

POPULAR JOKES AS TRIGGERS IN TRANSLATION CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT: *This article explores the possibility of employing popular jokes in the translation classrooms as triggers for a better and more interesting communication and analysis of the notion of untranslatability, which is the toughest nut to crack in the translation process. ‘Tintumon Jokes’, a very popular series of jokes being circulated in Malayalam especially in the form of mobile SMS, WhatsApp messages, and email forwards, is taken as a case in point for analysis here. The article throws light on various types of humour, especially verbal humour, and analyses the problems involved in the translation of humour and jokes. It exemplifies these problems with the aid of selected items from the ‘Tintumon Jokes’ series. The paper concludes by highlighting the advantages of bringing popular jokes into the translation classrooms.*

KEY WORDS: *Translation, Humour, Jokes, Lack of Equivalence, Untranslatability, Tintumon Jokes.*

Introduction

Translation is an activity of enormous importance in the present scenario of increased cross-cultural exchanges. Especially in countries like India, where diversity and heterogeneity of linguistic and cultural experiences form the be-all and end-all of life, it assumes greater significance. Realising the significance of translation in our day-to-day life and identifying the potential of translation as an academic discipline, of late, translation studies has been incorporated into the academic curriculum in our country. Also, a number of translated texts form part of the core textbooks and the processes and implications of translation have been problematised inside the classroom.

One of the most-focused areas of translation studies is the study of unavailability of translation equivalents and the consequent untranslatability. The following comments would expose the magnitude of this problem before us: “The central problem of translation-practice is that of finding TL [Target Language] translation equivalents. A central task of translation theory is that of defining the nature and condition of translation equivalence” (Catford 21). Susan Bassnett takes us further into the complexities of finding out translation equivalents:

Translation involves far more than replacement of lexical and grammatical items between languages and, as can be seen in the translation of idioms and metaphors, the process may involve discarding the basic linguistic elements of the SL [Source Language] text so as to achieve Popovic’s goal of ‘expressive identity’ between the SL and the TL texts. But once the translator moves away from close linguistic equivalence, the problems of determining the exact nature of the level of equivalence aimed for begin to emerge (25).

Thus, the perfect equivalence always appears to be elusive and the translator will be in constant search for the perfect equivalence, a task, though laborious, provides him with a rich learning experience.

A translator is not merely translating a text from one language into another but endeavours to carry the spirit of the text over to the TL. As A.K. Ramanujan wrote in his ‘Translator’s Note’ to Anantha

Murthy's *Samskara*, "A translator hopes not only to translate a text, but hopes (against all odds) to translate a non-native reader into a native one" (viii). Therefore, the greatest challenge before the translator is to carry over from the SL to the TL not only the meaning of the text but also the spirit embodied in it. This task becomes all the more difficult when the item to be translated is humour/jokes. Partly universal, partly individual, and at the same time rooted in a specific cultural and linguistic context, humour poses a real challenge for translators. The translator has to ensure that the TL reader understands the text and also that an exact equivalent for the humour-inducing component of the SL text is employed in the TL, so that source humour functions as humour in the target culture also without any loss. This challenge acquires serious dimensions when the humour/joke employed is highly language-dependent.

This paper, therefore, explores the possibility of employing popular jokes in the translation classroom for a better and more interesting communication and analysis of untranslatability. 'Tintumon Jokes', a very popular series of jokes being circulated in Malayalam especially in the form of mobile SMS, WhatsApp messages, and email forwards, is taken as a case in point for analysis here.

Why Humour?

Humour has always been a passion for all, irrespective of social class, educational background, gender differences, geographical affiliations and the like. In the present time, humour and jokes have a great say in social relations. The burgeoning popularity of jokes in the society, which is mainly generated by popular films and comedy shows on television channels, has set the platform ready for the use of humour/jokes in classrooms too. When judiciously employed in classrooms, humour generates curiosity towards learning, enhances reception, sustains learner interest, ensures retention, sharpens the analytical-critical faculty and enriches the intellectual acumen of learners. In the opinion of Debra J. Housel "Jokes and riddles stimulate intellectual growth" (3). Quoting Hill, Marc Deneire observes that humour has "a positive effect on the learning environment, to initiate, maintain, and enhance learner interest, and to facilitate retention" (285). Likewise, John Robert Schmitz comments: "The use of humour in language courses, in addition to making classes more enjoyable, can contribute to improving students' proficiency" (89).

What is Humour?

Defining humour is really a difficult task. One plain and common definition of humour is: 'something that makes a person laugh or smile' (Ross 1). The following explanations unearth the different implications of humour:

- ☺ that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous
- ☺ the mental faculty of discovering, expressing, or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous
- ☺ something that is or is designed to be comical or amusing (Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary)

J. Vandaele comments that from a scholarly point of view, defining humour poses great challenges which have compelled many linguists, psychologists and literary critics to abandon their quest for an all-encompassing definition (153). Whatever be the definition, the sources of humour are abundant – wordplay (pun, repetition, mispronunciation/wrong spelling etc.), exaggeration, absurdity, incongruity, parody, irony, satire, sexual innuendo, metaphor and simile, parallelism and contrast, connotation and what not.

Forms of Verbal Humour

Verbal humour falls into the following three main categories:

- 1) Universal Jokes – These are jokes that are enjoyed by people across regional, national and continental frontiers with almost equal acceptance. They are devoid of gross cultural and linguistic features that hamper their enjoyment. These jokes can be translated relatively easily when compared to the other two types of jokes.
- 2) Cultural jokes – These jokes derive their existence from the peculiarities of the culture in which they are generated. The eccentric behaviour of a person or a sect of persons, the geographical peculiarities of an area, the ethnic life style, the social rituals and practices, the popular art and cultural forms, the educational set in a particular society and so on serve as the source of humour in the case of cultural jokes. Translation of cultural jokes is a real challenge and often translators are to be satisfied with the option of transliteration with explanatory notes or re-rendering the joke in the TL by creating a non-corresponding situation in that language.
- 3) Linguistic jokes – As evident from the term itself, linguistic jokes stem from the peculiarities in the linguistic field of the SL. Ambiguities, peculiarities in syntactic structure, shared exponents, polysemy etc. that are unique in the case of the source language often form the base of humour here. In case of languages having least formal correspondence (for example, English and Malayalam), translation of linguistic jokes between them becomes nearly impossible. Explanation of the joke verbally (which drains it of its essence) or total re-contextualisation of it in the TL becomes the only ray of hope for the translator here.

Verbally expressed humour often evades translation. Unlike referential humour, verbal humour is often viewed as untranslatable due to its language-dependent quality. Translators are often faced with the seemingly impossible task of translating verbal humour while keeping as much as possible its informational and pragmatic content and, at the same time, producing a similar effect as it would provoke in the source language culture. Raphaelson-West illustrates the difficulty that lies at the basis of translating verbal humour relying on the following pun: “Linguistic jokes are punny as hell.” (130). She argues that “In order to translate the joke it would be necessary to have an idiomatic expression about humour which contained a word which rhymed with a word which means something about puns or language. This word which means something linguistic would have to be similar to the word it rhymes with, and its presence would have to add a little meaning to the sentence.” (130).

The Theories of Humour

In the comprehensive volume on humour, *The Language of Humour*, Alison Ross lists out three theories of humour and analyses different types of humour employed in literary and cultural discourses. The first of the three, the Incongruity Theory, states that we laugh at the unexpected or incongruous. The theory focuses on the element of surprise. It states that humour is created out of a conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in the joke. The Superiority Theory focuses on the *subject* of the humour. It explains our tendency to laugh when someone we despise is the target. Seeing which groups are the targets of humour can give a snapshot of that society’s attitudes (xii). The Psychic Release Theory explains laughter

as caused by the sense of a taboo being broken. We burst into laughter because of the mild revolutionary spirit in us that often operates with the spirit of conventionalism.

Intricacies of Humour Translation

As discussed earlier, translation of humour often becomes a herculean task. Many intricacies are involved in the process and to steer the boat of translation to safe shores the translator has to be conscious of the following:

- 1) Time frame – Ensure whether the SL text contains references to very recent events that have not yet entered the cultural conscience of the target audience and establish equivalents accordingly.
- 2) Socio-educational background of the TL readers – intellectually-charged jokes will fall flat before moderately-educated/uneducated ordinary readership, but man Vs woman jokes may become super hit with them.
- 3) Cultural peculiarities of the SL Text -- The cultural compatibility between the SL and the TL readers is a pre-requisite for the success of translation, but this is often absent, putting the translator in hot waters.
- 4) Linguistic peculiarities and formal correspondence between SL and TL -- The greater the formal correspondence, the better the equivalents. Every language, however, is unique and that is the hardest nut to crack for the translator.

The Tintumon Series

‘Tintumon Jokes’ is a series of jokes popularised by the new media, being mainly circulated through mobile phones, emails and social networking sites, though collection of these jokes in book form have been making their appearances of late. The protagonist Tintumon alias Tintu is an unprecedentedly-elusive character. His identity is quite indefinable from the jokes. He appears as a character of varying age, educational qualification, religion, profession and so on. For example, in one joke, we find him as a kindergarten student and in another, as an adult professional; he appears as a Hindu in one joke and as a Christian in the very next one. These transmigrations add additional toughness to the translation of these jokes. The only characteristic stamp of Tintu that pervades throughout the series is his naughtiness and queer logic.

The source and authorship of ‘Tintumon Jokes’ are unknown. In the case of these jokes, as in the case of oral narratives, often additions, deletions and appropriations are being made by individuals to place them in their cultural context before passing them to their circle of friends or acquaintances. Therefore, we can see that ‘Tintumon Jokes’ also provide the academics with a platform for the problematisation of the questions of individual authorship, meaning ‘intended’ by the author, culture and identity, role of the new media in popularising things etc.

‘Tintumon Jokes’ cover all the three main categories of jokes -- universal, cultural, and linguistic. They appear in both English and regional languages. These jokes can be employed in the classroom for an excursion into the subtleties of humour and the complexities involved in translating humour. Exercises

involving these jokes would definitely help the teacher realise two objectives: one, generation of interest towards a theoretical discussion of the issue of untranslatability; and two, realisation of the difficulties involved in the translation of humour. In the following part ‘Tintumon Jokes’ of various types that have direct applicability in the translation classroom are listed with comments on the source of humour and brief explanations of the root cause of untranslatability with respect to that particular joke. Only two or three selected jokes for each type of verbal humour are included in this paper due to the constraints of word limit. The Malayalam texts are transliterated for convenience in printing.

‘Tintumon Jokes’ -- Universal

1) Teacher : Orikkalum thanuthurachupokaatha oru liquidinte peru parayaamo?

Tintumon : Chooduvellam.

(In this case, the source of humour is Tintu’s queer logic and this joke can be easily translated as:

Teacher : Can you name a liquid that never gets frozen?

Tintumon : Hot water.)

2) Tintumon : Cheyyaatha kaaryathinu enne shikshikkumo teacher?

Teacher : Orikkalumilla.

Tintumon : Nalla teacher, njan homework cheythittillaa!

(Here also the source of humour is the same and this joke can be easily translated as:

Tintumon : Teacher, will you punish me for something which I have not done?

Teacher : Never.

Tintumon : Nice teacher. I haven’t done my homework!)

‘Tintumon Jokes’ -- Cultural

1) Tintumon ambalathile vazhipaad counter q-vil. (Tintumon in front of the offering counter of the temple)

Munnile bhakthan : shambhu, thiruvatira, paalppaayasam. (The devotee in front: shambhu, thiruvatira, paalppaayasam.)

Tintumon : Tintu, break dance, chicken biriyani!

(Here humour stems from the incongruity that arises from Tintu’s (pretended) ignorance of the practice of making offerings at temples. Even though this situation can be translated word-for-word, the TL reader who does not understand the notions associated with this temple practice of *vazhipaad* (sacred offering where the name of the devotee, his/her birth star, and the specific offering are said in sequence) will lose the crux of the joke here.)

2) Teacher : Choodaakkumbol kharaavasthayilekku maarunna draavakameth? (Which liquid changes to solid state when heated?)

Tintumon : Dosa.

(*Dosa* is a popular item for breakfast in Kerala and some other Indian States and for a non-native reader who is not aware of this food item and how it is made by pouring colloidal rice mix onto the hot pan, the soul of the joke is lost. Providing explanatory notes becomes the Hobson's choice for the translator.)

3) Tintumon at a bus stop.

Mattoru yaathrakkan : Kottarakkaraku ippol bus undo?

Tintumon : Ariyilla, Adoor Bhasikku oru jeeppundu.

(Here the source of humour is the twin shades of meaning that the word 'Kottarakkara' has, coupled with the phenomenon of the Malayalam particle (*vibhakthi Prathyayam*) 'kku' having two realisations in English – one, a preposition ('to') and two, possessive case (meaning 'Does + subject + have ...'). Kottarakkara is the name of a place in Kerala as well as the name of a popular film star of the past, Mr. Kottarakkara Sreedharan Nair, who is often addressed as simply Kottarakkara. In the joke under reference, the passenger asks whether there is any bus 'to' the place Kottarakkara at that time, where the naughty Tintu twists the question to be whether Mr. Kottarakkara owns a bus. Therefore, this example falls in the categories of both cultural and linguistic jokes and hence resists translation.)

'Tintumon Jokes' -- Linguistic

1) Tintu's Law of Motion: "Loose motion can never be in slow motion."

(The humour in this joke, which parodies Newton's Laws of Motion, stems from the polysemy of the English word 'motion', the common meaning of 'movement' and the specific meaning of 'diarrhoea'. Finding out a translation equivalent for it, i.e. a term sharing both these shades of meaning, in the Indian languages is almost impossible. The translator will have to think about total recreation here.)

2) Professor : What is the chemical symbol of Barium?

Tintumon : BA.

Prof : Of sodium?

Tintu : NA.

Prof : What shall we get if 1 atom of BA & 2 atoms of NA are combined?

Tintu : BANANA.

(The unique nature of the scientific register of English is the source of humour here. Though there is a scientific register in other languages too, the uniqueness of English language makes translation practically impossible in this case.)

3) Tuttumon : Pukavaliyum Yesudasum thammilulla vyatyaasam parayaamo? (Can you tell the difference between smoking and Yesudas?)

Tintumon : Athu eluppamalle! Pukavali paatilla. Pakshe, Yesudas paatum.

(This joke plays upon a unique feature of Malayalam – a word being the exponent of only one linguistic item when used in the affirmative sense and its negative counterpart serving as the exponent of two linguistic items. The word ‘paatum’ has only one meaning, ‘will sing’; but its negative counterpart ‘paatilla’ has two shades of meaning, ‘will not sing’ and ‘(something) is prohibited’. (Yesudas is a renowned singer.)

Students will definitely jump onto these examples when they are introduced in the translation class, as these are jokes that are improvised by them and/or much popular among them. The initial interest may be shallow fascination. But the teacher can take them from there to the deeper complexities of translation and the most troubling issue of untranslatability. Further, these examples would enlighten the learners on the challenges faced while translating humour/jokes. Thus, these jokes function as a highly potent teaching tool in the translation classroom.

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