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## Reconstructing Russian Humour in Chinese Translations

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*Humour is essentially a cultural phenomenon, the translation of which requires the reference to a common frame, within which the source language and the target language share the same way of understanding. However, since there are too many aspects concerning the difference between the two language systems, the rendering of the effect of humour from one language to another may not necessarily be successful to the full extent. For example, due to the difference of cultural traditions, Russian humour may not be fully appreciated by a Chinese, whose cultural taste falls into a very different category from that of a Russian. So, the translation of humorous texts goes beyond linguistic barriers.*

*Keywords: Chinese; culture; cultural background; humour; language and translation; translatable; Russian.*

*Good humour is one of the best articles  
of dress one can wear in society.*

*William Makepeace Thackeray*

### Point of view

By undoubted universals of human existence, there is a manifestation of the subjective world of the individual, human emotions like humour. The word «humour» harks back to the ancient Greek theory and early Middle-age English, when health, disease and human emotion were associated with wet qualities within the body. [3].

The detailed analysis of different approaches towards the idea of humour is presented in the new book by Igor Krichtafovich. Aristotle in «Rhetoric» views jokes as a form of educated snobbery. He pointed out two main features of the comic: «The ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain

or harm to others.» Aristotle was the first to introduce the concept of the effect of sudden or triggered laughter. This idea was completely forgotten by his descendants, and became re-developed over two thousand years later in the works of Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer. In contrast to Plato, Aristotle allowed that humour, in limited quantities, could be beneficial. Thomas Hobbes developed the views of Plato and Aristotle that laughter has bearing on one's social status and superiority over one's peers. In «Leviathan», Thomas Hobbes writes that the human race is in a constant power struggle, and that it should not be surprising that victory goes to the one who laughs. Thomas Hobbes expressed a fruitful idea that laughter is an expression of sudden triumph, caused by a no less sudden feeling of superiority over others or over one's past.

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Immanuel Kant in «Critique of Pure Reason» asserted that «laughter is an emotion which is born from the sudden change of an anxious expectation into nothing» (that is, with the statement of the key word, the ‘salt’ of the anecdote, our predictions about the expected conclusions are unfulfilled).

Sigmund Freud and his followers contributed significantly to the analysis of humour. In his «Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious» (1905) Sigmund Freud, having studied most of the accessible to him works about laughter gave a psychological evaluation of wit. He arrived at the following conclusion: «The pleasure of wit originated from an economy of expenditure in inhibition, or the comic from an economy of expenditure in thought, and of humour from an economy of expenditure in feeling.»[15]

In the Chinese language lexical unit 幽默 (you mo) is a phonetic loanword, which was introduced by the Chinese scholar Lin Yutang in 1924, and has the meaning of humour.[26] The lexical unit 笑话 (xiao hua), usually translated as «funny story», means anecdote. This text is not identical to the text of an anecdote in the European sense. 笑话(xiao hua) literally means «laugh talk» and has a certain connotation. Chinese «laugh talk» are funny stories that may not seem very funny to people of other cultures.

It is known that in contrast to the proper translation of the extra linguistic situation comedy, humour adjusts the participants of a communicative act of thoughtful, serious approach to the subject of laughter, to grasp its essence and main characteristics. Depending on the emotional tone of speech and cultural level of the subject, humour can be good-natured, cruel, friendly, rude, sad, sarcastic and touching. It is well known that the basis of comic is the difference between the value of statement (the literal meaning) and value of expression (the indirect meaning). This discrepancy may vary

from their overlap – the speaker wants to say nothing more than he says (usually in humorous discourse), to their complete opposites – the speaker means the opposite of what he says (in the case of irony, sarcasm, satire). The category of humour repeatedly became the object of study as linguists and representatives of other scientific areas. [18, 8]

There are various forms of humour. For the literary forms of expression are humorous anecdote, joke, monologue, dialogue, story, pun, and aphorism. In textual form, humour can also be represented in graphic form – a caricature, cartoon, picture, photo and etc. A special kind of humour is grave humour, presented in many linguistic cultures. One of the classifications of humour belongs to Sigmund Freud, who distinguished between the jokes and the comic as follows: «The joke is invented, comical happens». Victor Raskin also distinguished between intentional and unintentional humour, which is close to the definition of Sigmund Freud. [6]

As we all know that the rapid development of world civilization promotes the involvement of an increasing number of people in the area of intercultural communication and relationship. This highlights the relevance of issues related to literary translation, as translated literature remains one of the main sources of knowledge about other cultures. In order to avoid misunderstandings between different cultures, it is necessary to establish how reliable the culturological information can be, and that the reader not familiar with the original version, can find definition in the works of translation.

The main reason for distortions, errors and inaccuracies in the translation of artistic compositions is a cross-cultural asymmetry apparent in the comparison of original and translated texts. One of the prerequisites for reliable transmission of information contained in the original is the translator’s ability to penetrate

into the reality described in the original, to have the right idea about things, denoted by linguistic realities. Even more difficult for translators is to transfer various expressive parameters of the original text where humour exists. [1, 3]

Humour, as an integral part of human life, brings laughter to people. Humour, whether written or spoken, is popular among all nations and holds an important place in their languages and cultures. [20] Translation facilitates exchanges of humour among different nations. Since it is both a cross-language and cross-cultural process, the translator has to overcome barriers between the two cultures as well as those between the languages in order to get the humour across to the target language readers. In other words, he translates not only the words but also the effects.

Culture, the framework that provides people with their identity, includes not only language and communications but also multifarious parts of everyday life: such as dress and appearance, food and eating habits, and how people perceive and appreciate themselves in relation to the society in which they live. Culture also includes relationships, values and norms, beliefs and attitudes, work habits and practices, and the relationship between work and leisure and so on. Any of these aspects of culture, as well as entertainment and sex, can, of course, be related in some way to humour. All this is very much related to one's cultural background. [4, 3]

Translatable and untranslatable field of translation studies have been debating a long-standing theoretical issue. From the overall sense, language can be translated, the so-called language or meaning of language cannot be translated, and refers simply to some defined parts of language. On one hand, we believe that any two kinds of languages can be translated; on the other hand, we find that in every language there is some complex composition, very difficult to translate, or for which there is no suitable peer in another

language at all. [13, 120] Strategically, we must uphold the belief that theory can be translated; but tactics will have to accept that there are certain translation limits [25] Mr. Fu Zhongxuan(1993) has taken the district of untranslatable into absolute untranslatable and relative untranslatable. [5] English translation theorist John Catford (1991) divided it into language untranslatable and cultural untranslatable. [2] Therefore, we can assume that, untranslatable as a result of language self differences is absolute untranslatable, and as a result of cultural differences is temporarily hard to translate, so it is relative untranslatable.

### Examples

Researching the translation of humorous material, according to the Chinese author of the article «Culture and the translation of humour» Wang Junling, this material can be divided into three groups: 1) humour, remains in a certain context; 2) humour with cultural specificity; 3) verbal humour based on meaning of words and stylistic techniques, created by words, sounds, combinations of words and other tricks (pun, hyperbole, metaphor, etc.). Wide knowledge of both of these two countries, cultures and languages is a prerequisite for understanding and translation of humour. [24, 41]

Humour, remaining in a certain context, is easy to understand and translate into any foreign language. Usually this type of humour is understandable for people of any country. For example:

**Aunt Nattie, putting on her hat after a Sunday afternoon visit to one of her married nephews, said to eight-year old Johnny: «And, young man, would you like to walk with me to the bus stop?»**

- «No», Johnny said.

- «Why not?» asked Aunt Hattie.

- «Because we're going to start eating dinner as soon as you go.»

*Translation in Chinese:*

星期天的下午，在侄子家做客的海蒂姑妈戴上帽子，对八岁的庄尼说：「小家伙，你愿意送我到车站吗？」

-«不», 庄尼说。

-«为什么呢?»海蒂姑妈问。

-«因为你一走，我们就开饭了。» [16, 50]

Difficulties in the work with translation of Russian humour into Chinese, which has undoubted Russian cultural specificity, can be categorised into several types: 1) lack of understanding of domestic humour, associated with the absence of similar realities in the Chinese culture; 2) lack of understanding adopted by the etiquette rules; 3) lack of understanding of the underlying values of the culture. Misunderstandings of humour are based on ignorance of the realities that are usually removed in the presence of detailed comments.

Let's take for example, the description from humorous novel «The Twelve Chairs» about Absalom Iznurenkov:

**Об Авессаломе Владимировиче Изнуренкове можно было сказать, что другого такого человека нет во всей республике. Республика ценила его по заслугам. Он приносил ей большую пользу. И за всем тем он оставался неизвестным, хотя в своем искусстве он был таким же мастером, как Шаляпин – в пении, Горький – в литературе, Капабланка – в шахматах, Мельников – в беге на коньках и самый носатый, самый коричневый ассириец, занимающий лучшее место на углу Тверской и Камергерского, – в чистке сапог желтым кремом. [10]**

*Translation in English by John Richardson, 1997:*

It could be said that there was no one like Absalom Vladimirovich Iznurenkov in the whole Republic. The Republic valued his services. He was of great use to it. But, for all that, he remained

unknown, though he was just as skilled in his art as Chaliapin was in singing, Gorky in writing, Capablanca in chess, Melnikov in ice-skating, and that very large-nosed and brown Assyrian occupying the best place on the corner of Tverskaya and Kamerger streets was in cleaning black boots with brown polish.

*Notes: Capablanca was a world champion in 1921-1927. Melnikov was a champion of Russia in 1915, the champion of USSR in 1924-1935, in Europe in 1927. Gorky wrote a great novel – This refers to the «Life of Klim Simgin»: from June 1927 excerpts from this novel published «The Truth», and then the other Soviet periodicals, it became the subject of constant jokes in the literary sphere. [12, 176]*

*Translation in Chinese by Zhang Peiwen, 2004:*

谈到阿韦萨洛姆-弗拉基米罗维奇-伊兹努连科夫，可以说，这种人在全共和国再也找不到第二个。共和国重视它的功劳，他对共和国很有益处。不过他依然不为人知，默默无闻，虽然他在本门艺术上堪称大师，可以同其他名人相媲美，诸如歌唱界的夏利亚宾，文学界的高尔基，象棋界的卡帕布兰卡，速度滑冰方面的梅利尼科夫，以及在特韦尔和卡梅尔杰尔街角上占有最好的位置，用黄鞋油给路过人擦皮鞋的，那位长着一个大鼻头和浓重的褐色皮肤的亚述利亚人。

标注：卡帕布兰卡1921-1927世界冠军。梅利尼科夫，苏联功勋运动员，屡获俄国速度滑冰冠军，1915年俄国冠军，1924-1935年苏维埃冠军，1927年获欧洲冠军。亚述利亚人，居住在伊朗、伊拉克、叙利亚、苏联的一个民族。 [11, 215]

In this brief description, at first glance, a lot of unfamiliar names made the text incomprehensible, but in the English and Chinese translations of this text were attached notes, which helped us to understand the humour. From the given notes we got the information that Chaliapin, Capablanca and Melnikov were well-known people in USSR at that time.

Humour lies in the comparison of self-righteous hero with the famous singer, writer and other celebrities. And after these names as Chaliapin, Gorky, Capablanca and Melnikov, when reader is waiting for a more famous person, the name of shoes cleaner is listed, which is out of reader's psychological expectations. The sharp unexpected difference of comparison ridicules the hero's self-important, and makes people laugh.

Special attention is given to the cultural context of humour, cultural influence on the translator and the disparities between Russian and Chinese cultures. It is found that in translating Russian humour into Chinese, the cultural barrier is most likely to appear where no equivalents of the humour can be found in the Chinese culture, where the Russian humour contains symbols overlapping or different from those in the Chinese culture, and where the two cultures contain conflicting cultural values or symbols. The translator, therefore, is expected to realise the significance of cultural knowledge relevant to the translation and minimize the effects of the cultural barrier on the translation of humour.

In the case of humour, created by lexical means of language, different culture media may assume that, in the source language there is a simple coincidence of homonymous units being amusing, but because in their native language, these words are homonyms, the comic effect does not arise. Clarification associated with a form of words, virtually eliminates the unexpected semantic clashes and subsequently the underlying humour. Similarly, no cause of laughter or jokes arise from the rhymes. Let us turn to specific examples.

In Russia the relationship between mother-in-law and the husband of her daughter are usually tense, which is often reflected in folklore. There are many jokes about the wife's mother.

**Проходит отец с маленьким сыном мимо больницы. На воротах, как обычно,**

**эмблема врачей (змея вокруг кубка).**

**Сын спрашивает:**

**- Папа, что здесь нарисовано?**

**- А это – твоя бабушка мороженое кушает. [23, 34]**

*Translation in English:*

When a father with his little son are passing by the hospital, the son looks at the emblem of doctors on the gate of hospital – a snake around the cup. The son asks:

- Dad, what is drawn?

- That is your grandma eating ice cream.

*Translation in Chinese:*

当一个父亲带着儿子路过医院的时候, 儿子看到了医院大门上所画的一条蛇围绕着杯子, 孩子问爸爸:

-爸爸, 那画的是什么?

-那是你姥姥在吃冰淇淋。

This joke implies the comparison of the «grandmother» to a «snake», reflecting the relation between a man and his mother-in-law is unfriendly, and the negative evaluation of the mother-in-law. In this context, evaluation of the meaning expressed by the non-immediacy, implicitly weakened its pejorative strength, but in fact indirectly compensated and enhanced the negative evaluation; Its implicit euphemism, maintaining the normal communication between father and son to avoid disagreements and quarrels between them, avoids the risk of quarrelsome communication, but also accurately reflects the general evaluation of the relationship between a man and his mother-in-law in Russian society.

This joke can be very simply translated into Chinese, but because of different cultural backgrounds, Chinese readers cannot feel the strain on their relations, so it is better to add some additional information in translation, for example, relation between a woman and her husband's sister, then the Chinese readers will be able to directly feel the mystery of this joke.

Political humour is popular throughout the world, sometimes politicians use it to get maximum sympathy from people, and people also use it to express dissatisfaction about the government. For Chinese people, Russian not only bravely plays jokes on relationship between men and women and on sex, but also often sharply plays jokes about the government. For example the well-known quotation «There is no sadder story in the world than the tale of Romeo and Juliet», people have altered and mocked Russian politics in Soviet times to give the quote:

- **Нет повести печальнее на свете, чем повесть о Центральном Комитете.**

*Translation in English:*

- «No sadder story in the world than a story about the Central Committee»

*Translation in Chinese:*

- 世界上没有比有关中央委员会更悲惨的故事了。

In order to understand this kind of humour, a reader requires knowledge of the situation of this period in the USSR and its history explaining why people were dissatisfied with the authorities. This and previous examples contain cultural specifics, however for the translation into Chinese, it requires a deep knowledge of both countries to make an appropriate translation. [22, 46]

Now let's look at verbal humour and its translation. We also give examples for analysis and understanding.

- **Вы прочили роман?**

- **Нет, я начала другой роман, более интересный, чем тот, который Вы мне принесли.** («Как закалялась сталь», Н.Островский)

*Translation in English:*

- You have read the novel?

- No, I started another novel, more interesting than the one that you brought to me.

*Translation in Chinese:*

- 那本小说您看完了吗?

- 没有, 我已经开始爱上了另一本小说, 比您那本有意思得多。[19, 120]

This is a dialogue between Victor and Tonya, the heroes from the novel of Nikolai Ostrovsky «How the Steel Was Tempered». Victor asked Tonya about a literary work, and in response to Tonya, the word «novel» in Russian has also a second meaning – a love relationship. Unfortunately, in the Chinese translation humorous effect is not created, as in the Chinese language these homonyms are not represented.

Another example:

**Ноздрев был в некотором отношении исторический человек. Ни на одном собрании, где он был, не обходилось без истории. Какая-нибудь история непременно происходила...** («Мертвые души» Н. Гоголь) [7]

*Translation in Chinese:*

1: 在若干关系上, 罗士特来夫是一位«故事的»人物。没有哪一个集会, 只要他在场, 会不闹出点«故事»来的。那故事常常是..... [8, 75]

2: 就某一方面来, 诺兹德廖夫是一个经常惹是生非的人。无论什么集会, 只要他在场, 都不会安然度过。总不免要出点什么事儿..... [9, 85]

The second translator attempted a descriptive way to convey the meaning of the original. But Chinese readers will not be able to feel the full lexical item «historic». In the Russian original specifications for Nozdryov the words «historic» and «history» were used with a humorous and derogatory meaning. However, in the first version of the translation, the translator successfully picked up the corresponding Chinese word 故事 (story) and replaced the word «history». This example is only confirmed once again by the view of the famous Soviet interpreter Nikolai Lyubimov: «The non-translatable word play does not exist and should exist for the very rare exceptions. The only problem is skill of an translator». [17, 249]

So, a play of words can be conveyed in translation, although it is quite difficult. Pun – is mostly a play of the discrepancy between familiar and unfamiliar sounds of value. The stylistic goal of pun is the creation of comic effect, focusing the reader on a particular segment of the text. The goal should be to achieve a full reflection and translation, while the translator is obliged to keep strictly within the framework of the «comic style» – from a harmless joke to acute irony and biting satire. [21, 289]

### Result

The analysis of humour translation shows that jokes can be translated, provided it is accepted that often translations cannot be as effective as the source texts. The above analysis has provided some indications of the factors that should be taken into account in the translation of jokes. The following can be cautiously posited: it is important to determine the function of the joke in the target socio-cultural framework. As shown, a translated joke will have to work at two main levels. We must consider the pragmatic function of a joke, namely to amuse and to cause laughter. Next, there is a higher, interpersonal level that plays on the functions of humour. These latter functions are often situation and culture dependent and may differ from one joke to another as well as from one joke category to another. As the two levels usually co-exist, translators must strive to convey both of them in translation.

The overall picture of misunderstanding Russian humour for Chinese people is: from absolute not-understanding humour, built on a play of words and Russian realities, to easy understanding of universal jokes (usually on the theme of relations between men and women). Certainly, jokes based on societal convention or wordplay only get their message across when language or society allows them to do so. Although there may be deeper differences, with humour linked to a large extent to culture and ‘social conditioning’, it often means jokes cannot be understood fully or appreciated properly by peoples of different nationalities or regions.

Most incomprehensible are anecdotes related to differences in values between the Russian and Chinese cultures. Significantly difficult are the cases of Russian grave humour, the Chinese takes some efforts to understand the absurdity of the situation. [14, 26]

The translation of humourous text is quite a challenge for the translator, owing to differences of languages and cultures involved in the process of translation, and national characteristics of humour. However, this task is achievable, solved on the basis of the selection of different translation strategies and compensatory techniques. The theory of literary translation (Russian and Chinese) is not a comprehensive description of the methods of translation of humourous discourse, which may be the subject of further research in the theory of translation.

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## Реконструкция русского юмора в китайских переводах

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*Безусловно, юмор является культурным феноменом, перевод которого требует обращения к некому общему фрейму, в рамках которого язык оригинала и переводящий язык должны получить общий смысл. Тем не менее, перевод юмористического содержания с одного языка на другой не всегда может быть успешным из-за значительных различий в языковых системах. Например, из-за разницы культурных традиций русский юмор не может быть полностью понят и оценен китайцем, чей культурный опыт значительно отличается от аналогичного опыта русского человека. Поэтому перевод юмористических текстов выходит за рамки лингвистики.*

*Ключевые слова: китайский язык; культура; культурный фон; юмор; язык и перевод; переводимый; русский язык.*

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