Some Difficulties in Translating English humour into Arabic

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Introduction

Humour is the ability to understand and enjoy what is funny and what makes people laugh. Despite the existence of universal humour as in a child making mature adult-like statements, it is assumed that some languages have their own characteristics linguistically and culturally that evoke in their audience pleasurable and playful response. Menacere, M. ('1991:36) tells us that

As individuals view reality differently, it would be impossible to ask two

different languages to express thoughts in similar manner because each one possesses a mode of expression using the linguistic devices available in the language according to its needs. This has its bearing on translation; however, in the case of similar cultures and languages it is often possible to have an effective translation (Raphelson-West, 1989: 129).

The translation of English humour into other languages has been dealt with by Leibold (1989), Nilsen (1989) ,Ornstein- Galicia (1989) among others .

The purpose of this paper is to investigate and analyze English humour and demonstrate the difficulties encountered in rendering it

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into Arabic, a language linguistically and culturally different from English.

The language of humour is the result of conscious and deliberate planning and design; it relies heavily on puns and ambiguity whether spoken or written to produce a dramatic effect on the reader or hearer. Humour occurs at the various levels of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and culture. The translator would have to decide what to keep and when to break away from the linguistic and cultural imperialism of the source language so that natural discourse may be produced and the communicative objective of the message may be preserved. For the purpose of translation we shall distinguish two main
types of humour i.e. linguistic and cultural.

Linguistic Humour

Linguistic or language based humour is challenging and requires greater effort in processing because of the different structures of the two languages. An example would be the following:

(1) A:
How do
you make
a cat
drink?

B:

Easy, put it in the liquidiser.

English stress and intonation in 'cat drink' cause the ambiguity here, and semantically give it two possible interpretations i.e drink for a cat or make a cat drink. This humorous text was shown to five bilingual teachers of English and translation who were asked to translate it into Arabic. Three of the translations opted for the interpretation that by putting the cat in the liquidiser it will be able to drink. One translation regarded' cat' as a brand name for a drink and transliterated it into Arabic letters. One translation opted for the surface meaning that we can make a drink for the cat by putting the drink in the liquidiser which is not the purpose of the humorous utterance.

The five translations demonstrate how problematic it is to render into the target language humour that is based on semantic ambiguity. The translations that opted for the deep meaning of the text have failed to create the ambiguity -the source of humour -and consequently, they were not funny at all. The reason for this problem is provided by Catford (quoted in Bassnet-McGuire, 1980:32) who points out that linguistic untranslatability is due to the differences in the source language and the target language. No equivalent Arabic text would reflect semantically the two interpretations above. Therefore we may conclude that this type of humour is language specific and hence, untranslatable as far as equivalence is concerned.

Nevertheless, Lefevere (quoted in Susan- McGuire, 1980:82) sheds some light and proposes that the problem of linguistic untranslatability can be best solved by what he calls' versions , in which the substance of the source text is retained and the form is changed. Therefore, any literal translation will not be appropriate and greater intervention on the part of the translator is called for .

Another difficulty in translating humour is illustrated in the following joke:

> (2) An American asks a Britisher what he does. The Britisher in his r-less vowel dialect responds " I'm a clerk ". The American assumes on the basis of this answer that the Britisher sits round all day going' tick, tock, tick, tock ' .

The ambiguity creating humour here comes from the British pronunciation of the word' clerk' which is understood by the American as 'clock'. We see no humour in literal translation since phonologically it is not possible to clone the sound in Arabic, however, by providing a gloss to the body of the text such as:

قالها بلهجة إنجليزية بريطانية .

تشبه في نطقها كلمة ساعة باللهجة الإنجليزية الأمريكية .

we can provide the readership with background information about British and American pronunciation and the joke becomes comprehensible ,however, the dramatic effect is not as good as the original.

Humour can sometimes be created by playing on the word morphemes as in the following:

(3) A: What's a baby pig called ?

B: A piglet.

A: So what's a baby toy called?

B: A toilet.

In the above joke '–let' is a suffix 'bound morpheme' meaning 'small' as in a 'flatlet' meaning a small flat. for the reason of humour it is used creatively to make a new word in which the final syllable of 'toilet' is interpreted as the bound morpheme -let. Hence creating a new word meaning a small toy. This manipulation of the morphological rule is done on purpose to create this special effect. To translate it successfully into Arabic it would be necessary to find an equivalent morphological form that rhymes in the same way as that of the English. And since the morphological system of Arabic has no ready mechanism for producing such form, any translation preserving the form of the source language is not feasible and therefore, the translator would inevitably recourse to

retaining the sense rather than perhaps paraphrase which is relatively easy and workable with other types of prose.

Humour can also be found in the use -of phrasal verbs. The following is an example:

(4) A: When a car is not a car?

B: When it turns into a garage.

Ambiguity here lies in our interpretation of the verb 'turn into' either as 'to move in the direction of' or 'to change into' .In translating it into Arabic without intervention, we will be left with one interpretation since the equivalent verb in Arabic is not polysemous. Consequently, loss of the humour inherent in the English utterance is inevitable. Literal translation would look like this :

(a4) متى لا تكون السيارة سيارة ؟

عندما تتحول إلى كراج (عندما تتجه إلى الكراج)

The translation above fails to convey the two meanings in one lexical item and consequently, the communicative and pragmatic objectives are lost. Therefore, the translator may resort to a procedure

called by Herevy et al (1992: 37) "compensation in place" which consists in making up for any loss of effect in a given place in the source text by recovering a corresponding effect at another place in the target text. In this case changing the verb "turn into" to "تقف" meaning "to stop" and by playing on the duplicity of the meaning of the word "سيارة" (car- moving) , the translator can create ambiguity that minimizes the loss in the original and is perhaps as humorous .

(5) Contraceptives should be used on every conceivable occasion

In the example above the clue creating humour lies in the metaphorical use of the word 'conceivable' immediately bringing to mind its relationship with contraceptives, which should be used to prevent 'occasion' from getting pregnant. Any Arabic translation not considering the humorous effect created by the pun would lead as Newmark (1995) puts it 'to ugly translation thereby defeating the text', In translating the above into Arabic a similar ambiguity can be recovered by means of a compensationary technique, though not with a 'conceivable' .equivalent word, in the following translation:

(a5) ينبغي حمل مانع الحمل في كل المناسبات .

(Back-translation) Preventive of pregnancy should be carried on all occasions.

Contraceptives should be carried on every occasion.

In the Arabic version, ambiguity lies in the two possible interpretations of the word "حمـل" meaning either 'to be pregnant' or 'to carry'. Also the word 'used' in English has changed to 'carried' in Arabic. It is not an exact rendering of the original as accuracy is sacrificed for the sake of naturalness and communicative value, yet it creates similar ambiguity which, I believe, 'teases the brain' and perhaps produces a smile.

Pragmatic humour occurs when people concentrate on the sense of the utterance rather than its force. The speaker deliberately intending to create humour gives less information than is required and becomes ambiguous, thereby leading the hearer, in his interpretation of the utterance, into drawing certain conclusions i.e. implicature and replying accordingly. (See Grice H. P.1975, The Cooperative Principle, pp. 45-6).

(6) A: Does your dog bite?

B:No

(A -bends down to stroke the dog and gets bitten)

A: I thought you said your dog didn't bite ?

B: It's not my dog.

(a6) – هل كلبك يعض ؟

لا

(ينحني لكي يربت عليه فيعضه الكلب) .

- حسبت أنك قلت لي بأن كلبك لا يعض ؟

ولكنه ليس كلبي .

(7) A rabbit goes into a butcher's shop and asks, Have you got any lettuce ? The butcher says, We don't sell lettuce here. You need the green grocer's across the road . The next day the rabbit comes into the shop and asks for some lettuce again. The butcher tells him, look, I told you yesterday, we don't sell lettuce. You need the greengrocer's. The rabbit comes in the next day and asks the butcher again, Have you got any lettuce? The butcher goes mad. He says, Look I'm sick of this. How many times do I have to tell you I don't sell lettuce? If you come in here again asking for lettuce I'm going to nail your ears to the floor. The next day the rabbit comes in and asks the butcher, Have you got any nails? Nails? No.' 'Right, 'the rabbit says, 'Have you got any lettuce?'

(a7) دخل أرنب إلى دكان قصاب وسأله " هل لديك خس ؟ " فقال القصاب " نحن لا نبيع الخس هنا ، عليك بالذهاب إلى دكان الخضراوات على الجانب الآخر من الشارع " . في اليوم التالي جاء الأرنب للدكان وسأل عن الخس مرة أخرى ، فقال له القصاب " أسمع لقد أخبرتك بالأمس أننا لا نبيع الخس ، ما تريده هو دكان الخضراوات " . لكن الأرنب أتى في اليوم التالي وسأل القصاب مرة أخرى فجن جنون القصاب وقال له "

أسمع لقد سئمت هذا الأمر ، كم مرة يجب أن أخبرك بأنني لا أبيع الخس ، لو أتيت إلى هنا مرة أخرى سأثبت أذنيك بالمسامير في الأرض " لكن الأرنب جاء في اليوم التالي وسأل القصاب " هل لديك مسامير ؟ " أجاب القصاب " لا " فرد الأرنب " إذاً هل لديك خس " .

In the examples above pragmatic humour in no. (6) results from A's conclusion that the dog belongs to B and that it does not bite and in no. (7) from the Butcher's belief that the rabbit was in fact asking about nails.

Apart from the use of different cohesive devices to establish linkage, my proposed translation of examples (6) and (7) demonstrates that the content and grammatical structure and style of the original text can be preserved thereby securing referential and pragmatic equivalence . More importantly, the humour of the source text is perfectly retained. This is due to the fact that the text is "static" not departing from the norm , hence it requires the least intervention on the part of the translator and literal translation appears to be appropriate and achieves its goal.

Cultural humour

Newmark (1995: 94) defines culture as the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression. Consequently, translation involving heterogeneous cultural and linguistic systems is different

from translation between related languages belonging to the same cultural sphere in that the difficulties are greater (Wakabayashi, 1991: 420). Besides, for any cultural translation to be successful, it has to take into account all the different values and thought patterns and even logic of the source text. It depends on how much of the source language culture can be imposed on the target language structure in order for the communication to be effective and the language to be natural. Failing to do that will only result in the breakdown of communication. The following humour is an illustration of cultural difference:

(8) Manchester children all follow United, because their mothers tell them to stay away from The Maine Road

(9) There were paratroopers showing the Californian around their native city of New York. They decided that he could best see it and avoid traffic by jumping out of a plane, so they took him up and all prepared to parachute. They told him, , After you jump, count to ten and then pull the cord' .Well, he jumped but fell to the ground before pulling the cord. When the paratroopers landed, they heard, emitting from beneath a haystack,: .six..... seven..... , eight.....

(adapted from Raphelson -West (1989: 132).

When translating examples (8) and (9) into Arabic, they will be perfectly comprehended, but there is no way for the reader or hearer to know the ambiguity in' the Maine Road' , the home of Manchester City football ground nor will he know about the speaking habits of the people in California and New York in that the stereotypical New Yorker speaks fast and the stereotypical Californian speaks slowly. Untranslatability here is due to the absence in the target language culture of a relevant situational feature for the source language. text i.e. the location of Manchester United football ground in (8)and the speaking habits of the people of California and New York in (9) .This cultural hegemony leaves the translator with the option of either "domesticating" the joke i.e. to express it in a way familiar to the target language reader or hearer being aware that the socio-cultural match is lacking in the target language. This is maximal intervention or "foreignizing" of the joke where the translator decides to make concessions to the culture of the source text making it entirely visible to the target language reader or hearer (minimal intervention) through providing a gloss to compensate for the cultural gap, however this would also serve the purpose of demonstrating what jokes are like in American or British culture. Whether the translator opts' for the first or the second procedure to bridge the gap of culture is as Chau (1984) puts it left for the skill and intuition of individual translators.

Conclusion

The language of humour is highly motivated and relies heavily on deliberately devised structural complexity and semantic ambiguity .To appreciate it the reader or hearer has to go through the process of analysis in his mind and work out the pragmatic meaning. The translator being the mediator is required to create approximately a similar impact and response to that of the original environment through transcending the difficulties inherent in not only the grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, and cultural features of the original, but also in the aesthetic and stylistic features represented in skillfully manipulated ambiguities, puns, rhyming sounds, morphemes, words and context.

On the basis of the foregoing analysis of rendering English humour into Arabic- admittedly selective and based on a restricted sample of English humorous utterances-two main types may be distinguished within linguistic humour: the first type is the 'standardised' which infringes the norms of the source language and reveals striking discrepancies with the target language and the second type is the 'nonstandarised' which does not. The former is the most difficult to translate being dynamic and language-specific and therefore, requires a greater degree of intervention on the part of the translator. The latter type is relatively easy to manage since it involves an overlap of semantic and pragmatic meanings and formal equivalence is feasible. Some procedures for dealing with the two types were suggested.

Cultural humour, on the other hand, is transferable only if the cultural features are diffused and gain currency globally, otherwise they have to be explained with background information in which case it would be at the expense of humour and would only serve to show what humour is like in the foreign language. Sometimes, it would be more effective to replace the whole utterance with target language humour .

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