



# Challenges and Strategies in Subtitling Verbally Expressed Humour (VEH) from English into Chinese — A Study of *Vicious*

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the challenges and strategies of translating Verbally Expressed Humour (VEH) from English to Chinese, with the British sitcom *Vicious* as a case study. Drawing on Schmitz's humour classification and Nida's Functional Equivalence, it analyses universal, cultural, and linguistic VEH translation, demonstrating that domestication and substitution efficacy are contingent on humour types. It concludes that Functional Equivalence exhibits limitations and calls for a nuanced cross-cultural VEH framework.

**Keywords:** Verbally Expressed Humour (VEH), subtitling strategies, translation criteria, sitcom

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## 1. Introduction

The growing popularity of British sitcoms in China has foregrounded the critical challenge of subtitling their culturally-specific humour. This issue is exacerbated by prevalent “fansubbing” practices, where non-professional translations, constrained by deadlines and censorship, often fail to convey the original comedic intent. This study thus posits that the principal challenge lies in translating Verbally Expressed Humour (VEH), the failure of which fundamentally diminishes a show's comedic and narrative impact.

## 2. British Sitcom *Vicious*

This study utilizes the British sitcom *Vicious* (ITV, 2013–2016) as the case study for analyzing strategies in subtitling Verbally Expressed Humour (VEH). The narrative centres on Freddie and Stuart, an elderly gay couple whose fifty-year relationship is defined by a continuous stream of acerbic mutual insults[1].

Due to regulatory restrictions surrounding its central LGBTQ+ themes, *Vicious* was never officially broadcast in mainland China, forcing audiences to rely on unregulated “fansubs.” Consequently, this research employs an original translation to explore professional norms. The translation targets young adults (aged 20–35), a demographic assumed to possess the cultural literacy required to appreciate British humour. This profile grants the translator creative freedom to omit redundant explanations, prioritising the accessibility of the show's complex wit over literal fidelity[2].

## 3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter establishes the theoretical framework for scrutinising Verbally Expressed Humour (VEH) in *Vicious*. Acknowledging humour's definitional complexity, illustrated by Vandaele's (2002:167) ‘incongruity’ and ‘superiority’ pillars and the pragmatic approach of Diaz-Cintas and Remeel (2007:212), this study focuses specifically on VEH, as distinct from non-verbal humour (Attardo, 2002:188). While situated within a broader field encompassing Veatch (1998), Attardo and Raskin's (1991) GTVH, and Zabalbeascoa (2005), this research adopts Schmitz's (2002:89-113) tripartite classification—universal, cultural, and linguistic humour—as its primary analytical tool[3].

Translation efficacy is evaluated via Nida's (2004) Functional Equivalence, seeking “maximal equivalence” (Nida, 2001:87) wherein the target audience's response approximates that of the source (Nida, 1964:168). This is operationalised through the strategic dichotomy of Domestication, prioritising target-culture fluency (Nida, 1969), and Foreignization, which preserves the source text's cultural alterity (Venuti, 1998). Guided by Newmark's emphasis on context, a blended approach is employed[4].

## 4. Translation Analysis

### 4.1 The Translation of Universal Humour

Universal humour exhibits high translatability as it transcends specific linguistic and cultural contexts. Its efficacy stems from its appeal to shared cognitive frameworks and common human experiences, ensuring a consistent humorous

reception across diverse audiences.

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...get your dress on? Over your hump?	帮你把你的驼背塞进去?
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Consequently, the translation of such humour prioritises the attainment of maximal functional equivalence. Strategies should preserve both the semantic content and, crucially, the perlocutionary effect of the humour, as illustrated in the subsequent examples. First, Stuart's concern for his mother's "hump" is translated using "塞" (sai), a verb suggesting "to tuck forcefully". This choice vividly conveys the physical exaggeration and effort, effectively recreating the original's graphic humour[5].

## 4.2 The Translation of Cultural Humour

Since cultural humour is context-specific, Chiaro asserts that its translation is "above all, an inter-cultural" challenge rather than merely interlingual. Therefore, achieving cultural equivalence is paramount. Focusing on the selected clip, this study subcategorises cultural VEH and employs Chiaro's substitution strategy alongside domestication, subsequently assessing the feasibility of these methods in preserving comedic intent[6].

### 4.2.1 Substitution for Related Terms

This is the issue with this project since a variety of terms related to culture in SL (English) don't have counterparts in TL (Chinese). In this instance, the substitution technique should be used to produce a humorous impact.

#### 4.2.1.1 Buzzwords

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Nothing happened between us.	咱俩之间有毛线啊
I'm sorry. I got confused because...	抱歉，我风中凌乱了

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This section exemplifies the substitution strategy in translating humour, primarily through the judicious use of contemporary Chinese internet idioms to enhance equivalence. The first instance illustrates Ash's bewilderment at Violet's unfounded accusation of an affair. Instead of a literal "我们之间什么都没有" (Nothing happened between us), the translation employs "毛线" (knitting thread), a contemporary internet idiom that effectively conveys Ash's exasperation and disbelief, imbuing the expression with humour. Another example, the literal "困惑" (confused) is substituted with "风中凌乱" (dishevelled in the wind). This internet phrase vividly portrays a state of profound shock and confusion, perfectly capturing the hostess's incredulity regarding the two grooms.

#### 4.2.1.2 Taboo

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-Oh, you know this and that.	- 你懂的，这个那个喽
What the fuck is she wearing?	她特么穿的是个啥?

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Regarding sexual euphemisms, Violet's allusion to intimacy is rendered via "这个那个" (literally this and that), an established Chinese idiom used to vaguely refer to unspeakable acts. Conversely, strict censorship necessitates modifying profanity: the explicit "他妈" (Tama, a standard expletive) is replaced by the homophonic "特么" (Teme). This latter term is a popular internet neologism specifically adopted to evade content filtering. These instances demonstrate that translating taboos prioritizes semantic viability over strict lexical equivalence, thereby aligning with regulatory frameworks and the conservative sensibilities of Chinese audiences.

#### 4.2.1.3 Names

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-Oh, I thought we could take a taxi.	我还以为咱们打滴滴去就行呢
Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy back and forth	邓超孙俪那对明星夫妇式的拌嘴

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Despite audience linguistic competence, cultural specificities can impede comprehension, necessitating cultural substitution to preserve immediate humorous effect. Firstly, rendering "taxi" as "滴滴" (Didi, China's dominant ride-hailing app) underscores Violet's pretension; this juxtaposition of luxury with a mundane local service creates a sharper ironic contrast. Secondly, the potential opacity of "Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy" is resolved by their substitution with "邓超和孙俪" (Dengchao, Sunli). This domestication strategy prioritises functional equivalence, selecting local icons who embody the parallel "bickering but loving" dynamic.

### 4.2.2 Substitution for humorous effect

In many instances, a literal translation cannot capture humour as well as the original language. As a result, various sub-

stitutions are made to produce humorous effects, which frequently entails a total change of vocabulary. The choices made in this instance may be summed up as follows: “Preserving the VEH in the SL with an idiomatic expression in the TL” (Chiaro, 2006:202).

Now, come on. We're going.	快滚过来，跟老子走
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This analysis first examines a contrasting case involves the uneducated gangster, Jasper, whose persona necessitates intonational equivalence. Translating his “We” as the arrogant, dialectal self-designation “老子” (Laozi) powerfully signals his lack of manners and disrespect. This strategy not only achieves an idiomatic and humorous effect but also successfully renders Jasper’s intended characterization, thus demonstrating effective tonal adaptation in subtitling.

#### 4.2.3 Domestication method

As Nida (1969) states, absolute correspondence between languages is difficult. Thus, for the TL audience, translators must sensibly present ST semantics while ensuring useful cultural transfer. Treating cultural differences requires the translation to reproduce the ST’s style and spirit, encompassing its linguistic form and cultural connotations through appropriate compensation.

No, no, we can't do that.	臣妾做不到啊
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Cultural substitution bridges socio-cultural gaps by replacing source-specific humor with functional target equivalents to replicate the original comedic effect. This approach is exemplified by integrating the famous quote “臣妾做不到啊” (I cannot do this) from the drama *Empresses in the Palace* (甄嬛传), where humor is generated through the line’s well-known and contextually incongruous archaic formality.

### 4.3 The Translation of Linguistic Humour

Linguistic humour, or wordplay, strategically manipulates language’s formal properties for comedic effect. The following analysis examines three primary strategies employed in *Vicious* to translate such Verbally Expressed Humour (VEH).

Steel her by the hump!	轻扶驼背掌方向!
Matron	是伴老娘
She once fell out of a third-floor window and got right back up.	有次她从三楼掉下去，拍拍屁股就起来了

#### (a) Sentence patterns.

To translate humour derived from sentence structure, the imperative mood of a command is meticulously replicated. This strategy preserves the source text’s commanding tone, which likens a character to a malfunctioning vehicle, thereby ensuring the effective conveyance of its comedic subtext.

#### (b) Word formation.

Lexical humour, specifically malapropism (e.g., ‘matron’ for ‘bridesmaid’), is rendered through neologism. This approach achieves functional equivalence by coining a new term that merges key semantic attributes, thus successfully mirroring the source text’s comedic incongruity.

#### (c) Rhetorical Amplification.

For rhetorical devices like hyperbole, a compensatory strategy of amplification is employed. The translation intentionally heightens an exaggerated claim, operating on the principle that increased absurdity can bridge cultural-linguistic gaps and ensure a direct, potent comedic impact.

## 5. Conclusion

This study of VEH translation in *Vicious* reveals the limitations of functional equivalence, demonstrating that the efficacy of strategies like substitution and domestication is highly contingent on humour type. It thus argues for a more nuanced theoretical framework to navigate VEH between culturally distant systems. This research highlights a critical gap in Sinophone-focused translation studies and advocates for developing more sophisticated models for handling such complex linguistic transfers.

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