Julie Dillenkofer

Puns Lost in Translation. Contrasting English Puns and Their German Translations in the Television Show "How I Met Your Mother"

Master's Thesis
Julie Francis Dillenkofer

Puns Lost in Translation

Contrasting English Puns and Their German Translations in the Television Show How I Met Your Mother
Table of Contents

List of Tables ................................................................................................................. 5
List of Figures .................................................................................................................. 5
List of Abbreviations ........................................................................................................ 7
1 Introduction .................................................................................................................... 8
2 Contrasting English Puns and Their German Translations ........... 11
   2.1 Previous Studies on Pun Translation in Dubbed Television... 12
   2.2 Defining Puns ................................................................................................. 16
   2.3 Classification of Puns .................................................................................... 18
   2.4 Translation of Puns ........................................................................................ 23
      2.4.1 Problems Involved in Pun Translation .............................................. 32
      2.4.2 Humor Translation ............................................................................... 35
      2.4.3 A Note on Television Translation ...................................................... 37
3 Puns Lost in Translation: A Case Study of the Puns in How I Met
   Your Mother ............................................................................................................ 40
   3.1 Material .............................................................................................................. 40
   3.2 Method ............................................................................................................... 42
   3.3 Results ............................................................................................................... 43
      3.3.1 Linguistic Classification ......................................................................... 43
      3.3.2 Translation Modes .................................................................................. 44
      3.3.3 Successful Pun Translations .................................................................. 46
Table of Contents

3.3.4 Unsuccessful Pun Translations ................................. 57

3.4 Discussion .............................................................................. 94

4 Conclusion ............................................................................................. 111

5 Bibliography .......................................................................................... 114

  5.1 Corpora ......................................................................................... 114
  5.2 Secondary literature ...................................................................... 115
  5.3 Electronic Resources ................................................................... 119

6 Appendix ................................................................................................ 123
List of Tables

Table 1: Linguistic categories of puns ..............................................19
Table 2: Linguistic and formal types of spoken and written puns ....22
Table 3: Categories of spoken puns ..................................................23
Table 4: General pun translation techniques .....................................24
Table 5: Pun translation techniques for dubbed television ...............27
Table 6: Occurrences of source text puns in HIMYM .......................44
Table 7: Translation types of puns in HIMYM .................................45
Table 8: Source text puns and their successful translation modes in HIMYM .............................................................................46
Table 9: Translation modes of the successful pun translations in HIMYM .............................................................................47
Table 10: Successful adaptations in form of direct translations in HIMYM .............................................................................48
Table 11: Successful adaptations in form of punoids in HIMYM ....51
Table 12: Source text puns and their unsuccessful translation modes in HIMYM .............................................................................58
Table 13: Translation modes of the unsuccessful pun translation in HIMYM .............................................................................59
Table 14: English pun types and their (im)possible translations into German .............................................................................103
List of Figures

Figure 1: Square translation model................................................... 28
Figure 2: Pentagon translation model............................................... 29
Figure 3: Hexagon translation model ............................................... 30
Figure 4: Circle translation model.................................................... 31
Figure 5: Translation challenge of a visual homophone............... 95
Figure 6: Translation challenge of a metaphorical extension.......... 96
Figure 7: Translation challenge of non-paronymic equivalents ...... 97
Figure 8: Translation challenge of non-polysemous equivalents ..... 98
Figure 9: Translation challenge of non-polysemous compound equivalents................................................................. 100
Figure 10: Translation challenge of non-polysemous forename equivalents................................................................. 101
List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HIMYM</td>
<td><em>How I Met Your Mother</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST</td>
<td>Source text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TT</td>
<td>Target text</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1 Introduction

Translating a text into another language is a process mostly known in the area of literature. At the same time (even though often disregarded in this connection), translation is a central part of filmmaking. Since the emergence of sound films in the 1930s, screen translation (that is, subtitling, dubbing and voice-over) has become a tradition in Europe. In Germany, dubbing has been the universalized means of defying language barriers in the field of movie and television ever since (cf. Cedeno Rojas 2007: 13, 30, 82; Herbst 1994: 19; Jüngst 2010: 4, 59; Leinert 2015: 51; Naumann 2015: 29; Tveit 2005: 11).

However, it is commonly believed that translated movies and television series lack certain features as compared to their original. Disapproval of dubbed movies and television shows has become quite frequent in Germany, not necessarily among linguists and/or multilingual people exclusively. In the case of dubbed sitcoms which originate in the United States, it is safe to say that the German audience repeatedly stumbles upon scenes that are entirely incomprehensible and, even more perplexing, end in the laugh track which is typically inserted in US situation comedies. Clearly, the source text contains a joke that has been lost in translation. But what are the reasons for such ineffective adaptations? Is it the fact that the original jokes include a culture-specific term that is only understandable in the source language or is

---

1 Hereafter, German audience refers to speakers of the German language who are not necessarily located in Germany, but also in Austria or the German-speaking parts of Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Belgium, South Tyrol, etc.
simply the translators’ carelessness to blame? Research in media, humor and translation studies reveals that wordplays\(^2\) are a universal phenomenon which is generally considered untranslatable (cf. Delabastita 1993: 173-177; Heibert 1993: 155, Pisek 1997: 37, 43; Schröter 2010: 141-142).

In this paper, I argue that the German dubbed versions of US American sitcoms lose a great deal of their humor since language jokes, particularly puns, are rarely successfully translated. The dubbed versions include a remarkably large number of literal translations and even direct copies of English words which not only are no longer funny, but are also incomprehensible in the target language. Unfortunately, it seems to be the case that no research on English puns and their German dubbed translations has been conducted to date. Therefore, I will examine how English puns are adapted in the corresponding German translations. For this study, I will analyze the popular US television series *How I Met Your Mother*, which ran in the United States from 2005 to 2014 and is well-known for its jokes and frequent use of puns. I will first categorize the translation of puns in the fields of contrastive linguistics and translation studies and reflect on the question of translatability of puns in general. Then, I will give a brief overview of the studies that have focused on the translation of puns in screen translation and literary works. The next section defines the term *pun* and illustrates how wordplays can be classified linguistically. After demonstrating the various possibilities of translating puns, I will explain the central problems involved in translating lexical items from one lan-

\(^{2}\) The terms *pun* and *wordplay* are used interchangeably in this chapter, as their differentiation will not be discussed until section 2.2.
Introduction

Language into another. Next, the area of humor translation and the technical features of television translation, which may complicate a successful pun translation, will be briefly displayed. I will then investigate how English puns in the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* are adapted in the German dubbed version and whether they uphold their comical effect. Thereafter, I will determine the reasons for the various unsuccessful translations, while examining whether certain pun types appear easier to translate than others. Lastly, I will discuss whether puns in the field of dubbing are actually translatable or not. The last three seasons of *How I Met Your Mother* include 72 episodes, contain a total of 155 puns, and provide a solid base for the contrastive study of English puns and their German translations.
2 Contrasting English Puns and Their German Translations

Translating from one language into another often entails certain difficulties. Contrastive linguistics, which studies the synchronic comparison of two languages, illustrates the typical linguistic as well as culture-specific challenges involved in translation. The related field of translation studies visualizes additional problems concerning media-specific and human constraints.

Apart from the basic difficulties translators have to deal with (see section 2.4.1), puns turn out to be even more problematic to adapt into another language. On the one hand, puns do not serve the purpose of communication per se but are rather a means of amusement. Consequently, their translation cannot simply be compared to other kinds of translation (cf. Vandaele 2002: 150) and should be discussed against the background of humor translation as well.3 On the other hand, puns are based on particular graphemic, phonological, morphological, lexical as well as syntactic structures, which makes the translation process even more difficult. Therefore, puns are universally considered as one of the major challenges in the field of translation studies (cf. Delabastita 1994: 223, 229; Tęcza 1997: 1; Tveit 2005: 43).

In fact, it appears to be a widespread belief that puns can be understood only in their original form and exclusively by native speakers (cf. Heibert 1993: 155). As a result, puns are often believed to be untranslatable (cf. Delabastita 1993: 173-177; Heibert 1993: 155; Pisek 1997: 5).

---

3 Even though this paper does not explicitly study the area of humor itself, it seems necessary to briefly discuss humor translation, which will be done in section 2.4.2.
Contrasting English Puns and Their German Translations

37, 43; Schröter 2010: 141-142) – unless the source and the target language coincidentally share the same cultural meanings and linguistic structures (cf. Attardo 2002: 190; Heibert 1993: 155). Needless to say, such parallels in different languages are quite infrequent.

An opposing point of view derives from a few scholars who claim that nearly all puns can be translated (cf. Gottlieb 1997: 226; Low 2011: 59, 67; Schröter 2010: 142-143; Tęcza 1997: 207) – even in the area of dubbing (cf. Schröter 2010: 143). Given that there are specific tools as to how translators can successfully adapt a wordplay into another language, the following case study will investigate the actual reasons for an ineffective pun translation.

2.1 Previous Studies on Pun Translation in Dubbed Television

Even though the literature on puns in general is vast, it seems that only little research has focused on the translation of puns in the media. In fact, there are no studies that linguistically analyze the translation of verbal puns from English to German on the basis of a US American television series and its German dubbed version.

There is one work that investigates the translation of jokes, including wordplays, in dubbed television comedy (the British sitcom Yes Minister), yet in consideration of their Catalan and Spanish adaptations (see Zabalbeascoa 1996). Unfortunately, this paper does not present a contrastive linguistic examination of the translations but instead aims to find solutions to the apparent difficulty of the translation of jokes. In summary, the author suggests specific stylesheets for the translators, so they not only become skilled at correct language use but are also trained for the translation of humor.
Contrasting English Puns and Their German Translations

Considerably more attention has been directed to the translation of puns in the area of television subtitling. For instance, Gottlieb (1997) analyzes the Danish subtitled wordplays in the British television program *Carrott’s Commercial Breakdown*. The small study reveals that puns that are based on an identical phonological or graphemic representation of lexical items are more difficult to translate, as compared to other kinds of puns. The analysis also illustrates the reasons for the loss of puns in translation, such as language- and media-specific challenges. For the most part, however, Gottlieb holds human constraints (that is, the translators’ lack of talent, interest and/or experience, as well as time pressure) accountable for the loss of wordplays in general.

Jaki (2016) examines verbal humor in three American television shows (*The Big Bang Theory*, *New Girl*, as well as *Grace and Frankie*) and their German subtitles. Her study discloses that a high number of literal translations neutralize the majority of language plays (which, however, not only include puns, but also rhymes, alliterations, lexical blends, creative neologisms, literalizations of figurative language, phraseological modifications, misunderstandings and slips of the tongue). The author holds the technical restrictions in subtitling (reading speed and the maximum number of characters per line) as well as visual jokes responsible for the great loss of humor in subtitled television.

Schauffler (2015), on the other hand, contrasts two different approaches to the subtitling of wordplays using the short animation *Wallace and Gromit* in *A Matter of Loaf and Death*. Two German audiences were presented two versions of subtitling: one translation concentrates on the transfer of humor, whereas the other translation prioritizes the correspondence to the original conversations. The study re-
Contrasting English Puns and Their German Translations

veals that the former approach is substantially preferred over the original subtitles that focus on equivalence. In other words, the tested German-speaking audiences consider subtitles with close translations less appealing than subtitles that are not too similar but maintain the jokes instead.

In a theoretical paper, Schröter (2010) claims that all kinds of language-plays in movies and television programs are translatable—both in dubbing and subtitling. He refers to his doctoral dissertation in which he compared the quality of dubbed and subtitled language-plays in American and British movies in terms of their German, Swedish, Norwegian and Danish translations. Unfortunately, the reader has no insight into the material or the results; on the other hand, puns are not analyzed in isolation from other types of language-plays (such as modified expressions, nonce formations, nonce pronunciations, rhymes, half-rhymes and alliterations). Therefore, the essay is beneficial to the present study only with reference to Schröter’s postulation of a general translatability of language-plays in voice synchronization.

Further studies on pun translation can be found in the field of literature. For example, Grassegger (1985) analyzes the plays on words in the Asterix comics from French into English, German, Italian, Modern Greek, Swedish and Norwegian. His results show that the translators succeeded in translating wordplays while upholding the play on words and the sense. His study thus suggests that written wordplays can actually be translated into another language.

Heibert (1993) compares English wordplays in James Joyce’s Ulysses with numerous translations in French, German, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. He concludes that wordplays may or may not be translated
into another language. In his view, it is essentially a question of coincidence whether the target text translations comprise the essential technical, textual and functional aspects as the source text wordplays.

Tęcza (1997) examines Polish wordplays in eight works by Stanisław Lem (science fiction grotesque and science fiction fairy tales) and the quality of their German translations. As compared to Grassegger and Heibert, her study presents a relatively low translation rate of wordplays in written works.

Moreover, Delabastita (1993) studies a great number of wordplays in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and their translations into Dutch, German and French. His work is extremely meaningful for this paper since it comprises a precise translation model as to how puns can be translated into another language (successfully as well as unsuccessfully). In fact, Delabastita’s nine pun translation techniques are the base for the following categorization of puns and their translations from English to German. Complementary to Delabastita’s model, Low (2011) presents four linguistic tools for exclusively effective wordplay translations, which are also fundamental for the following examination of pun translations.

Regarding the linguistic description and categorization of wordplays, the earliest and simultaneously most dominant study derives from Hausmann (1974). In his investigation of wordplays in the French satiric newspaper *Canard enchaîné*, he organizes wordplays into several categories with regard to their lexical, phonological and graphemic ambiguity and/or similarity. The majority of academics examining the translation of puns adopted Hausmann’s classification model (e.g. Attardo 1994; Delabastita 1993/2004; Gottlieb 1997; Grassegger 1985;
Contrasting English Puns and Their German Translations

Heibert 1993; Tęcza 1997). It appears that Hausmann’s work on wordplay has served as a linguistic foundation not only in the past, but still provides a solid starting point for linguistic studies on puns today.

2.2 Defining Puns

The Oxford English Dictionary (2016a) defines *pun* as

> the use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect.

In other words, the term *pun* refers to words which imply further connotations of an expression by means of playing on words that have multiple denotations and/or sound similar or even alike. The result is an amusing “play on words” (Oxford English Dictionary 2016a) which appears to be known universally as *wordplay*.

*Wordplay*, on the other hand, is defined as “the action of playing with words; witty use of words” (Oxford English Dictionary 2016b). It is therefore, literally, a *play on words*. At first, the term appears to have the same meaning as *pun*, particularly when considering the additional description of *wordplay* as “a pun” (Oxford English Dictionary 2016b).

Comparing the respective definitions in *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (Wales 2011: 349), *pun* is defined as a lexical ambiguity which involves

- the use of a polysemous word to suggest two or more meanings [...] or
- the use of homonyms, i.e. different words which look or sound the same but which have different meanings [...] to produce a humorous or witty effect.