

HUMOR: YES. IT IS POSSIBLE TO TRANSLATE IT AND TEACH HOW TO TRANSLATE IT

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ABSTRACT: The present paper aims at presenting an answer to the question posed by John Robert Schmitz in TradTerm 3, 1996. This study will attempt to demonstrate that, taking into account the difficulties inherent to the translational act, it is nevertheless possible to translate humor and to teach how to translate it. With this purpose in mind, we will present an activity conducted with students of translation in which we will try to show some of the (linguistic, pragmatic and cultural) mechanisms utilized in creating humor and how we can proceed to retrieve them and retain the same, or almost the same, humorous effect in the translated text.

Keywords: humorous discourse; translation; teaching of translation.

While reading the article “*Humor: É Possível Traduzi-lo e Ensinar a Traduzi-lo?*” (Humor: Is it possible to translate it and teach how to translate it?) (*TradTerm*, 3, 1996) by Prof. John R. Schmitz, I felt quite motivated to offer an answer, not with the purpose of initiating a debate, but rather as an attempt to contribute to a discussion that is not only complex, but also controversial. This contribution does not intend to examine in depth the several theories of humor (which has been brilliantly done by Schmitz); it intends, however, to raise some relevant issues to the translation of humor, more specifically by means of a classroom activity, with the mere objective of illustrating some considerations presented by Schmitz.

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The complexity and controversy with regards to the translation of humor and the teaching of humor translation become quite clear when Schmitz (1996) asserts, along with the voices of several researchers on the subject, that there is no consensus about the effective possibility of translating humorous texts, but that there is, nevertheless, a general agreement that this type of texts represents a great challenge to translators. This challenge seems to stem from the various mechanisms utilized to achieve humor – mechanisms that occur on different levels: linguistic, pragmatic and cultural, just to mention a few. We entirely agree with Schmitz (1996) when he says:

The study of humor by translation students leads them to a deeper linguistic and cultural awareness (p. 87, my translation).

Furthermore, as we will be able to observe in the activity performed with translation students, the use of jokes seems to be quite suitable for this kind of practice since they represent short texts that constitute a complete textual universe, enabling the students to apprehend the text as a whole, a requirement which is not always met when they translate excerpts of literary texts, of newspaper articles and so on; i.e., the student is often unable to present an acceptable solution for he does not know the text as a whole. A more attentive reader may infer that we advocate a translation theory that only favors the “original” text; on the contrary, our concept of translation, to be presented further on, goes beyond traditional translation theories

But before going into our theoretical considerations, we would like to go over the text that prompted this paper. Still in the abstract, Schmitz (1996) claims that “*the answer to the question whether it is possible to translate humor is: in terms. When humor relies on the context or on the situation, there is no trouble translating jokes or quips. Nevertheless, when humor involves phonological, semantic or syntactic ambiguity, we find more difficulty due to the differences in the structure between the source and the target languages*“ (p. 87, my translation). When we are faced with an answer such as “in terms” and if we pursue the logical conse-

quences of this standpoint, one might readily deduce that the translation of jokes that do *not* rely on the context neither on the situation would not be feasible. This inclination to impracticability, fortunately, fades away as we move on. Schmitz (1996) adds: “*It is important to observe that the criterion for translating a joke from one language into another should not be based on the reconstruction of a given original humorous text.*”(p.88, my translation). That is why I do not agree with an answer such as “in terms”; I am convinced that a more suitable answer would be: “Yes, it is possible to translate humor”. To our mind, if humor is created relying either on the context, or on linguistic (phonological, semantic or syntactic) mechanisms, the translation of humor is still a very hard task, as difficult as translating any other type of text, but, above all, practicable.

All in all, the answer to the question on whether it is possible or not to translate humor is: yes. Translating a humorous or a non-humorous text is not based on translation theories that try to, at any cost, retrieve the meaning of the original. Our concept of translation tries to explore ways that put to rest the illusion that we can grasp the “original” only through the meanings we get while reading a certain text. According to Arrojo (1992a):

Every translation reveals its origin in one interpretation just because the text of which it is part, the so-called “original” can only live as the result of a reading which will – always and necessarily – be the product of the perspective and of the circumstances it is inserted in (p. 78, my translation).

The meaning of the source text is much more in the reader, for a text only starts to exist the moment it is read. Moreover, as Arrojo (1992a) points out: “*any translation, no matter how simple or unpretentious it may be, carries along with it a certain number of marks: the time, the history, the circumstances, the objectives and the perspective of the one who has done it (p. 78, my translation).*”

At this point, one of these factors which characterize a translation should be highlighted: its aims, and associate it another passage of Schmitz’s text (1996), in which he states:

Fidelity to the original text is not essential, but rather its commitment to (re)creating a humorous effect in the target language. (p.88, my translation).

It seems that this “(re)-creating a humorous effect” in the target language is closely connected with the objectives underlying the translation itself and the medium in which it will take place: oral or written. This commitment, in the case of jokes, can be seen through two perspectives at least. One can be a situation when a conference interpreter, who, in the presence of a very “funny” speaker, has to retell a joke, as a simple means of rhetoric, that is, a joke that would be relevant to the content of the speech. At this point, its commitment to the humorous effect seems quite appropriate: make the audience laugh at a certain moment. For this purpose, the interpreter could simply make use of a well-known joke and meet this expectation in a situation such as that. It is useful to mention that this kind of device is routinely recommended by veterans of the art of interpreting. In this specific case, almost “any” joke could be used to fill a pragmatic gap, this way, exceeding the limits of meaning. The other situation refers to written translation, which deserves more caution for it touches the source text more closely and, consequently, its aims. After all, it is about aims we are talking about! Even in written translation, on the one hand, the same device mentioned above would be used since the joke were not relevant to the text itself. On the other hand, were we translating culture-bound jokes to readers not familiar with the language, or adapting jokes to another culture, our attitude would be quite different. In these cases, we would necessarily stick to an undeniably “starting point” – the source text –, which can lead us to several “destinations”, equally satisfactory and appropriate depending on the ultimate reader of the translated text.

In short, what makes the translation of jokes (and of other types of texts) feasible is, inevitably, our concept of translation – a concept which, besides anticipating the various interpretations by the readers, accepts recreation as the only way out in some cases, e.g., a phonology-based humorous text.

The activity carried out with translation students¹ will be presented below. This activity consisted of translating jokes from English into Portuguese. We will try to demonstrate that it is possible to “teach” how to translate, or rather, that it is possible to lead the students to prolonged reflections on what translation is about and to lead them to more acceptable results.

The very selection of texts (jokes, here), should, preferably, mirror some concern not only for the challenge presented by the type of text, but also for the constraints placed by the structures of the languages involved. As far as jokes are concerned, they are internally structured on different mechanisms, which sometimes are not known or even noticed by the students. Therefore, before they go into translating, or while they are translating, the teacher can intervene pointing out the elements responsible for creating that piece of humorous text. Different aspects, both cultural and linguistic, can be brought into discussion before a solution in the source language can be found.

It is helpful to point out that, by believing that the result of a translation is closely connected with its objectives and before we get down to the actual translation process, some factors such as client, audience, time, register, genre and style should be established. This proposal is based on the ideas by Ruuskanen (1995), who suggests that the translator must construct a reader before beginning the translation. The author also suggests that, by changing one of these factors, we are automatically changing the result as a whole. So, before we began translating the jokes, the following table was established, that is, the teacher and the students came to terms that the translation would follow these parameters:

<i>Client</i>	publishing house
<i>Audience</i>	Brazilians, of different age groups
<i>Time</i>	one week

(1) This activity was carried out at the Faculdade Ibero-Americana, São Paulo, in 1995.

<i>Register</i>	everyday situation
<i>Genre</i>	humorous
<i>Style</i>	colloquial

The corpus used for the activity is presented below:

1. *How many Poles does it take to wash a car? Two. One to hold the sponge and one to move the car back and forth. (Ruch, Attardo & Raskin, 1993:135)*
2. *Diner: "Waiter, what's this fly doing in the soup?"
Waiter: "Looks like the breast-stroke, sir." (Nash, 1985:115, apud Yamaguchi, 1988:325)*

These two jokes refer to circumstances which pose no problem when they are translated (Schmitz, 1996) since humor relies on the context or situation. Joke # 1 clearly makes sense in the American society, for it is in this country that the Poles are ridiculed. In other countries, other ethnic groups are their laughing stock. In Brazil, for example, the Portuguese are the ones considered to be silly. This kind of joke requires a more general and culture-bound knowledge from the reader/listener so that humor can be achieved. As we will see further on, most of the students had no trouble translating this joke. For joke # 2, the translator would simply have to provide an answer equally literal. The students had no trouble translating such a joke either.

The following jokes require specific knowledge from the reader/listener because the humor lies in linguistic aspects (lexical, phonological, morphological, etc.)

Lexical

3. *"I don't think I've ever seen a \$ 200 bill."
"Really? I have one. I'll show it to you."
"You have a \$ 200 bill?"
"Of course, it's from my dentist."
(True 1981: 63, apud Laurian, 1992:115)*

4. Question: *What has four wheels and flies?*

Answer: *A garbage truck.*

(Dolitsky, 1992:38)

Phonological

5. *A famed Chinese diplomat attended gala reception in Washington in early part of the day. Senate lady, trying to make polite conversation, asked, "Dr. Wong, what 'nese' are you? Chinese, Japanese, or Javanese?" "Chinese", he replied, "and you, madam? What 'kee' are you? Monkey, donkey, or yankee?" (True 1981: 38, apud Laurian, 1992:114)*

Morphological

6. *Teacher, " said Bertie, "I can't do this problem because I ain't got no pencils".*

"Now, Bertie, " she said, 'It's a pencil. We don't have any pencils. They don't have any pencils.' "Do you understand?"

"No." admitted Bertie. "What happened to all them pencils?"

(True 1981:106, apud Laurian, 1992:117)

In general terms, these jokes focus their effect on the cognitive side. This aspect is closely linked with the incongruity theory (Morreall, 1983). According to this theory, "...amusement is an intellectual reaction to something unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate in some way." (Morreall, 1983:15).

This way, translating jokes is far from being an easy task. It requires much more than manipulating dictionaries and finding contextual equivalents. As translation in general, translating jokes is an intellectual activity which involves a heuristic process encompassing skills in four broad areas: "language, general knowledge, comprehension and re-expression" (Deslile, 1988:109).

How this can be applied in the classroom is shown next. Although we know that translation is a very complex activity, most laymen and even translation students think that once we are through with our translated text, it is ready to be printed.

Wrong. We know that this text can be changed as many times as it is revised. But, in real-life, conditions things are quite different, translators usually do not have plenty of time for several revisions. In the classroom, however, no matter how artificial it may seem, the teacher can train the students aiming at broader objectives, that is, translation, like writing, is “temporarily” finished. This does not mean, on the other hand, that the text needs no revising. With an activity as such, it is clear that the student can learn how to develop stronger criticism toward the translated text. The teacher, instead of simply collecting the translations and mainly correcting the “errors”, can make the student go through a more interesting and productive process, which will certainly make him/her more aware of what translating is about.

With an eye to the teaching of translation, the activity proposed anticipates, then, several sessions in which the student shares his/her decisions with both the teacher and the peers while he/she translates the text. To accomplish this activity, the students went through the following sequence:

- First meeting
 - teacher talks about the activities
 - students get the jokes to be translated at home
- Second meeting
 - peer-review following teacher’s guidelines
 - students write a report based on their discussions in class
 - teacher collects this report to prepare guidelines for the coming session
 - students “re-do” translation at home using peers’ suggestions
- Third meeting
 - peer-review following teacher’s guidelines
 - do the final draft at home following peers’ suggestions

The ideas used in this activity are based on the principles of the *process writing approach*, that is:

reading and writing are seen as interacting linguistic forces through which students will develop their overall academic

proficiency. Students are guided through numerous reading strategies that extract information from the printed page and then, through a process writing approach, they are shown that the act of writing itself helps to create, develop, and refine thinking processes. (Brown, Cohen & O'Day, 1991: vii).

Like writing a text of one's own, translating requires making several decisions and this kind of activity, inasmuch as it can be conducted within the framework of the classroom, can provide the students with situations that make them think over their own choices and alternative points of view. It is important to remember that, although these activities or this learning process as a whole might seem somewhat artificial, the student has the chance to see his/her translation "evaluated" and, most importantly, the chance to change it in the process of trying to improve its quality. This is not always possible for professional translators, for instance, for whom the deadlines are often very limited.

By applying this practice of peer-review and self-evaluation, the students are exposed to different points of view and gradually acquire the conventions of determined discourse styles previously unknown to them. Besides, the students are encouraged to develop self-confidence and "fight for" the choices they believe appropriate. The aim is to show that several interpretations are possible and acceptable.

The original jokes and their translated counterparts will be shown below:

Joke 1

How many Poles does it take to wash a car? Two. One to hold the sponge and one to move the car back and forth.
(Ruch, Attardo & Raskin, 1993:135)

*Quantos portugueses são necessários para lavar um carro?
Dois. Um para segurar a esponja e outro para movimentar o carro pra frente e pra trás.*

Joke 2

Diner: — *“Waiter, what’s this fly doing in the soup?”*

Waiter: — *“Looks like the breast-stroke, sir.” (Nash, 1985:115, apud Yamaguchi, 1988:325)*

Cliente: — *Garçom, o que esta mosca está fazendo na minha sopa?*

Garçom: — *Me parece que está praticando nado de peito, senhor.*

Cliente: — *Garçom, o que esta mosca está fazendo na minha sopa?*

Garçom: — *Está me parecendo nado de costas./ Praticando nado borboleta, senhor.*

Cliente: — *Garçom, o que esta mosca está fazendo na minha sopa?*

Garçom: — *Não se preocupe não, ela só está treinado para as Olimpíadas de 96. / Treinando para as próximas Olimpíadas, eu acho!*

Cliente: — *Garçom, o que esta mosca está fazendo na minha sopa?*

Garçom: — *Acho que ela está se preparando para a competição de natação da próxima semana, senhor. / Nada, está apenas nadando./ Parece que está praticando natação.*

Cliente: — *Garçom, o que esta mosca está fazendo na minha sopa?*

Garçom: — *Parece que ela está se afogando.*

Cliente: — *Garçom, o que esta mosca está fazendo na minha sopa?*

Garçom: — *Não sei, parece ter tido um ataque do coração.*

Cliente: — *Garçom, o que esta mosca está fazendo na minha sopa?*

Garçom: — *Se o senhor parar de mexer a colher, ela conseguirá sair viva do prato.*

These two jokes posed no translation problems for reasons already mentioned. Nevertheless, it is helpful to point out that once the mechanism utilized to achieve humor is detected, the translator simply has to find an equally effective one in the tar-

get language. That is, for Joke 2, for instance, the waiter would have to provide an answer as unexpected as in the original. We think the initial situation (fly in the soup) should be kept in order that the text could still be called a translation.

Joke 3

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a \$ 200 bill.”
 “Really? I have one. I’ll show it to you.”
 “You have a \$ 200 bill?”
 “Of course, it’s from my dentist.” (True 1981: 63, apud Laurian, 1992:115)

– *Nunca vi uma nota de 200 reais!*
 – *Como não? Eu tenho uma.*
 – *Você tem uma!*
 – *Claro. A nota fiscal do meu dentista./ A nota promissória do banco.*

In this case, some changes are necessary, since the lexically-based double meaning is not solved by simply changing one word. In order to keep humor, it was necessary to translate one of its meanings and add an adjective. Some students, however, translated it literally, and, obviously, presented something that was no longer a joke. This type of translation was considered unsatisfactory.

Joke 4

Question: What has four wheels and flies?
 Answer: A garbage truck. (Dolitsky, 1992:38)

– *O que tem quatro rodas e voa?*
 – *Um carro de polícia.*

From this joke on, more specifically, things seem to be more difficult for the ambiguity is created by changing the word class, that is, in our first reading we think of the verb *to fly* in the third person singular and, consequently, of another kind of

aircraft. We, then, realize it refers to *flies*, the plural of *fly* (the household insect) and to another kind of vehicle. Finding the same kind of ambiguity in Portuguese is simply impossible. But, after some struggle and creativity, a satisfactory solution was found. In this case, the ambiguity is partially re-created, playing with the polysemy of the verb “voar” (to fly), the meanings of which include, among others: “*sustentar-se ou mover-se no ar por meio de asas ou de aeronaves* (“to move through the air or travel by aircraft)” e “*correr velozmente* (to move quickly)” (*Novo Dicionário Aurélio*, p. 1786). This way, the reader/hearer of the translated joke also thinks of a new type of aircraft, however, realizes it refers to the *ways* it can travel.

Joke 5

Famed Chinese diplomat attended gala reception in Washington in early part of the day. Senate lady, trying to make polite conversation, asked, “Dr. Wong, what ‘nese’ are you? Chinese, Japanese, or Javanese? “Chinese”, he replied, “and you, madam? What ‘kee’ are you? Monkey, donkey, or yankee?” (True 1981: 38, apud Laurian, 1992:114)

Um famoso diplomata chinês chega à recepção de gala em Brasília, e é recebido pela senhora que tenta puxar papo perguntando: – Que tipo de “nês” o senhor é Dr. Wong? Chinês, japonês ou javanês? – Chinês – respondeu não muito satisfeito com a pergunta. – E a senhora que tipo de “eira” é? Estrangeira, maloqueira ou brasileira?

Um famoso diplomata chinês compareceu à recepção de gala na embaixada da Polônia em Washington e, durante a madrugada uma senadora, tentando ser gentil, perguntou a ela: – Dr. Wong, que tipo de “nês” o senhor é? Chinês, japonês ou javanês? – Chinês – respondeu ele. – E a senhora que tipo de “aca” é a madame? Macaca, bruaca ou polaca?

Although these two suggestions do not use the same images of the original: animals and local designations, they are

able to cause humor by using the same mechanism – phonology-based. Besides, another suggestion given by a student seems to be the most felicitous:

Um famoso diplomata chinês chega à recepção de gala em Brasília, e é recebido pela senhora que tenta puxar papo perguntando: – Que tipo de “nês” o senhor é Dr. Wong? Chinês ou japonês? – Chinês – respondeu não muito satisfeito com a pergunta. – E a senhora que tipo de “eira” é? Toupeira ou brasileira?

One of the questions commonly asked by students is: “But can this be done?” Our answer is: “Yes, provided that our objectives are taken into account”.

What arguments would we use to accept a translation such as this? First, choosing only two nationalities seems to represent a strong argument since we would hardly include Javanese as a nationality mistakable for the Asians commonly found in Brazil. Second, we would be more coherent to the original idea of comparing the American to a kind of dumb and laughable animal, and “toupeira” (mole) seems to satisfy this comparison, even creating the sonority required by rhyming with “brasileira” (a Brazilian female). In addition, our pragmatic objectives would be achieved: to cause humor to Brazilians.

Joke 6

“Teacher, “ said Bertie, “I can’t do this problem because I ain’t got no pencils”.

*“Now, Bertie, “ she said, ‘It’s a pencil. We don’t have **any** pencils. They don’t have **any** pencils.’ “Do you understand?” “No.” admitted Bertie. “What happened to all them pencils?” (True 1981:106, apud Laurian, 1992:117)*

– Professora! – chamou Joãozinho. A gente não podemos fazer a lição porque a gente não temos lápis.

*– Joãozinho, só uma coisa. – disse ela. – Preste atenção! **Eu** não **tenho** lápis. **Nós** não **temos** lápis. **A gente** não **tem** lápis.*

Entendeu?

– Não. – *confessou ele.* – *Ué, o quê aconteceu com todos os lápis?*

If the same type of “error” (double negative) made by the American child had been chosen, it would have gone unnoticed in Portuguese, for this kind of use is perfectly possible in this language. In this case, the translator should find elements typical of the speech of a child that could be seen as “errors”. So, this incorrect use of “a gente” with the verb in the plural seems quite natural for a child who is still learning how to read and write.

The translation of humorous or non-humorous texts is an intellectual activity interconnected with comprehension, general knowledge, language and re-expression. It is a kind of activity which not only admits various interpretations by the readers, but also accepts that the text is translated based on its objectives, considering the original text as a simple starting point.

Translation is a process which goes beyond the sheer manipulation of dictionaries: it requires a lot of effort, imagination and creativity. By proposing these peer-reviews and self-evaluations, the students are being confronted with their limitations, which may be overcome after discussing relevant points with their peers. This way, the teacher is not seen as the only provider of answers. With this exchange of information, the students realize that their translated text can always be modified for better. This does not mean that all problems are solved. The students, on the other hand, become more aware of the complexity of translation and try to find more acceptable solutions based on this reflection.

As demonstrated, we hope to have answered the initial question in a satisfactory manner. We can both translate humor and teach how to translate it, provided we are careful enough to leave some factors quite clear, that is, in order that humor can be translated and recovered, the translator needs: (a) to have a thorough knowledge of the languages involved to notice where the rule is being broken to create humor; (b) to have interpreted and understood the content using judgment and intelligence and

(c) to have expressed him/herself taking into account not only the standards of the target language, but also the needs of the audience addressed.

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