Handbook of Translation Studies

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Wordplay in translation

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1. Wordplay and humor

Dirk Delabastita's definition of wordplay is dense but comprehensive:

> Wordplay is the general name for the various textual phenomena in which structural features of the language(s) 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: 128)

Semantically, several meanings are activated by identical or similar forms in a text. Formally, the definition includes *homonymy* (same sound and writing), *homophony* (same sound), *homography* (same writing) and *paronymy* (similar form). Textually, the author adds, a pun can be "horizontal" or "vertical" (Haussmann, explained by Delabastita 1996: 128). Harvard professor of economic history Neal Ferguson offers an example of a vertical pun: the title of a book chapter about America, "Chimerica". As a chapter title, "Chimerica" is a vertical pun because various meanings are activated by one form (*token*) on the communicative axis. In one go, the token *chimerica* refers to China's enormous stake in America's economy and to the word *chimera*. In horizontal puns, *several* identical or similar tokens appear in the chain of communication in order to activate various meanings: "How the US put US to shame" is Delabastita's homographic example (129).

Ferguson's *Chimerica* pun shows, on the one hand, that wordplay is not a subcategory of humor* (see also Henry 2003: 36): Ferguson's pun is meant quite seriously. On the other hand, wordplay – perhaps even Ferguson's pun – does often create some amusement, a smile or even laughter. If we accept that humor takes root in incongruity and superiority, then we understand why wordplay is often perceived to be humorous. Indeed, insofar as our naïve linguistic intuition suggests that there exists a one-to-one correspondence between words and things, wordplay may be (naïvely) perceived as a linguistic incongruity (Delabastita 2004: 601); and pragmatically (discursively) we usually strive for unambiguous use of language (discourse) so that the practice of wordplay can be felt as a pragmatic incongruity (ibid.). Also, some forms of wordplay activate superiority mechanisms: they require us to activate relevant background knowledge and invite us to find interpretive "solutions" to the incongruous communication (Vandaele 2001: 38) and they may be "demonstrations of virtuosity" (Henry 2003: 154).

2. Wordplay and translation

Whether serious or comical, wordplay creates linguistic problems of translatability because different languages have different meaning-form distributions (Delabastita 2004: 601; see also Henry 2003: 69–110 for a lengthy discussion of translatability).

Delabastita notes that a structural and typological dissimilarity of source and target language increases the linguistic untranslatability of puns. Yet he also insists that puns are textual phenomena requiring a textual solution. A textual, rather than an isolated, approach to puns increases translatability. For instance, a vertical pun based on polysemy (the Spanish *¡ay!* meaning both an admiring 'wow' and a painful 'ouch') may be translated into Dutch by a horizontal one based on paronymy (the Dutch *wauw!* and *auw!*) (Vandaele 2010). Moreover, argues Delabastita, if translators reflect about the various textual functions that puns may perform in a text, they will find ways or techniques to translate them: translation can go from one pun type to another (as in the *¡ay!* example), from pun to non-pun, from pun to a rhetorically related device such as repetition, alliteration or rhyme (1996: 134), from comical pun to comical non-pun, etc. For an analysis in this sense, see e.g. Marco (2010) on Catalan translations of works by Oscar Wilde and Graham Swift. Marco notes for his corpus that "the translators tend to use techniques resulting in a negative punning balance, i.e. techniques which imply loss in terms of punning activity with regard to the S[ource] T[ext]" (2010: 276). In a similar vein Klitgård (2005) insists, with reference to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, that puns are not just items with textual functions but patterned elements with contextual, ideological meanings: "Joyce's puns are not just verbal fun and games […] but form large unfamiliar and foreign patterns of strong political, ideological or ethical messages" (88). In other words, the specific metalinguistic import of a pun is only one factor to be taken into consideration and its weight depends on textual and contextual factors. For instance, if it is true that wordplay often carries socially transgressive content, the nontranslation of a pun may have moral grounds rather than linguistic ones: what should we make of the Francoist translation *Con faldas y a lo loco* ('Wearing skirts and foolishly') of Billy Wilder's film comedy *Some Like It Hot* (1959)?

Delabastita (1996) introduces a collection of excellent theoretical studies. Gottlieb (1997) points out that puns in comic strips and TV comedy are often activated by "polysemiotic" means. Further references to wordplay translation can be found in Heibert (1993), Tęcza (1997) and Henry (2003). The theoretical considerations in Delabastita (2004) may help translation students to find well-argued practical solutions to seemingly impossible source-text wordplay.

3. Linguistic humor but not wordplay?

Despite Delabastita's and others' insistence that even wordplay is *not* untranslatable, it is obvious that verbally expressed humor stretches over a continuum from easily translatable humor to very resistant, "metalinguistic" humor (if we leave cultural aspects aside). It is worth asking if play with words that is not play *on* words (i.e. that is not wordplay *sensu stricto*) (Henry 2003: 41) may also to some extent be resistant to translation. To that effect Attardo (1994: 223) suggests that intralinguistic paraphrasability – and interlinguistic translatability – is a good test to see if verbally expressed humor is rather "referential" (when its translation is easy) or "(meta)linguistic" (when the source text is resistant). Yet Attardo also deflates the importance of this test by claiming that most jokes are translatable or paraphrasable, hence not (meta-) linguistic.

Antonopoulou (2002) argues by contrast that the language dependency of humor is pervasive, stretching far beyond the socio- and metalinguistic. For cognitive linguists such as Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (Antonopoulou & Nikiforidou 2009), idiomaticity is omnipresent in languages, and much humor is linguistic in the sense that it hinges on specific linguistic constructions. A cognitive linguistic perspective on humor translation (see Cognitive approaches*) pretends to offer "fine-grained, cognitively based analyses which emphasize the importance of *idiomaticity* […], as Construction Grammar does" (Antonopoulou 2002: 199). About Raymond Chandler's opening sentence of *Trouble is my Business* ("Anna Halsey was about two hundred and forty pounds of […] woman"), Antonopoulou writes that the narrator uses a linguistic construction to create humor (2002: 204). The humor depends on the mass-noun construction *x pounds of y* as combined with the count noun *woman*. For translators it is important to realize that, besides metalinguistic humor, much humor is linguistic in the sense that it exploits cognitive rules attached to linguistic constructions. Such analyses explain why "Anna Halsey was a woman of about two hundred and forty pounds" is not a humorous paraphrase; and "Anna Halsey era una mujer de ciento diez kilos" not a funny Spanish translation.

There is however a *relatively* easy and adequate Spanish translation ("Anna Halsey era ciento diez kilos de mujer") that is funny for the same reason as the source text (at least for those who can live with its derogatory meaning); and this fact shows that the 'linguistic' translation problem here is not caused by a linguistic unavailability of structures (i.e. of form-meaning pairs in the Spanish *langue*) but by Chandler's unusual use (*parole*) of perfectly available structures. For Spanish translators, then, Chandler's narrator's joke is clearly not metalinguistic (*langue*-bound) yet neither is it entirely "referential" (that is, entirely funny because of *what* it represents, no matter *how* it represents it): though not English-bound, the representation's how certainly matters – and that's a matter of play *with* words (though not *on* words).

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