

## LOSS OF HUMOR IN TRANSLATING SUBTITLES: A CASE STUDY OF THE PUNJABI FILM “ANGREJ” AND ITS ENGLISH SUBTITLES

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### Abstract

*Humor translation is a complex task as humor is a cultural and linguistic construct that incorporates shared knowledge between the sender and the audience. The present research investigates the phenomenon of humor translation in subtitling. It primarily deals with the ways Punjabi humor, an Indian Punjabi film Angrej, is translated into English subtitles. It also aims at analyzing the loss of humor and the reasons behind it in translation due to distinct linguistic and cultural aspects of languages involved in the process. To achieve the set aims, data is analyzed by applying the taxonomy of translation methods introduced by Vinay and Darbelnet (2000). The study shows that humor is lost in the subtitles of the selected film Angrej. The loss of humor occurs due to linguistic and cultural differences. The study paves the way for future researchers to work on humor specifically in the field of audiovisual translation.*

**Keywords:** humor, translation, subtitle, audiovisual translation

### Introduction

Humor is a universal phenomenon that is found in every culture and society around the world. Humor plays a significant role in human communication, as it helps to create social bonds, relieve stress, and cope with difficult situations. However, translating humor from one language to another can be a daunting task for translators, as humor is often based on cultural references, idiomatic expressions, and wordplay that do not always translate easily (Low, 2011). This research analyzes the way Punjabi humor is translated into the English subtitles of an Indian film *Angrej*.

Humor has played a significant role in literature throughout history. Humor can serve many purposes in literature, from providing comic relief to conveying social commentary and political satire. One of the ways that humor can provide comic relief is by breaking up the tension in a story (Morreall, 2011). This is especially true in works that deal with serious or dark themes. Humor can help to create a more balanced and nuanced portrayal of the characters and events in the story, making it easier for readers to connect with the characters and empathize with their struggles (Ibid.). In this way, humor can help to humanize the characters and make them more relatable to readers, which can ultimately lead to a more fulfilling reading experience. Humor can also be used to convey social commentary and political satire. By using humor to critique social and political issues, authors can make their works more accessible and engaging to readers who might not otherwise be interested in these topics. This is because humor can help to make difficult or controversial ideas more palatable and less intimidating. By presenting these issues in a humorous way, authors can encourage readers to think critically about the world around them and consider alternative perspectives. This is particularly important in a society where many people are apathetic or disengaged from politics and social issues.

To cut short, humor is a powerful tool in literature that can be used to engage readers, convey complex ideas, and provide insight into the human condition. By using humor in literature, authors can create works that are both entertaining and meaningful, providing readers with a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them.

### **Challenges of Translating Humor**

Translating humor is a challenging task that requires a deep understanding of the cultural context and linguistic nuances of both the source and target languages. According to Baker (1992), humor is often based on cultural references that may not be familiar to the target audience. As a result, the translator needs to have a good knowledge of the cultural context to ensure that the humor is accurately conveyed.

Another challenge of translating humor is the difference in linguistic structures between the source and target languages (Ageli, 2014). Humor often relies on wordplay, puns, and idiomatic expressions that do not translate easily (Low, 2011). As a result, the translator needs to be creative in finding equivalent expressions in the target language that convey the same meaning and humor as the original.

In addition, the cultural and social norms of the source and target languages may differ, making it difficult for the translator to convey the intended humor accurately (Zabalbeascoa, 1996). For example, humor that is considered acceptable in one culture may be deemed offensive in another culture. As a result, the translator needs to be aware of these differences and adapt the translation accordingly. According to Chen, Watkins and Martin (2013), cultural references are often the primary source of humor in a language, and these references may not be easily translatable. The translator has to be aware of the cultural nuances and references in both languages to ensure that the humor is accurately conveyed. In many cases, the translator may have to provide footnotes or additional information to help the viewer understand the joke.

Humor is an essential component of human communication, and it is present in every culture worldwide. It serves many purposes, such as relieving stress, fostering a sense of community, and coping with difficult situations. However, translating humor can be challenging since cultural references and wordplay may not translate easily. In this paper, we will examine the difficulties faced by translators in retaining humor in English subtitles of a Punjabi film *Angrej*, with a particular focus on the reasons behind the loss of humor and the strategies used to mitigate it.

### **Research Questions**

1. How humor is lost in the English subtitles of a Punjabi film *Angrej*?
2. What translation strategies are used while translating a humorous movie for subtitles?

### **Literature Review**

Translating humor may be a challenging endeavor since it calls for not just a thorough knowledge of the source and target languages but also a clear comprehension of the cultural subtleties and social context that underlie the jokes. This is why it's crucial for prospective interpreters and translators to expose to humor and comedy as part of their learning.

For instance, puns require a mastery of both languages involved, as well as an awareness of the double meanings and nuances of words. Translators need to be able to recognize these linguistic quirks and find creative solutions to reproduce the humor in the target language. Wordplay, on the other hand, involves playing with the sounds or meanings of words, often through clever word associations or rhyming. Interpreters must be able to identify and reproduce these linguistic techniques to convey the humor effectively.

Idioms, too, can be a challenge for translators, as they are often culturally specific and may not have equivalent expressions in the target language. Translators must be able to understand the idiomatic expressions and find suitable replacements that capture the intended humor. According to the literature, the translation of humor poses significant challenges for translators. Culture and language play a significant role in defining humor, which can take various forms, such as jokes, wordplay, puns, and idioms (Tien, 2018). Venuti (2002) suggests that translating humor requires an independent approach to target materials, involving domesticating adaptations of the source language texts while maintaining their relationship to the original text. Despite the advantages and drawbacks associated with translation, Venuti argues that there will always be a loss of foreign text at various levels, including form and meaning, syntax and lexicon, sound and meter, allusion, and intertextuality. Martínez-Sierra (2006) and Jankowska (2009) have also explored the loss that occurs in the translation of humor. Their studies found that regardless of the language pair and translation method used, there is a loss of humor in both a quantitative and qualitative sense. Specifically, they found that the target text tends to be less humorous than the source text, as it contains fewer humorous elements and the humorous elements that are present are less humorous. These losses may be attributed to cultural and linguistic differences that make it difficult to capture the humor of the source text in the target text (Tien, 2018). However, Kovács (2014) argues that losses in the translation of humor can be compensated by introducing other humorous elements elsewhere in the text. This approach may involve adapting the source text to the target language and culture or using creative strategies to convey the humor effectively.

However, there may also be benefits from translation, both linguistically and culturally, as Venuti (2002) notes, “because translating is radically re-contextualizing, actually exorbitant in its creation of another context.” The linguistic and cultural gain, especially in literary translations, frequently outweighs the source work and has meaning only for the reader of the target language, evoking parts of the receiving culture, its values, and traditions. The source text is changed in both the formal and semantic aspects. Venuti (2002) refers to these effects as “domestic ‘reminder’ in a translation” since they go beyond the simple transmission of a single meaning and take into account the receivers' language and cultural contexts (p. 8).

Concisely, translating humor is a challenging task as it is highly subjective and what one person finds funny may not be the case for another. In addition, the genre of humor also plays a crucial role in determining the ease of translation. For example, situational or anecdotal humor, which emphasizes universal aspects of human existence and is amusing to people of different cultural backgrounds, is easier to translate than wordplays, puns, or idioms that are specific to a particular language and culture. However, it is important to note that the success of humor translation depends on the translator's ability to convey the humorous impact of the source text. As Attardo (2001) suggests, the essence of a humorous text is its ability to be perceived as funny, and this is reflected in the text itself. Therefore, we should consider a text whose purpose is to amuse the audience as humorous.

In addition, every joke expresses the social context in which it is told. Every culture has unique dangers and issues. There are several jokes where the sole participants are the same. Society is capable of enjoying comedy. For instance, jokes that farmers tell one other may be highly humorous to them, but they are not funny to men who have had formal education. This illustrates the idea that what is amusing to men in illiterate societies is not amusing to men in intelligent societies (Chun, 1977, p. 124). To understand humor's core, one must comprehend common

cultural and social realities as well as shared beliefs and attitudes (Nash, 1985). “Culture is characterized as the totality of actions, thoughts, and objects that represent those actions, thoughts, and objects” (Newmark, 1991, p. 73). A “joke” is a type of humor where the funniest part of the joke is the punchline at the end of the joke (Ahmed, 1996). The stage setup and the end line are two components of a joke.

To produce an accurate translation, the translator must have an in-depth understanding of the cultural and linguistic nuances of both the source and target languages. They must also be able to adapt the source text creatively to convey the humor effectively in the target language. This involves using various translation techniques, such as paraphrasing, adaptation, and compensation, to ensure that the humor is conveyed appropriately in the target language (Kovács, 2014)

In conclusion, translating humor is a complex and challenging task, and the success of humor translation depends on various factors. However, with a thorough understanding of the cultural and linguistic nuances of both languages, along with creative translation techniques, a translator can effectively convey the humorous impact of the source text to the target audience.

In this regard, several studies have examined the loss of humor in subtitles, and most of them have found that humor is often lost in the translation process. For example, in a study by Ramos (2018), it was found that humor was often lost in Spanish translations of English subtitles. The study analyzed the subtitles of six English-language comedies, and the results showed that only 30% of the jokes were translated accurately. In another study by Remael and Vercauteren (2007), it was found that humor was often lost in Dutch translations of English subtitles. The study analyzed the subtitles of four English-language comedies and found that only 15% of the jokes were translated accurately.

Tisgam (2009) conducts a study where she claims that culturally distinct jokes lose their hilarious qualities after getting translated into the Arabic language. She particularly chooses jokes from the available forms of humor to analyze the loss of humor in translation. The study reveals that a translator creates new jokes that contextually fit in the target culture rather than translating the source.

Geoghegan (2022) studies the transfer of humorous elements in subtitles of a television series by employing Diaz-Cintas and Remael’s taxonomy of humorous elements. He analyzes the adaptation of culturally humoristic items in translation which are added to enhance the effect of humor in the translated text. The findings expose that the translator tends to maintain the humor of the source in the target and to do so uses domesticating strategies more frequently.

Amini, Siau, Amirdabbaghian, and Tee (2022) conduct an analysis of translating humor from English to Chinese subtitling. The study looks into the methods of fansub for the television program *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, examining the humor in the source and target texts and spotting errors in English to Chinese fansub. The study emphasizes variables that may cause inconsistent fansub quality and translation issues, such as linguistic and technical constraints, a lack of cultural knowledge, and deviations from translation traditions. The study has significance for trainers, subtitlers, and translators both theoretically and practically.

## Methodology

### Data Collection

The data selected for the current research is an Indian movie *Angrej*. *Angrej* is a 2015 romantic comedy movie in the Punjabi language. It centers on the love tale between Maado, a country girl from a lower socioeconomic level, and *Angrej*, a young guy from a wealthy family. The movie



addresses the difficulties the couple has to deal with as a result of their cultural and societal conventions. It depicts the pre-partition Punjabi way of life, culture, and traditions, emphasizing the value of family, community, and the place of women in Punjabi society in a light and comic way. The movie is downloaded along with its subtitles and the example are extracted by using purposive sampling.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For the goal of investigating humor in translation, the model developed by Vinay and Darbelnet is used, which includes both fundamental methods and a number of different techniques. With the justification that translation typically addresses emotions, feelings, and ideas in many semantic areas rather than lexemes separately, Vinay and Darbelnet decline to recognize individual words as the unit of translation. According to Vinay & Darbelnet (1958, cited in Hatim & Munday (2004, p. 18), the 'smallest chunks of the pronouncement' whose signals are related in such a way that they should not be translated individually' constitute the basic unit of translation.

From this vantage point, the translated unit approximately connects to a lexical unit and a unit of thought. Vinay & Darbelnet's (1958–2000) taxonomy of translation methods, which addresses incompatibility/incongruity between the source text and destination text structures, distinguishes between two basic translation methodologies. The first is “Direct Translation,” which incorporates calque, literal translation, and borrowing techniques and imitates word-for-word conversion of the source text into the target language. (ibid., 1995, p. 31-124, 2004). The researcher mostly works on “Oblique Translation” in a different area. Oblique is the tactic employed when a direct translation cannot be applied. It is the subsequent plan that Vinay and Darbelnet have suggested, and it is similar to “Free translation.” This method also includes four more techniques that the translator might use to condense and extend the original text's underlying meaning. These techniques are modulation, transposition, idiomatic translation, and adaptation (Munday 2013, p. 90). Transposition, Modulation, Idiomatic Translation, and Adaptation are all techniques used to change the grammatical category of a word or phrase while preserving its meaning. Transposition involves changing the grammatical category of a word or phrase while preserving its meaning, while Modulation involves expressing an idea in a different way without changing its essential meaning. Idiomatic Translation involves using expressions and idioms that are natural in the target language, while Adaptation involves changing cultural or historical references that may not be understood in the target language while preserving the overall meaning of the text.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Extract 1**

ST	TT
tenu barhi agg lagi ey	Why are you so eager?

Transposition is used here in this example which refers to the change in the grammatical structure of a sentence while preserving the meaning. In this case, the translator has changed the word order of the Punjabi sentence to fit the English grammatical structure. The Punjabi sentence is structured as “Tenu barhi agg lagi ey,” where “tenu” means “you,” “barhi” means “big,” “agg” means “fire,” “lagi” means “caught,” and “ey” is an auxiliary. The translator has transposed the sentence to “Why are you so eager?” to fit the English sentence structure, where the subject comes before the verb and the object.

In the example, the original Punjabi line “Tenu barhi agg lagi ey” means “You have caught a big fire.” However, the use of the idiom “barhi agg lagi ey” in Punjabi refers to feeling intense passion

or excitement for something, like catching a big fire. It is a commonly used expression in Punjabi to convey a strong emotional feeling. However, in the translated subtitle “Why are you so eager?” the use of the word “eager” is not an accurate translation of the original. The translated subtitle fails to capture the intensity and emotion of the idiom used in the original Punjabi line. “The word eager” does not convey the same connotation as “big fire,” which is used metaphorically to describe intense emotions. The translated subtitle loses the humor and cultural reference present in the original Punjabi line. A more accurate translation of the original line could have been “You are burning with intense passion,” which captures the idiom's intended meaning and preserves the humor and cultural reference of the original line.

### **Extract 2**

ST	TT
<b>Aa ty aamb lain ayi ey?</b>	Have you take to have mangoes?

In this example, the original line in Punjabi, “Aa ty aamb lain ayi ey?” means “Did you bring mangoes?” However, in Punjabi culture, it is common to use this expression when someone is late or taking a long time to do something. The line is actually a playful and sarcastic way of asking someone if they're ever going to show up or get something done.

However, in the translated subtitles, “Have you take to have mangoes?” is a literal and nonsensical translation of the original line. The cultural context and the intended humor are lost, as the translated line makes no sense and does not convey the same tone or sarcasm as the original.

This shows how the loss of cultural context and language nuances can result in the loss of humor in subtitles. The translator may not have been familiar with the cultural significance of the expression, or may have been unable to find an equivalent expression in the target language, leading to a mistranslation that loses the intended humor of the original line.

### **Extract 3**

ST	TT
Barrun ty barhy ghussy ch gya si jiwe andrun maa maar de ga	You came inside in such an anger. If after coming inside, you will break everything.

In this example, the original Punjabi line “Barrun ty barhy ghussy ch gya si jiwe andrun maa maar de ga” means “You came in with such anger as if you're going to hit your mother from the inside.” The use of the phrase “andrun maa maar de ga” (hit your mother from the inside) is a common idiom in Punjabi that means to have an intense or uncontrollable rage. The phrase is not to be taken literally and is used to emphasize the strength of one's anger.

However, in the translated subtitle “You came inside in such an anger. If after coming inside, you will break everything,” the use of the idiom “hit your mother from the inside” is not translated accurately. The translated subtitle does not convey the same intensity or humor as the original line. The use of the idiom “hit your mother from the inside” adds a humorous and cultural touch to the line, which is lost in the translated subtitle.

This example highlights how the loss of idiomatic expressions and cultural references in translation can result in the loss of humor and intended meaning.

### **Extract 4**

ST	TT
kida tai pura tabar e shikar karan nu phir da.	How about we go hunting in the whole Taber (area) again?

The Punjabi phrase is roughly translated into “How about we go hunting in the whole Taber again?” employing the strategy of modulation where structure undergoes a certain change. However this translation does not capture the humor present in the original Punjabi phrase. The humor in the phrase occurs due to the use of sarcasm and exaggeration. The phrase is essentially mocking someone who is over-eager to go hunting. “Pura tabar” means ‘the whole family’ which is transliterated as it is in the source by adding a gloss ‘area’ which does not clear the intended meaning. In the way, the humor in the original is lost in translation because sarcasm and exaggeration is not translated well in the target text. Moreover, literal translation does not convey the intended humor and it may come across as straightforward suggestion rather than a mocking remark.

#### **Extract 5**

ST	TT
Angrej, Kekriya tarah tu pajji phirna ey.	Stupid, you are the one running.

Firstly, modulation is used to convey the meaning of the Punjabi sentence in English. The Punjabi sentence “Angrej, Kekriya tarah tu pajji phirna ey” is translated as “Stupid, you are the one running” in English. The translator has changed the sentence structure and word choice trying to convey the same meaning in English. Secondly, idiomatic translation is used in the translation of the Punjabi sentence. The Punjabi phrase “pajji phirna ey” means to run around aimlessly, and the translator has used the English idiom “running around” to convey the same meaning.

In this example, the original Punjabi line “Angrej, Kekriya tarah tu pajji phirna ey” means “Angrej, you're spinning like a Kekriya (an insect).”

The use of the Punjabi expression which means spinning like an insect” is a humorous way of teasing Angrej for his movements, implying that he's spinning around aimlessly and looking silly while doing so. However, in the translated subtitle “Stupid, you are the one running,” the use of the idiom is not translated accurately. The translated subtitle loses the intended humor of the original line and fails to convey the same playful tone as the original.

Moreover, the subtitle uses the word “stupid” to insult Angrej, which is not present in the original line. This addition alters the original line's intended tone and makes the subtitle more aggressive and insulting.

#### **Discussion**

Humor is highly influenced by cultural context, and jokes, puns, and comedic elements often rely on cultural references, wordplay, idiomatic expressions, and shared experiences that may not easily translate across languages. Understanding the cultural nuances and references embedded in the original language helps translators accurately convey the intended humor in the target language. It involves not only translating the words themselves but also capturing the cultural and contextual elements that contribute to the comedic effect.

The study endorses the research by Geoghegan (2022) and Amini, Siau, Amirdabbaghian, and Tee (2022) who state that cultural knowledge and its involvement in translation humor is significant. It shows that translators struggle to accurately convey the humor, resulting in the loss or distortion of comedic elements in subtitles. They may resort to literal translations that fail to capture the intended wit or rely on generic humor that may not resonate with the target audience.

Additionally, translators may rely on generic humor that is easily understood but lacks the same resonance as the original humor. By doing so, they may overlook the unique cultural elements that

make the humor impactful, resulting in a diluted or less engaging experience for the target audience.

### Findings and Conclusion

The study shows that humor is lost in the subtitles of the selected film *Angrej*. The loss of humor occurs for several reasons, such as cultural differences or difficulties in accurately translating idiomatic expressions. In the case of the Punjabi movie *Angrej*, the humor may be lost in the subtitles for a few reasons.

Firstly, Punjabi is a language with many dialects and nuances, which may be difficult to translate accurately into other languages. The puns and wordplay in the movie may rely heavily on these nuances, which could be challenging to convey in subtitles.

Secondly, the humor in *Angrej* may be specific to the Punjabi culture, which may not be familiar to viewers from other cultures. The cultural references and context may not be fully captured in the subtitles, which could result in the loss of humor.

Modulation is the frequently used strategy in the subtitles of the movie however subtitles by nature are a condensed version of the dialogue, as they have to be displayed on-screen within a limited time frame. This brevity could result in some of the subtleties and nuances of the humor being lost, as there may not be enough time to convey the full meaning of the dialogue.

Overall, the loss of humor in the subtitles of Punjabi movie *Angrej* could be due to a combination of these factors, including the difficulties of accurately translating the language and cultural references.

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