On Verbal Humour Translation from English to Chinese in Subtitles of Stand-up Comedies under the General Theory of Verbal Humour

Qingyi Zhang

Yunnan Technology and Business University, Kunming 650000, Yunnan, China

Abstract: Apart from the increase in local TV or network programs of stand-up comedies, many Chinese translators have translated English stand-up comedies online. In the light of Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humour, this research aims to discuss the translation effect of verbal humour in accordance with the six Knowledge Resources from the GTVH. After a qualitative analysis of research data, this research demonstrates the translatability of verbal humour in stand-up comedies.

Keywords: verbal humour translation, stand-up comedy, the General Theory of Verbal Humour

1. Introduction

1.1 Research background

Verbal humour is a universal linguistic phenomenon. The translatability of verbal humour has always been controversial. Humour, especially jokes and puns, have been considered as untranslatable (Alan, 2011). Verbal humour translation contains the features of entertainment on the language level, and it is the most significant element because any stand-up performance is on the basis of the script.

1.2 The General Theory of Verbal Humour

Attardo and Raskin raised the GTVH in 1991 to be a new and only mature semantic theory. It can be applied in research on the translation of verbal humour. The six Knowledge Resources proposed in this theory offers an empirical and pragmatic framework for the systematic and structural study on verbal humour through a similarity measurement that can compare the resemblance between the original text and the translation.

1.3 Research questions and methods

The research question is: To what extent and how is the verbal humour of the original subtitles in selected stand-up comedy videos transmitted to the translation from English to Chinese?

This research is conducted by using the qualitative method — case study to evaluate the effect of the verbal humour translation of subtitles in selected cases. In the source stand-up comedy, a total of 22 examples of excerpts with verbal humour are identified according to the six KRs from the GTVH. The script is studied as a whole, while some of the examples are singled out for specific analysis of the effect of humour delivering in the translations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Previous studies on verbal humor and its translatability

Critical issues, like whether verbal humour can be transferred and how humour can be effectively translated, have been addressed. The difficulties in the translation of humour were accepted by Laurian (1992, p. 127). Many researchers admit that humour translation is challenging; however, make efforts to study strategies to translate humour based on analysing the essential information conveyed through humour (Delabastita, 1994, p. 223).

In the light of Peter Alan Low's view of verbal humour's translatability, it does not require that the target text adopts the same linguistic construction, but simply deliberates the same funny messages. What the translators should do is to deliver the humourous elements as much as they can so that it can be recognised as humour (Low, 2011, p. 59-70).

2.2 The General Theory of Verbal Humour

Linguistics started to play a dominant role in humour research only in the late 1970s (Attardo, 1997, p. 395). It suggests that a joke is a confrontation, an overlap and transformation of two or more scripts or frameworks as the centre. The script opposition is an essential factor of verbal humour in the Semantic Script Theory of Humour, but it ignores other important factors which affect humour (Raskin, 1985).

Attardo (1991, p. 173-194) proposed six parameters of humour. Language (LA), Narrative Strategy (NS), Situation (SI) and Script Opposition (SO) are the four obligatory parameters. Target (TA) and Logical Mechanism (LM) are the optional parameters. These parameters are named knowledge Resources and can be used to describe any jokes:

LA contains verbal elements at all levels of a text. Any joke can be rewritten in a considerable number of ways (that is, using synonyms, other syntactic structures, etc.) with its semantic meaning reserved (Attardo, 1994).

NS indicated the narrative constructions embodied by humour. The narrative format of humour can be a conversation, a riddle, or a simple statement. The NS can be used to categorise the varying genres and sub-genres of verbal humour.

SI refers to the tool of a humourous text; it can be objects, participants, instruments or activities. Any joke should be about a specific thing (driving a car, having dinner, etc.). Some jokes depend more on the situation, while others may ignore it thoroughly.

SO refers to two opposing scripts, including the topics as real (unreal), possible (impossible), normal (abnormal) and so on. Almost all humour text involves script opposition.

TA is the object (the ones whom the joke makes fun of) of a humourous text.

LM includes verbal and non-verbal logical mechanisms which connect different discourses in a humourous text. As a complex parameter, the LM can embody the solution of discordance in incongruity-resolution models but is not necessary for humour. There are a few common logical mechanisms existing in humourous texts: role-reversal, role-exchange, analogy, self-undermining, garden-path, faulty-reasoning, exaggeration, etc.

3. Data Analysis

Stand-up comedian: Joan Rivers	
Verbal humour number: 6	
Context: Talking about how popular men are in the dating market.	
English source text: "We have an extra man."	Chinese translation and back translation: " 我们还有一位男士哦 " ("We have another man oh.")
"Bring him along, bring him along."	" 他一起来呀 带他一起来呀 " ("Let him come along, bring him along.")
"He's 98."	" 他都 98 岁了 " ("He is 98-year-old.")
"Bring him, bring him."	" 叫他来啊 叫他来啊 " ("Call him to come aah, tell him to come aah.")
"He's dead."	" 他已经死了 " ("He is already dead.")
"Bring him!..."	" 带！他！来！ " ("Bring! Him!")
...We'll pull up him, just bring him.	我们可以把他撑起来嘛 带他来就行了 (We can pull him up, just bring him.)
...We say he's quiet"	就说他是个安静的老男子 " (Say he is a quiet old man.)
I know what I'm speaking about,	这事我深有体会 (I fully understand this from personal experience.)
cuz my mother had two of those at home.	因为在我老妈家里 (Because in my mom's house)
Those weren't as the expression goes moving.	就有两个 "安静" 的人 (There are two "quiet" people.)
LA: Synonyms: quiet/ expression goes moving. Repetition at syntactic level: "Bring him."	
SO: In the dating market, even though men are considered as popular, it is impossible for a 98-year-old man or a dead man to go on a date. The script is opposite to the normal and real situation.	
NS: Conversation	
SI: Making fun of how men are popular in the dating market even though they are aged.	
LM: Exaggeration and ignoring the obvious. Exaggeration: "He's 98." Ignoring the obvious: "He's dead" "Bring him!"	
TA: Aged man	

All six parameters are obvious in the source text and are well delivered in the target text as well. And the use of "安静的老男子" is inspired by a network buzzword "安静的美男子(anjingde meinanzi)" which means a quiet and handsome man. The contrast between "an old man" and "a handsome man" forms a punchline in the target language, which sounds funnier in the translation than the original text. The use of domestication is effective in translating humourous factors in stand-up comedies because it renders the translation closer to the conversational manners of the target language users.

As for the coherence rule, in this case, the translator chooses to translate two synonyms — quiet and "weren't as the expression goes moving" into one Chinese term "安静(an jing, quiet)", consequently the audience can better understand the link between these two different lines with the same meaning in the comedy.

There are also some strategic additions such as modal particles "哦(o)", "啊(a)", "呀(ya)", "嘛(ma)", along with some colloquial expressions like "老妈(lao ma, Mom)". In this example, the informative content is not much; its primary purpose is to make the audience laugh or liven the atmosphere. Flexible strategies might maximise the reproduction of irony and hilarity.

4. Conclusion

Through above analysis, it is discovered that the humour similarity measurement consisting of the six Knowledge Resources can somehow be reflected in the Chinese versions despite some nuances between the ST and the TT.

In the translation of verbal humour, due to cultural barriers and linguistic differences, it is challenging for the original information and humorous effect to be perfectly reflected in the translation. Sometimes the KRs in the source text may be lost in the target text. Most of the original humourous elements are kept in the translation, only a few KRs cannot be found in the target text; thus most humour is translated successfully into the Chinese versions. That is to say, verbal humour in stand-up comedies is translatable in accordance with the knowledge resources measurement.

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