

MISSION 'IMPLAUSIBLE' IN TRANSLATING CERTAIN TYPES OF ENGLISH JOKES

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Abstract

Humour is a significant part of our daily life, especially in our working environment. Nowadays as professional presenters, teachers and lecturers are required to be able to present humour in their teaching activities. However, it is a pity that there is a great deal of interesting humour in English print media that cannot be translated into Indonesian owing to entirely divergent structures, vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, as well as other linguistic features in the two languages. This paper reveals certain types of English humour that cannot be appropriately translated into Indonesian. However hard a translator may try, his endeavour to translate the types of humour presented in this paper will be futile since the humorous elements in the original language will dissipate into the air; humour no longer becomes humour when the key element, namely the humorous element, cannot be retained in the target language.

Keywords: *humour, humorous, hurdles, linguistic elements, untranslatable*

Humor adalah bagian yang penting dari kehidupan kita sehari-hari, terutama dalam lingkungan kerja. Kini sebagai pembicara profesional, guru dan dosen juga dituntut untuk dapat menyajikan humor dalam kegiatan mengajar mereka. Sayangnya ada banyak humor yang menarik dalam media cetak bahasa Inggris yang tidak bisa diterjemahkan ke dalam bahasa Indonesia karena tata bahasa, kosakata, ejaan, ucapan, dan unsur-unsur linguistik lainnya yang sama sekali berbeda dalam kedua bahasa tersebut. Makalah ini mengungkapkan jenis-jenis humor dalam bahasa Inggris yang tidak dapat diterjemahkan dengan semestinya ke dalam Bahasa Indonesia. Betapapun kerasnya seorang penerjemah mencoba, usahanya untuk menerjemahkan jenis-jenis humor yang disajikan dalam makalah ini akan sia-sia karena unsur-unsur lucu yang ada dalam bahasa aslinya akan lenyap; humor tidak menjadi humor lagi ketika unsur-unsur utamanya, yaitu unsur lucu, tidak bisa dipertahankan dalam bahasa yang dituju.

Kata kunci: *humor, lucu, kendala, unsur-unsur linguistik, tidak dapat diterjemahkan*

INTRODUCTION

Freud states that everybody in the world is interested in jokes. A joke may release our tension and make us happy: ‘Jokes and humour allow us to release ideas and emotions which have been repressed, and the euphoria we reach is the same as “the mood of our childhood when we were ignorant of the comic, when we were incapable of jokes and when we had no need of humour to make us feel happy in our life”’ (Richards: Back cover). Humour is a necessary part of human life which may make people live longer since it enhances both human physical and mental health, as Tamblyn reveals: ‘Recent research suggests that laughter does indeed fulfill a biological function, affecting not only our physical health but our mental agility as well.’ (Tamblyn: 218) In addition, ‘The findings of research suggest that “mirthful” (as opposed to nervous or hostile) laughter reduces stress and even boosts some parts of the immune system. These preliminary conclusions seem to corroborate the now-famous anecdotal evidence of Norman Cousins, who successfully overcame a debilitating connective-tissue disease in part with daily doses of humour.’ (Tamblyn: 218)

It is of paramount importance to note that humours and teachers are closely related. Nowadays, teachers should be professional speakers; besides their knowledge and ability to teach, they are forced to learn how to be entertaining. According to Joanna Slan: ‘professional speakers are getting more and more entertaining. Modern audiences expect presentations that tickle their funny bones while delivering content, and professional speakers have been forced to rise to the challenge or lose their spot on the podium.’ (Slan: 164, 165)

Why else should we be interested in humour? In her book, Joanna Slan reveals seven facts on the significance of humour in our presentations, namely:

1. *It helps the speaker be accepted by the audience more.*
2. *It keeps the audience from getting bored.*
3. *It encourages the people to have a good time.*
4. *It makes it easier to share difficult or sensitive material by easing tension and hostility.*
5. *It improves retention of information.*
6. *It enhances the creativity of the listener.*
7. *It engages the listener’s right brain.*

According to *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, a joke is ‘something, such as a funny story or trick, that is said or done in order to make people laugh’ (Colin: 840) and *The New Lexicon Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language*, defines a joke as ‘an action, saying, event or circumstance which causes or is intended to cause amusement or laughter.’ (Caine: 527) Two important intensions of jokes, namely ‘to release tension and to cause amusement or laughter’ must be underscored when a joke is translated from one language into another. In this particular case, when a joke in English is translated into Indonesian, those intentions must surely be maintained. Unfortunately, in practice, there are at least twelve types of jokes in English which are impossible to translate into Indonesian, or as I put it in the title, it is an implausible mission to translate certain types of jokes. Such types of jokes will be presented together with the examples in the following discussion. Whereas Tamblyn is concerned with ‘how to use humour in work successfully, appropriately, and without fear’ (Tamblyn), I believe we should pay more attention to how to translate humour in English into Indonesian successfully, appropriately, and effectively.

It is not my intent to say that after reading this paper, the reader will find out the ‘real solution’ to the ‘Mission Implausible’ in translating humour since this article only exhibits such implausibility or untranslatability. As the subsequent citation reveals, translation is not at all easy, ‘Ivor Richard once described translation as “very probably the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos”’ (Holmes, 1988, cited in Hatim, 2001)

METHOD OF RESEARCH

This is a library research. I read several English text-books, especially short stories for reproduction that contain jokes, an article in the Jakarta Post, and books on jokes and books on translation. I also wrote my own jokes to depict untranslatability of certain types of jokes and presented two devices to depict types of jokes in English that cannot be translated.

DISCUSSION

1. JOKES BASED ON SYNTAX

Some jokes that are based on the English syntax or structure is really impossible to translate into Indonesian since the two languages have different structures. Consider the following anonymous joke in which plural and singular nouns are effectively used: *A child of eight shocked his mother when he just returned home from school and amusingly told her that he knew how to make a baby. No sooner had she recovered from her shock than he smilingly explained, "It's very easy. Just **drop the 'ies'** and then **add a 'y'**".* 'Babies' does become 'baby'. It is not a dirty joke but it must be impossible to retain the joke in Indonesian since the plural form of a noun in the target language is formed by repeating the noun itself. In Indonesian, 'bayi' becomes 'bayi-bayi' when it is pluralized. It would not make sense when we translated it literally and it would not be funny if we translated it into 'buang saja salah satu bayinya' ('Just discard one of the babies'). Concerning the role of the translator, it is stated, 'the translator decodes messages transmitted in one language and re-encodes them in another' (Bell: 15). Although there is not a problem in grasping the message in the joke above, re-encoding it in the target language is an implausible mission.

2. JOKES INVOLVING AMBIGUOUS LEXIS

The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of The English Language defines 'Ambiguity' as 'an idea, statement or expression capable of being understood in more than one sense (Page 28). Because of its particular nature, jokes involving ambiguity can be very effective. This is very well illustrated in the following passage about doctor Barululus, who has just graduated from the Medical Faculty of Sosompral Private University. While still panting, Barululus hurriedly entered the administration office and sighed: 'Call me a doctor! Call me a doctor!' The typist suddenly stopped typing and anxiously asked: 'Are you ill?' Barululus answered proudly: 'No, I've just graduated from the Medical Faculty!' (The joke is adapted from a Korean student's research on jokes.) The word 'call' is obviously ambiguous. One of the meanings of 'to call' is '**to address a person by a particular name**'; the other meaning in this context is '**to ask a person to come.**' There is by no means any ambiguity in '**Panggil aku dokter**' and '**Panggilkan aku dokter**' in our Bahasa Indonesia. Therefore, never can there be a joke involving ambiguity in Bahasa Indonesia in so far as the words 'panggil' and 'panggilkan' are concerned. It is apparent that however skilful a translator may be, he will not be able to translate such jokes appropriately.

Bell points out that one of the generally expected duties of the translator is to 'preserve semantic and stylistic equivalences' in the course of translation (Bell: 98). Nevertheless, even when the duty is successfully accomplished, the humorous element dissipates into the air. Owing to the absence of ambiguity in the target language.

3. JOKES BEARING IDIOMS / SAYINGS

According to *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, an idiom is 'a group of words in a fixed order that have a particular meaning that is different from the meanings of each word on its own'. (Colin: 772) I have chosen to present the idiom or saying which says: 'Two's company, three's a crowd'. Here is how the joke goes:

- Petra: Putri, is this your new bike?
- Putri: Yes, isn't it gorgeous?
- Petra: How many bicycles have you got?
- Putri: I used to have three but one has just been stolen. Now I only have two.
- Petra: Oh, great! **Two's company, three's a crowd.**

'Two's company, three's a crowd' does not have an equivalent in the Bahasa, so quit trying to translate this saying for no matter how skilful the translator may be, its appropriateness in the English language cannot be translated into our national language.

4. JOKES CONSISTING OF FIGURATIVE AND LITERAL MEANINGS

'Can I have a word with you?' implies 'Can I have a short discussion or talk with you?' When 'a' is literally interpreted, it must mean 'one'. Nobody means to have just one word when they want to discuss something. The fact has led to a particularly 'peculiar' joke with such a response like: 'Oh, you can have two'. The same is true with the expression like 'I have to go back to the kitchen to turn off the stove. Can you **wait a second?**', or 'I'll be back **in a second!**' When your wife has just come into the bathroom to take a bath, will you believe her (if you interpret it literally) when she says that she will be back in a second? In Indonesian, we have the expression 'satu atau dua kata' ('one or two words') and 'tunggu sebentar' ('Wait a moment!') but hardly do we say 'Tunggu sedetik! (Wait a second)' In English, people may joke, saying 'He told us to wait just **a second**; this is already twenty seconds, yet he hasn't turned up!' Since the key phrase in the joke is 'a second', nobody may second the use of the word 'sedetik' ('a second') in the Indonesian translation.

5. THIRD PERSON SINGULAR PRONOUNS IN JOKES

In Indonesia, in which English is a foreign language, students are already taught subject pronouns, possessive pronouns, and object pronouns even at the elementary level, so they are familiar with the third person singular subjects which consist of three. 'He' is used for a boy or a man. 'She' is used for a girl or a woman and 'it' is used when we refer to a thing or an animal. However, in the Bahasa, we only have one word for the third person subject pronoun, namely 'dia' or 'ia'. This presents difficulties for translators when they translate an English joke containing this pronoun into Indonesian, particularly when this pronoun plays a crucial role in the joke. The following adaptation from L.A.Hill's *Elementary Stories for Reproduction* furnishes a case in point: '*One day Mrs Bigmouth who liked talking about her expensive electrical appliances told Mrs Sohumble about her new dishwasher. She said, 'Oh, **it's** remarkable. **It** washes the dishes very quickly and effectively'. Mrs Sohumble then asked, 'but does **it** dry them and put them in the cupboard too? Being surprised, Mrs Bigmouth's mouth and eyes were wide open. She said, 'The dishes in the machine dry soon but **it** does not put them away, of course.' Mrs Sohumble then remarked, 'I have had a dishwasher for more than twenty years. **He** washes the dishes, dries them, and puts them in the cupboard.'* The writer succeeds in making a very conspicuous contrast between '**it**' and '**he**' in the joke above. When put into the Indonesian language, the joke would be '*Gone with the Wind!*'

What about jokes about gays and lesbians in which people gossip about **his** husband and **her** wife? Such deliberately improper possessive pronouns in English which may make the audience *'laugh longer'* would never make an Indonesian audience laugh when they heard the joke in Indonesian since both '**his**' and '**her**' are translated in the same way, namely '**dia**' or '**nya**'.

6. JOKES BASED ON PRONUNCIATION

Native speakers of English precisely know the distinction between 'beach' and 'bitch' and never mispronounce or exchange each word with the other except when they do it deliberately, for instance, when they are joking. However, a joke did emerge in a dictation class when a native English speaker said 'Come to Australia! We have many beautiful beaches.' Some of the Indonesian students who attended the elementary English class wrote 'bitches' instead of 'beaches'. The teacher's explanation of the spelling of both the words elicited laughter. Another joke also occurred when an Aussie from Down under had a conversation with her private student who was also her boy-friend. She asked him, 'Are you going to Australia **today**?' The student responded, 'No, not **to die** but to marry you.' However skilful the translator might be, even with all his might, he might never be able to retain the joke which is based on the notorious yet common 'mispronunciation' of the diphthong. In other words, the joke will vanish in the mist when the two words are translated into Bahasa Indonesia.

7. SLIP OF THE TONGUE IN JOKES

When one is nervous, slips of the tongue may occur. A 'notorious' example that is frequently exploited in jokes is the ordinary greeting in speech, that is 'Good morning ladies and gentlemen!' This is made into a joke by changing the order of the words: 'Good ladies morning gentlemen!' When the joke is written, it may be further extended into 'Good ladies **mourning** gentlemen!' It would not at all be funny when the first humorous greeting is translated word by word. When the second humorous greeting is literally translated into Indonesian, it would not become a greeting but a statement which would never elicit laughter either, however perfect the translation might be.

8. ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS IN JOKES

Acronyms in English cannot be properly translated into Indonesian (and virtually into other languages). Whether the translator applies communicative or semantic translation, the plausibility of eliciting laughter parity in the Indonesian version is dubious. When **N A T O** (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) is facetiously substituted by **No Action Talk Only**, the humour in the target language must surely come to nought or be thrown into disarray. The same case is true when we attempt to translate the following joke. One day Mr Pettycash received a memo which said: Dr Petticash, 13 Dark Dr, your debt is due the day after tomorrow. If you do not pay it by then, you will be evicted immediately. He was obviously very surprised because nobody, including his colleagues, had addressed him with the title 'Dr' before. Since he was not a doctor, he was wondering why the leasing company addressed him with 'Dr'. As far as he knew, Dr is an abbreviation for either 'doctor' or 'Drive' but his wife suddenly reminded him that Dr might also stand for **Debtor** and the leasing company was undoubtedly entitled to give him such a 'title'.

9. JOKES CONTAINING DELIBERATE SPELLING MISTAKES

Each language in the world has its own unique spelling. Never can the humour in the subsequent ‘Advertising humour’ be translated into our Bahasa Indonesia: *On a card extolling the services of a massage therapist: “Body messages.”* (Slan: 180).

Apart from the vowels ‘a’ and ‘e’ in the initial syllable of each word, the two words are spelt in the same way. However, the deliberately wrong spelling generates a substantial humorous effect.

10. JOKES CONTAINING DELIBERATE MISPUNCTUATION

Precisely on New Year this year, I reworded the precis of one of my precious humorous pieces. It became precisely like this: Your teenage daughter who has sprained her ankle goes to a chiropractor alone. When she arrives at the destination, she notices the notice in the window which says: ‘JACK: THE RAPIST’. What she needs is a **therapist**, namely a person who treats a particular type of physical illness or disability in lieu of **the rapist**, the person who will force her to have sex with her. Apparently, the space between ‘the’ and ‘rapist’ is manipulated to produce the humorous impact. There would never be a translator who could possibly convey my English joke in the Bahasa. I have also devised a diverse device to create humour. Linkage between certain words can also obviously be as effective as the splitting of the word above. Here is my deliberate typing error: ‘THE PENIS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD might be the title of my new poem. The original hyperbole is ‘THE PEN IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD!’ Employ any method of translation: communicative translation, semantic translation, covert or overt translation (Hatim: xiii); apply a serial plane, in which the text is transformed sentence by sentence or a structural plane, in which the translator abstracts a “mental conception” of the original text (Hatim: 112). Use any translation method to elicit laughter parity in the target language. Can anyone render such a deadly tremendous impact of linkage in the humour in the Indonesian language?

Another type of improper punctuation involves the omission of the apostrophe, i.e. the sign (’). In English grammar, an apostrophe is an important punctuation mark. When it is put prior to s, one of its functions is to show that something or someone belongs to someone or something, for instance, Anne’s husband, Anna’s partner, and Anu’s group. However, in recent years, particularly when cellular phones have become commonly used for texting, the apostrophe has frequently been omitted for the sake of convenience. Such a convenient omission of the apostrophe has proved to be an inconvenient issue of considerable public concern, as is revealed by Nury Vittachi in his article entitled ‘Funeral Time for The Word ‘You’re’ And Please Don’t Reply ‘Your Right’ in the Jakarta Post on 8 June, 2014: ‘As for punctuation, the saddest lost apostrophe of recent times must be one in the photo a reader sent to me, showing a school in India owned by a man named Anu Sharma. The sign maker dropped the all-important apostrophe and thus the sign says ANUS English Academy. Sad but true.’ Exploiting the omission of the apostrophe, I have analogically concocted a similarly humorous taste of ‘anus’: **Annas** pie and **Annes** pie taste sweet but **Anus** tastes sweeter. How can translators, with their extraordinary dexterity, retain or pour flavour of the taste of this humour into Indonesian?

11. PUNS IN JOKES

Do you ever think of making a joke by changing the order of the word or its syllables to create pun? I once did make such a joke. The word is the verb ‘understand’. The word is changed into two words comprising a verb and a preposition. Look at how it works:

- Teacher: Don’t be noisy, class! Do you **understand me**?
- Student: No, Miss.
- Teacher: Well, if you don’t **understand me, stand under me**. (Astounded by her own words, she dismissed her class.)

As the writer of the joke, I cannot keep the comical key words in the Indonesian translation even if I apply either ‘literal’ or ‘free’ translation strategy. (Hatim: xiii)

12. HOMONYMS IN JOKES

A homonym is a word that has the same sound, or the same spelling and sound, as another which has a different meaning. A very funny story that is absolutely impossible to translate involves Mr Watt and Mr Will Knott. The names are manipulated as the key words in the jokes. ‘**Watt**’ and ‘**what**’ are homonyms, and so do ‘**Will Knott**’ and ‘**will not**’. Read the following jokes and I am convinced that everybody will agree with me that it can never be properly translated into Indonesian. In fact, this marks the climax of the serious series of ‘slings’ and rows of ‘arrows’ in translations of jokes. Here is the condensation of the humorous piece! ‘*Mr Will Knott, a teacher, who felt fatigued, picked the telephone and said, ‘This is Brightbride 13. Who’s speaking, please?’*

‘Watt,’ a man replied.

‘What’s your name, please? Said Mr Knott.

‘Watt’s my name!’ was the answer.

‘Yes, I asked you that. What’s your name? Mr Knott said again.

‘I told you Watt’s my name’ said the other man. ‘Are you Word Smith?’

‘No, I’m Knott,’ answered Mr Knott.

‘Will you give me your name, please?’ said Mr Watt.

‘Will Knott,’ answered Mr Knott.

Both Mr Watt and Mr Will Knott put their telephones down furiously and thought, ‘That was a rude, fully foolish man!’ (Adapted from L.A. Hill’s Elementary Stories for Reproduction)

It is evident that translating humours is not at all easy, particularly when it involves the elements above. In spite of that, I would rather not say that translating humours or jokes is the most risky job. Talking about bizarre translation or rendering a bizarre piece of translation concerning matters of state must involve bigger risks since a ‘slight’ mistake may entail horrible consequences, as the following citation (about one Japanese word that was misinterpreted into English) illustrates:

‘Twain, of course, exaggerated his example of bizarre translation – but sometimes such ineptness can have disastrous consequences.... The world heard that Japan had rejected the ultimatum – instead of that Japan was still considering it. Domei’s mistranslation led the United States to send B-29s, laden with atomic bombs, over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Apparently, if mokusatsu had been correctly translated, the atomic bomb need never have been dropped’ (Farb: 198).

There will never be any problem in translating jokes from English into Indonesian unless we have the hurdles mentioned above. The following humorous piece, for instance, may be put into Indonesian quite easily, since it does not contain such hurdles that may hinder the translator in his or her effort to render proper translation of the passage. It is quoted verbatim from *Laugh And Learn*. ‘A **WEALTHY** businessman was vacationing on the Riviera, when one day he got a call from home. It was his butler.

“I am very sorry to inform you of this, Sir,” he said, “but I thought you should know right away. Your beloved cat somehow got onto the roof and fell. I am afraid the animal is deceased.”

Expecting grief at this news, the butler was startled at his employer’s response: “Hey! Hey! Don’t they teach you anything in butler school?”

Before his servant could reply the man went on: “You don’t just spring stuff like that on people. You always give bad news by degrees. What you should have done is send me a series of telegrams. The first one says, ‘Your cat is on the roof.’ Then the next one: ‘Cat fallen off roof.’ Then another one: ‘Cat in critical condition; prognosis poor.’ Then, when I’m prepared, you understand, I get: ‘Cat deceased.’ See? That’s how you give someone bad news. Jeez.”

The butler, of course, could only apologize profusely and assure his employer this gaffe would never occur again. The businessman tried to put the whole thing out of his mind and enjoy the rest of his holiday as best he could. A week later, just as he was starting to relax once more, he received a telegram. It said:

“Your mother is on the roof.” (Tamblyn: 7, 8).

Likewise, the following joke from ‘*Jokes And Their Relation to The Unconscious*’ is practically translatable: ‘At this moment I cannot recall all the students’ **names**, and of the professors there are some who still **have no name** at all.’ (Richards: 73)

CONCLUSION

The discussion depicts the fact that humorous pieces may be translated except when they contain those 12 types of obstacles, but what should be done then with the ‘Mission Implausible’? Learn the target language. Whereas our elders who were well-educated spoke five or even more than five foreign languages (and as *Kick Andy Show* shows: a sixteen-year-old Moluccan-Javanese girl, the late Gayatri, spoke approximately ten foreign languages fluently), what prevents us from learning just one or two foreign languages (especially English as the most international language) so that we can comprehend and enjoy the jokes more fully and get benefit from them? Why should we insist on learning the language? The reason is that remarkably comical jokes that have been efficiently and effectively composed may have become thoroughly irksome lump of junk bringing a lump to the reader’s throat. Even additional illumination or further elucidation in the margin may just cause unjust judgement to the original knight of the pen who has intentionally intently arranged a range of hilarious words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and passages intended to stir laughter, not to stir up trouble by presenting unwieldily bulky and wearisome disquisition that worries not some but most or even all the audience or the readers as the translator is prone to do.

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