Translation strategies: adaptation and equivalence — Joker contest

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Abstract

This paper deals with wordplay translation strategies based on the Joker project and contest. Humour and wordplay are discussed a lot in linguistics as well as in translation studies. Both very difficult to render, they have been the subjects of debates, theses and analysis in many languages. The goal is to analyze the data collected through the Joker contest and find examples of conventional puns or translations of cultural allusions to explain the strategies relevant when going from one language to another. Moreover, my personal experience with the Joker contest and the Joker classification is used as an example of the reasoning taken when translating a wordplay.

Keywords

wordplay, translation, humour, Joker project

1. Introduction

Humour has always been an issue in translation. According to the dictionary (*Le Robert*), a wordplay is a joke based on the similarity of at least two words. This means that only terms that are homonyms, homophones or homographs are considered to be wordplays and that the entire concept of wordplay relies on phonetic similarity, even though it also plays the form of words, grammar rules and common social norms. It challenges the structures and uses of language for different purposes (creative, poetic, humorous, cryptic, rhetorical, etc.)[1]. Mustonen explains that "wordplay is a general term for the phenomenon of exploiting the inherent structures of a language to create a communicatively significant (near) simultaneous confrontation of two or more meanings" (Mustonen 5). The author also emphasizes the communicational aspect of wordplay, which is essential in the translation of cultural references and elements.

When going from the source language to the target language, one can wonder if some elements of information or cultural references are inevitably going to be left behind and whether strategies exist to render them as faithfully as possible. This paper explains how to translate a conventional pun or a pun containing a cultural allusion by using adaptation and equivalence. It also provides a very short review of the translation strategies that exist as far as humour and wordplay are concerned. I use The Joker project and the Joker contest to justify the research and the analysis that is proposed throughout this paper, as well as theses and articles written on this subject.

2. Translation strategies

2.1. Wordplay characteristics

2.1.1. Primary characteristics

Wordplay has to be communicational and intentional. Indeed, "one of the basic purposes of wordplay is to communicate something that may not be explicitly stated" (Mustonen 6) such as voices, persuasion, awareness, irony, tension or taboo subjects. However, identifying wordplay relies on the reader's ability to spot it [4]. Cultural references acquire a specific weight according to the communicative context of the enunciation and the constraints dictated by this same context. The difficulties of translation can result either from the absence of these references in the target language or from their different statuses in the target culture [6].

2.1.2. Secondary characteristics

Numerous researches examine the translation strategies regarding humour, more specifically wordplay. Some of the elements to take into consideration when translating wordplay are whether it is:

- **an idiom**: "a stable word combination with a fully or partially transferred meaning"(Mustonen 25);
- **an allusion**: "references to an external context"(Mustonen 27);
- **a malapropism**: "rarely intentionally produced by speakers; most occurrences of malapropisms in regular dialogue are slips of the tongue"(Mustonen 28);
- **a proper noun**: proper nouns can carry meaning;
- **a portmanteau**: the fusion of two words;
- **interdependent**: "some puns may be dependent on other puns"(Mustonen 32).

2.2. The notion of fixity and wordplay translation

Fixity refers to the rigidity of some structures which are, by nature, linguistically frozen. It is built through norms, imposed by sociological elements, but it relies strictly on a linguistic nature [3]. More precisely, when translating, one must take into account that the structure of the target language will be different from the one of the source language. For example, Salah Mejri explains that every language structure is governed by rules which determine the use of specific words or expressions [3]. Fixity plays an important role in the adaptation of cultural references and in translation in general as the translator must be cautious whether the pun is trapped into the word and sentence structure or not.

2.3. The translation codes:

Multiple ways to translate wordplay while keeping the source text in mind exist [5].

- **Borrowing**: the word is not translated and can be understood by the target readership;
- **Loan translation or calque**: a literal translation, the action of finding an equivalent in another language;

- **Word-for-word**: translating the words separately without taking their sense into consideration when they are put together in a sentence;
- **Transposition**: changing the syntax but not the sense;
- **Modulation**: changing the point of view;
- **Equivalence**: adapting the text to the target readership. Equivalence is often used for the translation of idioms. The concept of equivalence is divided into two notions by Eugene Nida (American linguist and translator): dynamic equivalence (the target text does not look like a translation, it looks natural) and functional equivalence (the emphasis is placed on the message, it must stay loyal to the message of the source text);
- **Adaptation**: useful for the translation of cultural elements, so that they are understood by the target culture. The translator needs to make sure that the reference will be successfully comprehended by changing it into an allusion familiar to the readership.

3. Joker project and contest

The Joker project exists in order to "bring together translators and computer scientists to work on an evaluation framework for wordplay, including data and metric development, and to foster work on automatic methods for wordplay translation." [1]

The project's main goal in the automatic translation of wordplays and humour are:

- To study humour and wordplay localization strategies;
- To create a multilingual parallel corpus, annotated according to these strategies, open and freely available with respect to the third parties' copyrights;
- To develop evaluation metrics.[1]

The Joker project organised a contest in which anyone could participate. The goal was to translate as many wordplays as possible from English into French. In order to be considered a good translation, the target wordplay needed to:

- contain the same semantic field as the source wordplay;
- contain a form of wordplay [1].

All participants were given the same list, and every translation was then collected in order to be classified and added into the project's data. The data is then used to analyze the different translations a strategies and possibilities and strengthen the classification.

Wordplays are classified according to eight categories, one of them being the "Presence of (mostly) cultural allusion". This column is important, especially in translation. It allows one to easily find how the translator dealt with the presence of cultural elements or allusions.

3.1. Joker contest: analysis and personal experience

Equivalence and **adaptation** are interesting in the case of the translation of cultural references. Before being introduced to those two notions, what mattered the most was whether what I had translated made sense and whether the pun was located on the same word or group of words. I

tended to opt for a literal translation as it seemed to be the easiest way to create the same (or at least almost the same) pun or wordplay. However, when the French word did not contain as much ambiguity as the English word, I tried to find a synonym to make sure I kept the same lexical field. When I could not find one, I changed the whole wordplay (while trying to keep the same lexical field and sense), example:

> Some people don't have the Vegas idea of how to quit gambling.[1]
> La meilleure façon de gagner au casino c'est de garder une poker face.[1]

Translation: The best way to win in a casino is to keep a poker face.

While the ambiguity lies in the similarity between "Vegas" and "vague" in English, I shifted the location to the word "poker" that can also be found in the expression "poker face". The downside of this translation is that Vegas is completely gone.

But for a reference to be understood by the target readership, the translator needs to adapt it to the target language or target culture. As an example, the pun "Wal - Mart isn't the only saving place !"[1] is based on the ambiguity of "saving" (saving as in a discount, and saving as in a safe place). However, it also contains the reference Walmart, an American retail corporation. In order to translate the sentence correctly (by correctly I mean keeping the sense and lexical field), the translator needs to adapt this reference. Walmart might be well-known internationally, but it does not mean that a French person would understand it. A participant proposed the following translation: "*Le clerc du village est adorable : il défend toujours ce qui compte pour nous.*"[1] (Translation: The village clerk is lovely: he always fights for what matters to us). The ambiguity in the translation lies in the phonetic identity between "*Le clerc*" (the clerk) and "*Leclerc*" (a French hypermarket chain, which is more or less the equivalent of Walmart in France). Another example would be the pun "A kettle on the stove was singing "Home on the Range"". Here, the word "range" contains ambiguity. Indeed, on its own it is a kitchen stove, but in the sentence it is a part of the cultural reference *Home on the Range*[1], which is a famous country song. It is impossible to keep the title of the song in the French translation, so one of the participants found another way: "*Une bouilloire dansait sur la cuisinière en sifflotant le générique de "La Petite Maison dans l'après-riz"*[1]." (Translation: A kettle was dancing on the stove, whistling the opening of *Little House on the Prairie*). The translator chose to keep the context of a cottage core house given by the source pun but transferred the actual wordplay to the word "*sifflant*" (which describes the whistle of a a tune and the noise a kettle makes when the water is boiling). He also played with the oral identity between "*La Petite Maison dans la Prairie*" (Little House on the Prairie) and "*La Petite Maison dans l'après-riz*" (The Little House on the after-rice, which does not mean anything but allows the word rice to make a link with the kettle and the water boiling) in French as they are both pronounced the same way.

The same process can be used for the translation of idioms, with the system of equivalence. For example, in the phrase-based classification of the Joker project, the pun "So let's let bybones be bybones" can be found (from the video game Undertale)[1]. Wordplay here lies in the similarity between "bybones" and "bygones" but also in the fact that "So let's let bygones be bygones" is an idiom that means "let's forget about the past". It has been translated by "*Allez,*

on se serre la carpe"[1] in French, which is a mixture between the idiom "*on se serre la pince*" (we help each other) and the word "*carpe*" (a carp). The sense is somewhat the same while the lexical field is completely different, but it can be considered a correct translation as the idiom has been translated by another idiom.

3.1.1. Translating conventional pun forms

One of the issues that the contest made me realise is the translation of conventional pun forms. Tom Swifty puns for example were an interesting case. In the contest, I just kept the structure of "Tom did..." or "Tom said...". But as I had to classify and translate after learning about the classification process, I decided to opt for the translation "Quel est le comble pour..." (Translation: What is the greatest paradox for...) and keep the context of the source pun. Example:

> I haven't developed my photographs yet, said Tom negatively.[1]
> "Je n'ai pas encore développé mes photos", dit Tom de façon négative.[1]

It is a literal translation, which is understandable but does not mean anything in terms of structure for a French readership. Although the ambiguity still exists (*négative* as in pessimist and *négative* in photography), the translation does not feel natural.
I realised that, for the pun to work, the main goal of the translator is to adapt the conventional pun so that a French readership would understand it. As an example, I now choose to translate Tom Swifties this way:

> I travel all over America, Tom stated.[1]
> Quel est le comble pour le président américain ? De se mettre dans tous ses états.[1]

Translation: What is the greatest paradox for the president of the United States? To be in one hell of a state.
Here, the sense and lexical field is preserved. What has been adapted is actually the first part of the pun which can be translated as "What is the greatest paradox for...". This structure is a common French pun form and helps a French person to identify a conventional pun, while a literal translation will lose this aspect (even if wordplay is translated well).

4. Conclusion

Many aspects must be taken into consideration when translating humour, and especially wordplay. If it seems to be an easy task at first, while translating for the contest I realised that I could spend thirty minutes on a single pun, making sure I found the best translation that I could taking into account the semantic field of the source text and trying to find an equivalent in French. It is even harder when wordplay contains cultural references or is caught in a conventional form. Not only the sense, lexical field and potential idiom or allusion must be translated, but the translation also needs to respect a structure, familiar and natural enough, for the target readership to understand what the entire pun relies on. The Joker contest and

classification allowed me to take a look at all the participant's translations and develop a new sense of analysis when it comes to dissecting and deciphering wordplay. I realised that, quite naturally, the participants adapted the cultural reference in English to make it understandable in French and only a very few of them kept the original reference. However, it was not the case for the "Tom Swifties" puns, which were usually kept as it is in English rather than transformed into a conventional form familiar to a French readership. I found adaptation and equivalence to be strategies relevant in the field of humour as they both contain a strong communicational role, which is the key to understanding humour and/or puns, but these are also strategies that need to be applied in many other fields such as in multimedia translation, especially in dubbing for example.

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