Anna Kristin Tangen

Translation of Culture-Specific References in Subtitling: the Effect on the Rendition of Humor

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Supervisor: Anja Katrine Angelsen
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NTNU
Kunnskap for en bedre verden

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Humor is a universal concept. However, it is often culture-bound and requires an understanding of the cultural references for the humor to come across. This is especially true for the translation of humor. Thus, the audience's familiarity with the culture-specific reference is crucial. In today's global world, we access humor shows from different cultures where the content of the show is mediated through the translation of subtitles. This mediation might involve compensation of transfer from one cultural context to another (Paschen, 2012), which will ultimately affect the target audience's perception and understanding of the humor. Culture-specific items are known to be a challenge in translation (Davies, 2003), and the time- and space limitations of audiovisual translation (AVT) add additional hurdles to the process (Paschen, 2012). The present paper will focus on a data-set from the translated subtitles of the Netflix Comedy Special *Amy Schumer Growing*, a live standup show performed in Chicago, Illinois in 2019, where Schumer jokes about marriage, pregnancy, and personal growth. Amy Schumer is a 37-year old American standup comedian, writer, actress, and producer who is known for speaking her mind and not suppressing her political views (Amy Schumer Biography, n.d.), hence this is an ideal show for the analysis of translation strategies and rendition of humor in subtitles. What strategies and procedures have been used in the translation of culture-specific references and wordplay in the subtitling of *Amy Schumer Growing* from English to Norwegian, and what effect did these procedures have on the rendition of the humor?

Background

Translational procedures

There are many procedures for translation, Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) introduce seven, which can be used alone or combined with others (p. 31). They classify these procedures into two types, direct or literal translation and oblique translation (ibid.). Their procedures are as follows: borrowing, calque, literal translation, transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation, of which the three first are considered direct- and the remaining oblique translation (ibid.). Borrowing is sometimes used to add flavor of the source language (SL) culture into the translation and is "the simplest of all translation [procedures]" (ibid., p. 31-32). This is ultimately a decision of style and message. When an expression is borrowed and then translated word for word, Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) call this a "calque" (p. 32). If the translator finds that direct translation is not acceptable, meaning structurally impossible,

meaningless or of different meaning, he must turn to procedures of oblique translation (ibid., p. 34). With the procedure of "transposition," Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) refer to the replacement of one word-class for another, without there being any change to the meaning of the message (p. 36.) However, when there is a change in the point of view, due to either the translation being unsuitable or awkward in the target language (TL), it is called "modulation" (ibid., p. 36-37). Both are distinguished either as optional or obligatory. The procedure of "equivalence" pertains to idioms, adjectival phrases and proverbs, phrases that are stylistically and structurally different in the source text (ST) and target text (TT), but that are ultimately equivalent (ibid., p. 38). Their final procedure, "adaptation," concerns cases where the situation being referred to in the ST is unknown in the TL culture and must be translated to a situation that is considered to be equivalent (ibid., p. 39).

Procedures for culture-specific references

Many attempts can be made to provide models for analyzing the ways in which cultural references are dealt with in translation. Pedersen (2005) proposes a model for the rendering of culture-specific references in subtitles, where he categorizes such references as "translation crisis points," a category under which wordplay also fall (p. 1). A culture-specific reference "does not exist of itself," but is rather the result of a reference that, when transferred from a ST to a TT, creates a translation problem because of the reference being nonexistent or of a different value in the TL culture (Davies, 2003, p. 69). The translator has to make active decisions when faced with translation crisis points (Pedersen, 2005, p. 1). He refers to culture-specific references as "extralinguistic culture-bound references" (ECRs) which will be the reference for the remainder of this paper. He defines an ECR as follows:

> [a] reference that is attempted by means of any culture-bound linguistic expression, which refers to an extralinguistic entity or process, and which is assumed to have a discourse referent that is identifiable to a relevant audience as this referent is within the encyclopedic knowledge of this audience (p. 2).

Not all transfers of ECRs from a ST to a TT involves translation, which is why Pedersen (2005) uses the word "render" instead of "translate" (p. 3). Venuti (1995) arranges translation strategies from the most foreignizing- to the most domesticating procedures (as cited in Pedersen, 2005, p. 3). It is this "Venutian scale" Pedersen (2005) utilizes in his model (p. 3).

Foreignizing procedures will be SL oriented, while domesticating procedures are TL oriented. Pedersen's (2005) procedures for rendering ECRs are: official equivalent, retention, specification, direct translation, generalization, substitution, and omission (p. 3-9). The most SL-oriented procedure is retention, as it brings the cultural reference into the TT, offering no guidance for the TT audience. On the other hand, the most TL-oriented procedure is cultural substitution as it removes the ST ECR and replaces it with a TL ECR (ibid., p. 7). Procedures are often combined in "real life subtitling" as the process of translation is commonly internalized and subconscious (ibid., p. 9). Pedersen (2005) introduces the term "transculturality," which refers to as an ECR that used to be culture-bound but is now accessible and widely known to other cultures, rendering it no longer bound to that one culture (p. 10). Contrastingly, "monocultural" refers to an ECR that only exists within one culture (ibid.). It is highly unlikely that there would exist an unsolvable culture-bound translation problem (ibid., p. 16).

Translation of humor

Humor is generally regarded as difficult to translate, and often involves "compensation or transfer from one (cultural) context to another" (von Paschen, 2012, p. 77). Limitations of AVT add to these difficulties (ibid.). There can be a contrasting reception and understanding of a movie in the original SL and the rendered TL version. While one can be inherently funny, the other might be considered serious and "without a flicker of amusement" (ibid., p. 79). Concerning translation and subtitling, Gottlieb believes that the rendering of each verbal segment ought to be analyzed with stylistic and semantic values in mind (as cited in Kianbakht, 2015, p. 27). Humor is ambiguous but can be grouped into three: "universal humor," based on context and the general functioning of the world, "linguistic or language-based humor," such as wordplay and proverbs, and "cultural-based humor" based on cultural references (ibid., p. 28). In his research, Kianbakht (2015) found that when cultural references were neutralized or generalized, the cultural sense of the original was lost in the translated version, and not as humorous (p. 30).

Audiovisual humor

Most humor is translatable; in his study, Martínez-Sierra (2006) found that only a small percentage (14.4%) of the humor was diminished in the TT (p. 294). The importance of a "shared background knowledge" between the SL- and TL audiences is significant, as is the

role of translators as mediators (ibid.). The translator's role is then to provide the information the target audience needs in order to be able to process the translation in a similar way that the source culture audience does the ST (Davies, 2003, p. 68). Translators who spot "intercultural barriers" easier will ultimately provide better translations for the target audience (ibid.). The visual components of AVT can be considered as positive contributions to the understanding of the TT (ibid.). There is an overall tendency to convey the humor mainly by rendering "the same humorous elements in the target version," meaning that an idiom will be rendered as an idiom in the TT as well (ibid.). Translators additionally strive to make the reduction minimal whenever the humor is diminished (ibid.). Martínez-Sierra (2006) sees a tendency of foreignizing strategies in his study, and subsequently an avoidance of target culture ECRs (p. 295).

Humor and audience perception

Humor must be addressed "in any dubbed or subtitled version" (Zabalbeascoa, 2016, p. 107). Omission may be deliberate as the translator might believe the medium to be more about something else, or that humor would distract from other factors (ibid.). Artistic quality in a translation can be a better goal than likeness to the original (ibid.), which is a possible reasoning for the differences often found in a TT. Censorship could also be an underlying reason in a "translation with apparent shortcomings and errors" (ibid.). Regardless, the rendering of ECRs is complex, on the one hand there is the need to provide a true rendition of the ST, and on the other the need to make the rendition intelligible and accessible to the target audience from another culture (Davies, 2003, p. 97). The type of humor found in a ST should be rendered equally. This means that if the ST contains a segment of dark humor, the corresponding TT segment is expected to also be of a darkly humorous tone, leaving the impact on the audience approximately intact (Bucaria, 2008, p. 225-226). In her case study, Bucaria (2008) found that the "strategy of close rendering," meaning that the TT successfully convey the humor while retaining the ST elements, appeared to be the most common strategy (p. 227). In several cases of omission, she found that the humorous element was communicated through purely linguistic devices, many of which were ambiguous (ibid., p. 228).

Method

The framework for this paper is based on Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS), which aims to identify norms and laws of translation (Toury, 2012, p. xiii), and Toury's (2012) three-

phase methodology will serve as the method of choice. What Toury (2012) refers to as "norms" will in this paper henceforth be referred to as "procedures". His methodology begins with the phase of situating the TL text and its acceptability in the target culture (ibid., p. 31). Then, the translation is to be mapped onto its counterpart, meaning a textual analysis of the ST and the TT to determine relations between the two texts through parallel segments, which Toury (2012) refers to as "coupled pairs" (p. 32-33). In this phase of the method, the problems and subsequent solutions of the translation will be revealed, and "shifts can also be identified and studied" (ibid., p. 32). The next step will be to draw conclusions or generalizations about the overall pattern of the translation and reconstruct the process (ibid., p. 32-33). This "pattern" will be referred to as "strategy" for the remainder of this paper. Toury (2012) asserts that there are two contending orientations of translation, one that is source language SL-oriented, termed "adequacy", and the other which is TL-oriented, or degree of "acceptability" (p. 79). If the first one is adopted, the translation will be dominated by attempts of the TT reflecting, not only, the ST, but most likely the SL and source culture as well (ibid.). Toury (2012) claims that "such an attitude is likely to result in certain incompatibilities with normal target culture practices" (ibid.). If, on the other hand, the second stance is adopted, the source culture will be in a secondary position while target [procedures] will be the priority (ibid.).

The ST chosen for the data-set is the spoken text of *Amy Schumer Growing*, and the source material for the ensuing analysis are the most relevant segments of cultural references, and wordplay in combination with humor from the show. The first step of the data collection was to identify all elements of cultural references and wordplay throughout the comedy special, which numbered at twenty-four. Second came the step of pairing the ST- and TT-segments before analyzing and comparing the renderings. Thereafter, the translated items were examined to detect whether the humor had been affected in the process. The final step was carefully choosing the six most versatile segments to include and discuss, due to lack of space. The typology of translation procedures by Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) were employed in order to establish and describe the choices the translator has made in each chosen segment of the standup comedy. Additionally, Pedersen's (2005) taxonomy of procedures used when rendering ECRs in translation have been utilized to explore the procedural choices made when dealing with a culturally bound reference.

Analysis

(1) We were gonna get arrested on **the Capitol steps**

Vi skulle arresteres ved **Capitol**

Back translation: We were going to get arrested by Capitol

(Amy Schumer Growing: 46.25)

One of Pedersen's (2005) seven procedures employed for rendering ECRs are "official equivalent," which this rendering might be in the sense that the ECR have previously entered the TL, being used as the standard translation. As there is no corresponding congressional building in Norway, the concept of "the Capitol steps" is unequivocally foreign, though it seems to be the standard translation in the TL in references from news outlets. Perhaps Pedersen's (2005) procedure of specification would be beneficial in this case, considering the target culture audience may not be as familiar with the ECR as the source culture audience. This is also a generalization as "the Capitol steps" have been generalized to "the Capitol," however, the overall meaning of the utterance remains the same. Generalization is normally a domesticating procedure, but in this case, it does not simplify a subject for the target culture audience. It is more likely a result of time- and space restrictions of AVT. The overall strategy of the segment is foreignizing (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995) or, in other words, ST-oriented (Toury, 2012). The translation of this segment does not affect the humor per se. The specific location is not essential information for the joke, which concerns Amy Schumer's action of shoving food in her mouth for fear of being hungry when in jail for protesting, not that she was located at the Capitol steps. However, knowledge of the location would add a historic element to the joke, as it is not a normal spot to for arrests. More importantly, this is a building which symbolizes freedom of speech and democracy, associations the target culture would not possess, resulting in a loss of the ironic undertone of the joke.

(2) Looks like the defensive line for **the Bears**

Ser ut som forsvarslinjen til ***The Bears***

(Amy Schumer Growing: 17.13)

Many of the ECRs in this translation have been rendered through the process of retention (Pedersen, 2005) or borrowing (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995). These have been put in quotations

or italics. The difference between quotation marks and italics when it comes to retention of ST ECRs seems to be whether the ECR is a proper noun or not, but according to Pedersen (2005) there is much inconsistency (p. 4). The ECR in this segment is "the Bears," the name of an American football team located in Chicago, Illinois, which falls under the category of a proper noun since it is an organization and a specific name, beginning with a capital letter. Nonetheless, it is not rendered in quotations, which collaborates the notions of inconsistency. This is a direct or literal translation, a word-for-word rendering of the ST segment, which is a foreignizing (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995) strategy that is SL-oriented (Toury, 2012) as well. There is no reference to what "the Bears" is in the ST, nor is this specified in the TT. The notion of American football is known in the target culture, but not to the degree of knowing that "the Bears" is an American football team. In order for the joke to function, the connotations of how the defensive players on a football team looks is essential, which is not given in the target culture. Ultimately, the humorous aspect is diminished, however, the aspect of AVT means that the audience can get a better understanding through the visual text, which makes sure the joke is not completely lost on the TT audience.

(3) Should I go on *Shark Tank*?

Bør jeg bli med på **"Shark Tank»?**
(Amy Schumer Growing: 34.34)

Segment (3) is the only instance in which the translator chose to put the ST ECR in quotations. "Shark Tank," the title of an American tv-show, is a proper noun fit for quotations, however, this showcases the inconsistencies mentioned within a single translation. The ST ECR is conveyed through the procedure of retention (Pedersen, 2005) and subsequently transferred to the TT. This is a SL-oriented (Toury, 2012), and foreignizing (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995) procedure as the concept of the TV show, which is vital for the joke, is likely to be lesser known to the target culture audience. The translator most likely opted for a literal translation but met some semantic issues, which made the procedure of modulation (ibid.) obligatory. The tv-show, "Shark Tank" is broadcasted on certain channels in Norway, however, it is not a mainstream show. There used to be a similar program in Norway, with a common plot, called "Skaperen" which could have been a possible substitution. Considering the target culture's limited knowledge of the show, a different procedure might have been preferable. The effect of this retention on the humor is significant,

though not complete as some context can be taken from the visual text (facial expressions) as well as the leading up to this joke. Therefore, the comic effect is not totally lost.

(4) **Lindsey mammo-Graham**, feel this

Lindsay mammo-Graham, kjenn her
(Amy Schumer Growing: 45.00)

In the case of segment (4), the translator seems to have chosen direct or literal translation, though the imperative sentence had to be modulated (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995) for lack of acceptability (Toury, 2012) otherwise. This is an ECR and a wordplay combined, relating to a name and a word that correlates. The last name of republican senator, Lindsey Graham, and the word "mammogram," from the process of x-ray breast examination, is used due to their similar-sounding endings. The monocultural reference of the American politician, and the transcultural reference to the act of mammography is an epitome of Pedersen's (2005) description of direct translation. The chance that the translator combined procedures is evidently high. It is possible she chose to retain the ST ECR because of the transculturality of the reference, but also because retaining the reference and rendering it word-for-word would result in the same product. Again, this is a foreignizing (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995) strategy, rendering a SL-oriented (Toury, 2012) TT. The word "mammogram" is written and pronounced more or less the same way in both the SL and TL, and therefore needs no translation. This means that the wordplay is transcultural and has the same effect on the target audience. The name of the Republican senator, however, is a ST ECR that is not transferable to the target culture audience as this person is most likely unbeknown to Norwegians. The result is a joke that is rendered halfway. The humorous and sarcastic aspect of the conservative Trump-critic-turned-advocate commenting on female matters such as women's health and their autonomy will be lost on the target audience (Leibovich, 2019).

(5) and a **Coachella flower halo**

og en **blomsterglorie**
(Amy Schumer Growing: 16.29)

The noun "blomsterglorie" is a hyponym of the ST ECR "Coachella flower halo" in that it is a wider term which concerns "a flower halo" rather than a particular type of flower halo as the ST suggests. In terms of Pedersen's (2005) procedures, generalization was utilized and combined with omission, in which the translator lost the ST ECR altogether, leaving the TT less specific. Through omitting the foreign concept of "Coachella," the translator implemented a domesticating (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995) strategy with a TL-oriented (Toury, 2012) "shifted direct translation" (Pedersen, 2005), meaning a word-for-word rendering but with a cultural shift through the removal of the ECR. "Coachella" is the name of an American prestigious and expensive festival where people dress a certain way. This is an American concept; however, it is widely known, and would most likely be a transcultural (Pedersen, 2005) ECR that many in the target culture audience would get. Considering the age group of the people likely to make up the target culture audience, millennials, it is likely that such an ECR would be transferable. By omitting the reference altogether, the impact of the humorous segment is diminished. A situational flower halo, or a specific type of flower halo with certain connotations is removed from the equation and therefore lessens the context of the TT and subsequently, the impact. The underlying humor of the segment is still present, only not to the same extent.

(6) I'm still on **Bumble**

Jeg er fortsatt på **Tinder**
(Amy Schumer Growing: 13.35)

In segment (6) the ST ECR "Bumble" has been removed and replaced with a different ECR, a transcultural ECR, one that is more familiar to the target culture. "Tinder" is a cultural substitution (Pedersen, 2005) which is expected to be known by the target culture audience. The translator has made this adaption (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995) or cultural shift, presumably, because "Bumble" is a lesser known dating application for Norwegians than it is for Americans. The procedure of direct or literal translation has also seemingly been used for the rendition of this segment. Therefore, the strategy for this particular case can be said to be a mixture of domesticating and foreignizing, with the prior being the dominant strategy rendering the translation TL-oriented (Toury, 2012). Seeing as both "Bumble" and "Tinder" are dating applications, the connotations associated with them are more or less equivalent. This means that there is no significant reduction in the impact of the humor.

Discussion

The analysis indicates that the translator has used different translation procedures and strategies for rendering the ECRs and wordplay of the ST. The most frequently used strategy was foreignization (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995) with the overall tendency of the translator being literal translation or word-for-word renderings. Four out of six of the segments were rendered through foreignizing procedures, while the other two segments were domesticating (ibid.). This means that the overall strategy, the sum of the choices made in the translation, was ST-oriented (Toury, 2012). In regards of the rendition of humor, only one out of six cases were not affected, which manifests the consensus of the beforementioned scholars that translation of humor is especially difficult.

A dilemma arises when faced with linguistic humor in subtitling, because often the wordplay is essential for the humorous essence of the segment, which makes it difficult to translate. When there is no equivalent rhetorical device in the TL, the loss of meaning is inevitable. However, in segment (4) it was not the linguistic reference in similar-sounding word endings "mammo**gram**" and "**Graham**," but the reference to the American politician, that diminished the impact of the humor intended. The result was a joke that only rendered half of the humor intended. Considering that humor is the most important aspect of any standup comedy, each decision regarding strategy and procedure was likely to secure punch lines. This might have been the deciding factor in the retention of segment (4), though it was not completely secured.

The AVT of humor is particularly difficult because it dictates rendering of humorous elements that interact in ways which does not co-exist in other forms of translation. In instances when the comic effect has declined in translation, the humor can still be more or less preserved through the visual text (i.e. gestures the comedian makes, or images shown to the audience) which contributes to the comedic effect and understanding of the target audience. This was the case for segment (2) in which Schumer pressed her arm into her body to show a large upper arm, comparing it to "turkey legs" and referencing the arms of defensive players on American football teams. Without this gesture, the target audience would have little guidance as to the meaning of the reference as it was rendered through retention. This shows that the medium of AVT not always complicates the process but can be a helpful contribution.

As segments (2) and (3) testify, the translator marked off the ECRs when using the procedure of retention (Pedersen, 2005) in this translation. Retention does not provide any guidance to the TT audience and can in many ways be seen as the strategy that is most loyal to the ST. When ECRs are neutralized or generalized, the cultural sense of the ST is missed, leaving the translation to not read as humorous as the ST. When "Coachella" was omitted in segment (5) the comic effect was inevitably lessened, as with most uses of omittance in rendering ECRs. What was a situational reference with several connotations to a certain type of girl in the ST was non-existent in the TT, depriving the target audience of the equivalent degree of humor. However, the notion of the type of girl who goes to the "Coachella" festival and dresses a certain way, with a flower halo on her head, has a different value in the target culture. The reference is not necessarily a transcultural one, nor is it a monocultural one that only relates to the source culture. The majority of Amy Schumer's audience would know of the type of girl she indicates and hold the expected connotations towards this type of head piece, regardless of their nationality due to the spread of culture through globalization and social media.

Conclusion

To conclude, the analysis of the data-set seems to have, more or less, affirmed the finds of the aforementioned scholars. SL-oriented strategies and procedures appear to be the preferable choice for rendering humor and ECRs. More precisely, the procedure of literal translation was found to be the most commonly adopted throughout the chosen ECR- and wordplay-segments. With the most common procedure being word-for-word rendition, and repeated use of retention the ensuing choice, humor was more often than not intact in the translated TT, though there were noticeable losses. There seems to be, as should be, given high priority to the translation of humor, as it is most of the time rendered with a similar effect to the ST. Humor is as mentioned a universal concept, but irreversibly rooted in specific cultural and linguistic contexts as the data-set ultimately proves. Overall observation of the chosen segments shows that the ECRs were nearly always essential for the comic effect to be equivalent in the TT.

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