of transcreativity in terms of meaning transfer: zero-translation, partial translation, full translation and transcreation. Copycatted humour is posited against them as the most creative of all, i.e., it “mimics the idea itself and (re)creates the humorous item (meme) in its entirety: context, text, co-text and multimodality” (p.69). In a similar vein, Adrián Fuentes-Luque and Cristina Valdés in Chapter 5 argue that the translators of humorous ads sometimes “sell their souls”, that is, abandoning traditional notions of loyalty in favor of creative solutions to achieve desired results. Chiara Bucaria’s work in Chapter 6 “Between marketing and cultural adaptation: the case of comedy film titles in Italy” is based on substantial, solid data of comedy film title translation and field study of semi-structured interviews with distributors. The research reveals not only repeat patterns of creative translation on the part of the translators but also the intervention of the distribution companies and the marketing departments.

The next four chapters (7, 8, 9, 10) in this volume provide in-depth discussion of audiovisual translation, which has been discussed widely as the prototype of multimodal communication since 1990s. Chapters 9 and 10 are particularly noteworthy as they bring us into innovative applications of audiovisual translation in medicine and health.

Chapter 9 “Amateur dubbing and humour to promote well-being among hospitalised children and adolescents” explores therapeutic benefits of amateur dubbing for humorous characters and scenes in clinical setting. Specifically, Dore and Vagnoli present a pilot project conducted at Meyer Children hospital in Florence, Italy, where hospitalized Children were encouraged to amateur dub comic situation in order to experience positive emotions and ultimately enhance their psychological well-being. The authors detail the planning and implementation, as well as the technical and linguistic challenges posed by the promising project. Chapter 10 “Audio describing humour: seeking laughter when images do not suffice” considers an under-researched form of audio description, which is “a way to translate information in one sense (visual) to a form that is comparatively accessible to another(aural)” (Snyder, 2008, p. 196). Sierra’s study concentrates in particular on the accessibility of audio description of humour to the blind and the visually impaired, to whom visual elements of humour are denied. The chapter provides an overview of the theoretical and practical issues of audio description of humour and outlines defining features and requirements thereof, paving the way for further interdisciplinary study between translation studies, humour studies, multimodality studies and medicine.

Chapter 7 “Multilingual humour in audiovisual translation: multilingual realities, humour and translation in an ever-changing mediascape” focuses on the intriguing issue of multilingual humour in audiovisual translation. The author contends that an audiovisual joke in language C should be treated as any other “textual elements” rather than as “foreign bodies” as in the traditional model of translation(p.131). He uses a number of examples from different time periods to illustrate the use of omission or substitution as specific strategies of overall localization and (global) adaptation and justifies their legitimacy from the perspective of functionalist skopos theory. The author argues that multilingual audiovisual humour calls for a more “wholistic, flexible translation” (p.131) and suggests a combination of factors to guide translation practices. In Chapter 8, Albert F.S. Pai investigates subtitling strategies for translating different types of humour in the BBC sitcom *The Office* into Traditional Chinese subtitles through self-built corpus containing spoken English, written Chinese, and annotations.

Chapter 11 “Epilogue: local laughter, context collapse and translational agency” is a self-reflective critique of this book. With view to the chapters herein, Jeroen Vandaele offers his insightful

reflections on the rationale behind this collection as a whole and on the ways internet humour is mediated and manipulated, both locally and globally. Although the author agrees with Chiaro that the basic mechanisms of humour and humour translation remain largely unchanged over time, he acknowledges with reservations that “there may be much variance, change, evolution, difference and contrast when we study the actual meaning of humour in different environments, times and modes of transport” (p.199).

However, some improvements might be made. First, as mentioned previously, most of the contributions in this volume are accounts of the practice of online humour translation, problems encountered, and strategies adopted. As such, they lack a comprehensive theoretical reflection on translation humour as a universal phenomenon. Second, too much attention is given to the time-honoured problem of verbally expressed humour for its own sake rather than to the impact of communication channels on humour translation, which should have been the logical focus of this collection. Thus, it is not made very clear how exactly modern medium of communication are involved in the translation of humour across cultures. This explains the ambiguity in Vandaele’s final analysis. On the one hand he admits that “the medium of communication---in the end modulate the social meaning of the humour and the responses of translators” (p.199, ellipsis added), but on the other hand he is not sure to what extent this may be the case, claiming that “translation may often play a positive part in this process” (p.199, emphasis added).

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