
Key words: Subtitling Strategies, Humor, General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), a Script-based Theory for Humor Translation in Subtitling.

Several studies have been conducted with the focus on subtitling, but only few of them elaborately analyzed the core position of subtitling compared to other kinds of translation media. Thus, some findings of the previous researchers failed to give any major contributions to the quality of the subtitling products because they either manipulated subtitling merely as the medium of texts, or overlooked the existence of subtitling boundaries that set this specific medium apart from any other kinds of translations. Humor, widely believed to be an untranslatable feature of a language, is taken as the subject of this present study because it is likely to pose a distinct obstacle in the part of the subtitler because its specific constraints (space and time factors) limit the subtitler’s creativity in finding the solution that can keep both the semantic and humorous genes of laughter intended by the original humor. Both the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) and the Script-based Theory for Humor Translation in Subtitling proposed by Attardo (2002) suggest that in the process of translating humor, the internal (Knowledge Resources) and external structures should be highly considered.

This present study includes the humorous dialogues found in the first five episodes (season 1) of Friends and the data are analyzed qualitatively. The findings are broken down into three categories consisting of the linguistically-bound humor, culturally-bound humor and universal humor made on the basis of the logical mechanism and elements involved in the set up of humors. The linguistically-bound humor covers pun (3 data) and register-based humor (2 data), the culturally-bound humor includes allusion (2 data) and nonsensism (4 data), and the universal humor (linguistically-less bound humor) takes account of verbal irony (5 data), sarcasm or cutting language (5 data), bull humor (4 data), disparagement (1 data) and repartee (4 data).

While the two first categories tend to hold up the structure of the text through literal strategy and the faithful transfer of the humorous elements (as in the case of register-based humor and allusion), the last category generally offers a solution of modifying the original structures of humors through modulation strategy. Although some inconsistencies do arise, the findings show that the categories of humor take two different sides. The first two tend to leave the responsibility in comprehending the humors on the part of the viewers alone by preserving some cultural references and choosing a strategy that merely holds up the structure of humors but fails to give clues that may assist the viewers’ comprehension. Universal humors, those which are not linguistically bound to the source language, are devoted to the viewers’ side by changing perspective in seeing the original text and are likely to result in a highly readable subtitle. The inconsistencies found in the attempt of rendering humors belong to the same category or even type also highlights the fact that one strategy does not always prove to be the best solution in dealing with the similar problem.

Among the three categories of humors, literal translation is more frequently used on the basis of assumption that the intertextuality of the viewers is not taken into a huge consideration and this condition results in the loss of humorous point or
produces a less humorous humor in the target language (TL). On the other hand, literal strategy proves to be the best solution in dealing with some humor belonging under the category of universal humor because it both preserves the humorous effect and produces subtitles with a high degree of readability. The second most frequently applied strategy, i.e., modulation, involving the procedure of changing the category of thought or offers a different perspective by restructuring the source language (SL) humor. This strategy, in some cases, aids the viewers to comprehend and experience the humor naturally in their native language. But again, this does not apply to all cases because it can also result in a less humorous humor. The other alternative strategies including condensation, addition, and deletion do not give any significant contributions to the inconsistency of the pattern because they are mostly applied to some minor cases in order to support the subtitles’ readability and acceptability in general. The inconsistency of pattern signals that the choice of strategy does not merely depend on the similarity shared by the humors, but the prominence goes to the distinctive characteristics of each humor in relation to the structure of its internal and external elements. To sum up, choosing a subtitling strategy involves a decision-making process where the internal and external factors come into play and, therefore, rendering humor in a contextually bound medium such as subtitling, does not necessarily work in the TL environment in a consistent manner.

Unveiling the face of laughter on the screen: strategies used in subtitling humor (a case study of a TV serial friends) / Gusti Nyoman Ayu Sukerti

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