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Subtitling of script-based humor in *Friends* into Norwegian

An empirical translation thesis

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1.   Introduction

The famous sitcom series *Friends* (1994-2004) has been watched by millions and is a popular TV show to this day. Watching any kind of comedy series, one can be struck by the difference in experience of watching it with as opposed to without subtitles. In this research paper on subtitling of humor in *Friends*, I will demonstrate how translation studies can explain why this is often the case. Using Victor Raskin's (1985) humor model with focus on script and incongruity as the main humor theory and the approach of Korostenkiene and Pakrosnyte (2018) as the main source in this thesis, the goal is to explore the translation strategies used for the subtitling of humor on the TV series. Additionally, I will try to discover if there are any patterns or repetitions in said strategies. The examples chosen to demonstrate the humorous instances from the series used in this thesis, will all be of *script-based humor*.

I will approach the dissertation by first introducing humor theories and previous studies on humor in translation, as well as presenting the translation strategies that my study is based on. Subsequently I explain the method of how the analysis will take place. Further, I will demonstrate and analyze several examples of script-based humor from the series. The notions of script and incongruity which are the most important elements of Raskin's humor theory, will be explained in section 2. Finally, I will discuss my findings and conclude, as well as give ideas for further research on the subject. My research question for this thesis is thus the following: What are the strategies used in translating script-based humor in *Friends* to Norwegian?

2.   Theoretical background

In the theory section I will introduce the humor theory I base my thesis on, namely Raskin's (1985) humor model with the theory of incongruity and script. Further, I will present humor in translation, before introducing some previous research on the subject, as explained in Korostenkiene and Pakrosnyte (2018) which will be used the main source of my thesis. The different translation strategies will be explained, and the usage of said strategies in this specific case will be further analyzed.

2.1 Victor Raskin's (1985) humor model

Trying to concretize exactly what humor is, and to explain what goes on when a person is triggered by something he or she finds funny, can offer difficulty. According to Raskin (1985, p. 1) humor is a subjective phenomenon, because what someone finds funny might not be perceived as funny by the next person (cited in Azeez & Turki, 2019, p. 4). What people find funny tend to vary in different cultures, however, the ability to find something funny is a universal phenomenon (ibid.). Raskin's humor model consists of the two components *script* and *incongruity*.

The notion of script in this sense brings forward the expectations the viewer creates. This includes what they think is *supposed* to happen next or be said next. Because the viewer always has an expectation of what is succeeding, it is as if the viewers themselves have a "script" that is being created in their mind as the dialogue happens. Incongruity then occurs because the script the reader has "planned for" in their head crashes with what is actually being said, and thus the humorous effect occurs. Azeez and Turki explain this as a script taking an unexpected turn, in regard to the expectation of the audience (2019, p. 13).

Incongruity can be explained as a conflict between what is predicted and what follows in the joke. Further this can be seen in means of an ambiguity of some kind, often language wise, which causes a conflict and a surprise at the end of the joke. Omar and Sadeghpour (2015) explain incongruity as the conflict between what is said versus what is expected by the audience (n.p.). This will trigger an outcome that is not expected as it is not "coherent with the rest of the joke" (Azeez & Turki, 2019, p. 13.). Moreover, for incongruity to take place, there needs to be an expectation of what is going to happen next. This occurs, as mentioned, by the audience creating a script in their head which then clashes with the actual script: what happens on-screen.

Attardo (1994) discusses the semantic script theory of humor, where he elaborates on Raskin's theory. Summarized, a text needs to be compatible with two scripts that need to be opposed to each other for a text to be classified as funny (p. 205). The compatibility of two scripts means that the audience will gather a set of ideas that are put together in two different scripts (Korostenkiene & Pakrosnyte, 2018, p. 161). The humorous outcome occurs when these two scripts clash. For humor to be script-based, it needs to include the notions of script

and incongruity as explained above. Thus, the examples of humorous instances used in this thesis are all script-based, and include the definitions as stated above.

2.2   Previous studies

Julia Korostenkiene and Miglë Pakrosnyte (2018) did an empirical study on the translation of humor in *Friends* into Lithuanian. In their research paper they used Raskin's (1985) humor model as a tool for analyzing several hundred humorous instances from the show, and their way of analyzing the humorous scripts are tidy and thorough. In addition, they have looked at the different macro and micro strategies used by the subtitler to analyze the translation.

In some cases, cultural and linguistic aspects tend to be omitted in the translation process as a whole. According to Korostenkiene and Pakrosnyte (2018), the most common way to translate humor is either in form of literal translation or to transfer the effect (p. 155). To translate humor in form of literal translation means that the joke will be translated literally from the source language to the target language, the language of which the joke is translated to, not taking in consideration if there are elements that need clarification in the transformation from source language to target language. This way the joke told will be in the same form, without adapting or explaining in any way from source language to target language. Transferring the effect means translating the joke to fit the target language (ibid.), which may include changing the word order or adapting linguistic or cultural aspects to make the joke understandable for the audience of the target language. With this in mind, it becomes clear that the translator has a vast variety of choices to make in the translation from the source text to the target text.

2.3   Defining translation strategies

I will use Anne Schjoldager's (2008) definitions of macro- and micro translation strategies from respectively chapters 5 *Macrostrategies* and 6 *Microstrategies*. These are the strategies used when analyzing which type of translation occurs by the choices made by the translator. Below is a short explication from Schjoldager (2008, p. 90-92) of the different translation macro- and micro strategies used in this thesis. For space purposes I will only define the micro strategies used in this paper, although there exist several additional micro strategies below each macro strategy.

Table 1.   **Translation macro- and micro strategies**

Translation strategy	Translation micro strategy	Definition
Direct translation	Literal translation	A word-for-word translation of the source-text item into a grammatically and idiomatically correct target-language expression.
	Calque	A special kind of borrowing. The TL (in the TT) borrows an expression or the structure of an expression from the SL (in the ST) and translates each element literally.
Oblique translation	Condensation	Translates in a shorter way, which may involve implication (making explicit information implicit).
Transformation	Deletion	An ST item is not rendered in the TT.

3.   Methodology

I will approach the empirical part of the paper by qualitatively examining 5 examples from episodes 1 to 4 in season 1 of *Friends*, similar to the way done by Korostenkiene and Pakrosnyte (2018). In their research paper, they use examples with Lithuanian dubbing and English subtitles (p. 164), but examples with the original language with the Norwegian subtitling will be demonstrated in this analysis.

As the series is a humor sitcom, there are evidently countless examples that would demonstrate any form of humor. The foundation for the examples chosen in this thesis is that they all need to include script-based humor as defined above. In addition, the humorous instances chosen has further been supported by canned laughter (background laughter), to ensure that the excerpts chosen are not subjectively humor but are meant to be found funny by the producers of the show (Korostenkiene & Pakrosnyte, 2018, p. 164).

For the empirical part, the approach used in this paper will be somewhat similar to the one used by Korostenkiene and Pakrosnyte (2018). It will involve an explication of the context of the joke, the actual data (the source text (ST) and target text (TT)), a short analysis on the translation which involve defining which macro and micro translation strategies were used, as well as identifying the script in the examples.

In the analytic section I will define why the joke is of script-based humor before analyzing each example according to the translation strategies as demonstrated by Schjoldager (2008, p. 90-92), as well as comparing the transfer of the script-based jokes from ST to TT looking at the eventual loss and gain from the translation.

4. Analysis and results

Table 2: S1E2. **The joke about the lost ring**

	Macro strategy: direct translation Micro strategy: literal translation
Context: Rachel could not find her engagement ring and asks if anyone has seen it.	
English (SL)	**Norwegian (TL)**
Joey: All right, when did you have it on last? Phoebe: Doy, probably right before she lost it.	Joey: Når hadde du den på sist? Phoebe: Like før hun mistet den.

The humor in the ST arises because the script clashes when Joey asks when Rachel had on the ring last followed by Phoebe's comment. By Joey asking this question, the audience might

expect Rachel to reply with when she in fact did have the ring on last. Instead, Phoebe unexpectedly and sarcastically replies that Rachel probably had it on last right before she lost it. This creates the humorous effect of this script, because incongruity occurs in the anticipation of Rachel's reply, which is disturbed by Phoebe's unanticipated comment. Phoebe's reply is incongruent in relation to Joey's question.

The same humorous effect occurs in the translation of the ST, and the meaning and the humorous effect is intact. Moreover, the same script and incongruence occurs in the ST as in the TT. The translation macro strategy used is direct translation, and the micro strategy used is literal translation, because it is a word-for-word translation which keeps intact the grammar and significance of the target language (Schjoldager, 2008, p. 90).

Table 3: S1E2. **The joke about Phoebe not wanting to help**

	Macro strategy: transformation **Micro strategy: deletion**
Context: Ross asks Phoebe if she wants to help him install some furniture.	
English (SL)	**Norwegian (TL)**
Phoebe: I wish I could, but I don't want to.	Phoebe: Gjerne, men jeg vil ikke.

In the ST, the Phoebe says that she *wishes she could* help Ross, but that she does in fact not *want* to, which are two obvious opposite remarks. This is an example of a script clashing within a sentence. After the first part of the sentence, the subordinate clause, the addressee expects Phoebe to give a reason for why she cannot, as she starts with saying that she wishes she could, but that she (for some reason) cannot. When she says her reason, which is that she does not *want* to, it creates a humorous effect to the script as it is an unexpected remark which clashes with the script that would have been a more obvious reality: her giving a "valid" reason for why she could not help.

In the TT, the humorous effect is somewhat transformed, but there occurs a form of loss to the first part of the sentence. In the ST, Phoebe expresses that she wishes she could, but in the TT, she only expresses *gjerne* which does not invite for an opposition, as it would if the entirety of

the sentence would have been added (*jeg skulle gjerne*). This way the reader would expect something else to follow, as this would be a subordinate clause that needs to be fulfilled in order for it to make sense as a complete utterance. The translation macro strategy used is transformation and the micro strategy used is deletion, as there is a source text item not included in the TT (Schjoldager, 2008, p. 91). In this case, it is the subordinate clause that invites for an opposition which happens in the ST but not in the TT.

Table 4: S1E3. **Chandler's one-liner about how much he likes Alan**

Macro strategy: direct translation Micro strategy: calque	
Context: Monica is dating a guy named Alan, which everyone seems to like very much. Chandler expresses his fondness of him.	
English (SL)	**Norwegian (TL)**
Chandler: I personally could have a gallon of Alan.	Chandler: Jeg kunne ta flere liter med Alan.

This is another example of incongruence happening within one sentence. Chandler says that he *could have a gallon of,* and the audience might expect him to finish the sentence with something liquid. Instead he says *Alan.* In the ST, *Alan* demonstrates the incongruence that opposes with the script that the viewer might have imagined, it being the name of a person and not something drinkable. Another humorous effect here, which might not be evident unless one has the visual aspect, is Chandler's own stunned expression after he has said the one-liner, clearly impressed by his wittiness, by the fact that the words *gallon* and *Alan* rhyme. In addition, there is alliteration as the words both have *a* and *l*, which adds to the cleverness of the joke.

In the TT, the translation is literal. The word *gallon* is replaced with *flere liter* as Norwegian does not use gallon as a measurement. The translation does not transform the same wittiness as in the ST, with the rhyme not being present. It does however show some form of alliteration with ga*ll*on – *l*iter and Alan, however only with the letter *l*. The subtitler has used the translation macro strategy direct translation and the micro strategy calque as it follows the language of the ST, creating a close translation.

Table 5: S1E4. **The joke about the word 'omnipotent'**

	Macro strategy: direct translation **Micro strategy: literal translation**
Context: Everyone discuss what they would do if they were omnipotent, before Joey joins the conversation.	

English (SL)	Norwegian (TL)
Monica: What would you do if you were omnipotent? Joey: Probably kill myself. Monica: Excuse me?	Monica: Hva ville du gjort om du ble omnipotent? Joey: Drept meg, tenker jeg. Monica: Unnskyld?

In the ST, Monica is asking Joey what he would have done if he were omnipotent, which means being able to do whatever he wants. By asking this, one would probably assume that his reply would be somewhat similar to others' replies, such as Phoebe's for instance, "I would want world peace, no more hunger", or Chandler's being "I would make myself omnipotent forever". When Joey's reply to what he would do if he were omnipotent is that he would probably kill himself, incongruence occurs. This is what creates the humorous effect, because the script that the audience have in their head does not match with actual script, the one being said by Joey.

In the TT, the same script and the same incongruence occurs, because the meaning is intact. The translation macro strategy used is direct translation, and the micro strategy used is literal translation. The Norwegian subtitles have the same grammar and meaning and is in the ST (Korostenkiene & Pakrosnyte, 2018, p. 162-163).

Table 6: S1E4. **Cont.: The joke about the word 'omnipotent'**

Macro strategy: oblique translation   **Micro strategies: condensation**
Context Continuation of the previous scene: Joey explains with why he would 'probably kill himself' if he were omnipotent, to which Ross demonstrates that Joey has confused the words 'omnipotent' and 'impotent'.

English (SL)	**Norwegian (TL)**
Joey: If little Joey's dead, then I got no reason to live, you know? Ross: Joey, *om*nipotent. Joey: You are?	Joey: Hvis lille Joey er død, har ikke jeg noen grunn til å leve. Ross: Joey, omnipotent. Joey: Er du?

In the ST Joey explains that he would have killed himself if he were omnipotent, because *if little Joey's dead, then I got no reason to live*. By saying this, it is clear that Joey confuses the words 'omnipotent' and 'impotent', which sound similar, but mean two entirely different things. When Ross notices this, he tries to explain to Joey that he has confused the two words by repeating the word 'omnipotent' in a slow manner for him to understand that they are talking about *omnipotence* and not *impotence*. This is however not explicitly said: but is understood by the English-speaking audience because the two words sound similar, in addition to the information that is being received by Joey's reply. Him replying *you are?* followed by a confused look, as if he thinks Ross is saying that he himself is impotent '*om*nipotent -> *I'm* impotent' indicates that he thinks Ross is saying that he is impotent. After Ross says 'omnipotent', the audience might create a scenario, a script, where they think the information becomes clear to Joey, and that he understands, and perhaps would reply with something similar to what he would have done if he were in fact omnipotent (in the right manner) for instance. However, that does not happen. Instead, incongruence occurs because the script imagined by the audience does not match with the script that takes place, creating the humorous effect with Joey's unexpected reply.

In the TT, however, the humorous effect is not transformed in the Norwegian subtitles, as there occurs a loss to the information given. This is because the word 'omnipotent' which

means the same and is written the same way in the SL as in the TL, followed by the remark *er du?* does not transform the same humorous effect. The reason for the humorous effect in the ST, is that Ross saying 'omnipotent' sounded (for Joey) as if he were saying 'I'm impotent', followed by his reply which makes sense in the ST, but not in the TT. This is an example of language bound humor. The subtitler has used the translation macro strategy oblique translation, and the micro strategy condensation, as information in the TT is made less explicit (Korostenkiene & Pakrosnyte, 2019, p. 162-163).

5.   Discussion

In the script that is being created in the audience's head, cultural and linguistic aspects might not be as obvious, or not obvious at all, until the subtitles are visible. This way, the subtitles functions as a sort of helping tool for the audience. The audience of the source language might have a different script than the audience of the target language in watching any kind of TV series. In subtitling of subtitling humor, Omar and Sadeghpour (2015) explain how linguistic features offers difficulties for the subtitler because of the linguistic differences in languages, especially in regard to wordplays or puns (n.p.). Hence the difficult task for the translator being that humorous elements such as wordplays give more than one meaning in the source language (ibid.), and not to the language of which the TV series is translated to. Finding a similar pun in the target language will thus offer difficulty as the meaning will most likely disappear. The difficulty in translating linguistic aspects of a joke is shown in the analysis above.

Jokes that end up the category of linguistic jokes, as in tables 4 and 6 seem to be harder to translate than jokes can be understood by the universal audience. This being if the joke the ST translated to TT give the same information and have the same humorous effect. In table 6, for instance, it is the fact that the words 'omnipotent' sounded (for Joey) as if Ross was saying 'I'm impotent', followed by Joey's reply which creates the humorous effect. As shown, the humorous effect was not transferred in the TT because 'I am' in the TT is 'jeg er', and thus the joke could not be transferred without a linguistically over-explanation. Examples of jokes that were transferred with full effect are the ones which used the micro strategy literal translation, as shown in tables 2 and 5. Here, the meaning of the joke was not linguistically bound, and the humorous effect was fully transferred.

As demonstrated in the analysis, some elements are easier translated than others. This being a smaller study on the subject and only five examples are used in this thesis makes it difficult to

be able to see a specific pattern in regard to the translation strategies used. Still it interesting to see and analyze what choices that are made by the subtitler. The examples being few is reinforced by illustrating a variety of the translation methods used.

6.   Conclusions and suggestions for further research

Using Raskin's (1985) humor theory with the notions of script and incongruity as a foundation in this empirical translation study, I have demonstrated how script-based humor is portrayed in the TV series *Friends* and looked at the subtitling to Norwegian. In the analysis I have used five examples of script-based humor in the TV series *Friends*. The jokes used were script-based which was a requirement for the analysis. From using Schjoldager's (2008) definitions of micro strategies in the analysis, I have investigated the choices made by the subtitler when translating the series from source text to target text. Further I have demonstrated how translation offers a set of challenges for the translator. In addition, there are humor elements that are more difficult than others to translate, in rendering its full meaning from the ST to the TT.

Though it might be difficult to see a specific pattern in the translation of script-based humor from the small number of examples used in this dissertation, the examples still show a variety of translation strategies used. This could give notions for further research on the subject. An idea could be to use more elements of script-based humor to have a wider range of examples to have a stronger starting point and a stronger base. There are evidently several humor elements that are universal, but an American sitcom series is guaranteed to contain elements of humor that are specific to American culture. Not having focused on the translation of cultural aspects in this thesis, this could be an interesting thing for further research. Thus, the translation of humoristic cultural aspects would be an interesting thing to look at further which could bring a stronger foundation to the table when discussing the concept of translating humor.

Candidate: 10030

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