Humor and translation—an interdiscipline

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Abstract

This paper calls for greater attention from researchers into the nature of humor translation as an interdisciplinary area that should be of interest to translation and humor studies. It includes a brief review of the complexity of translation and the problems posed by traditional approaches. The paper introduces a number of parameters that may be of assistance in developing joke typologies for translators or translation scholars. A model is presented for structuring joke-types according to binary branching. An attempt is then made to combine the model with ideas and concepts put forward in Attardo (2002). The result is a binary branch tree for the 6 Knowledge Resources and the hierarchical structure that Attardo claims they have. One important conclusion is that sameness, or similarity, may have little to do with funniness, and, if this is so, it is going to create a dilemma for translators wishing to achieve equivalent effect.

Keywords: Translation; interdisciplinary; joke-type; variable; mapping, GTVH.

1. Introduction

There is one idea among translation scholars that is hardly disputed at all nowadays; and it is that translation studies is an interdisciplinary field of research. So is humor studies; and both draw from linguistics, psychology and sociology, among other disciplines, for their descriptions and their theoretical models and constructs. It is not surprising, then, that humor and translation studies overlap, and the findings of one must be of interest

to the other. What is surprising is that the link between translation and humor has not received sufficient attention from scholars in either field, with a handful of honorable exceptions (most recently, Vandaele 2002). The translatability of humor, how well humor travels across languages, and the nature of the barriers, these are the kinds of issues that need to be addressed from both sides of the area where humor and translation overlap. Translators could benefit immensely from a few useful tips and some practical advice on how to decode and reconstruct humoristic patterns. In developing their theories, translation scholars cannot afford to ignore the insights of their colleagues in humor studies (among others); likewise, I believe that humor studies can actually gain greater insight into the linguistic, social and psychological factors of humor, in the search of universals, for example, by resorting to the test of translation, both experimentally and descriptively. If there is insufficient dialogue and awareness of progress made in related fields (e.g., humor studies), certain translation problems and issues can only be addressed by applying "general" theoretical models and proposals, none of which have ever received widespread consensus from the scholarly community as actually constituting a general theory of translation. Such is the case of Skopostheorie, a powerful functionalist theory for translation, as it accounts for a lot, but this does not mean that it can usurp the contribution of humor studies, or ignore the hard work of its scholars.

2.   The ABC of translatability variables

The reason why translation is so difficult to fathom is because it is about dealing with contingency, unlike comparative linguistics. While the linguist is interested in general patterns of similarities and differences between language systems (e.g., grammaticality, normality), a translator is required to act upon textual items (i.e., utterances) that often contravene the norm, or to use words or sentences that have never been used before. Thus, all attempts to pin translation down to a series of absolute truths have failed. There are so many variables affecting translation that they may not have all been identified yet. In any case, here are the most obvious ones, the ABC of translation variables, in ten points (a)–(j).

a.   the language(s)/culture(s) one is translating from (including all aspects of language variation, such as dialects and registers)
b.   the language(s)/culture(s) one is translating into

c. the purpose(s) and justification(s) for the existence of the translated version
d. the nature of the text, including parameters such as textuality, genre, style and discourse
e. the intended recipient(s), what they are assumed to be like
f. the client(s) or translation initiator(s), their needs and demands
g. the expectation(s) for the translated text and prejudice towards translations and translators
h. the translator(s): human (individuals or teams), fully automatic, or computer assisted
i. the conditions in which the task is carried out (deadline, materials, motivation, etc.)
j. the medium, mode and means of communication: oral, written, audiovisual, private, mass media, etc.

In turn, each one of these variables can be read in the singular or in the plural, as not all texts are monolingual, or single-purpose; more than one person may be responsible for the final product, and so on. The translation of each and every text item (any segment, form, function, or feature of a text, anything from the smallest detail to the whole text) is affected by the nature of these variables.

So much variability seems to suggest two complementary procedures that could be of great benefit to scholar and translator alike. I will call one procedure "mapping", i.e. locating and analyzing textual items (e.g., instances of humor) according to relevant classifications (e.g., humor typologies). The other I call "prioritizing", i.e. establishing what is important for each case (in the context of translating), and how important each item and aspect is, in order to have clear set of criteria for shaping the translation in one way rather than another. Translators and scholars alike have to weigh the relative importance of humor, along with the importance of a given type of humor, when deciding how to deal with it. A dangerous simplification is to presume that humor will necessarily be equally important in both the translated version and its source text. Or that the nature of the humor must be the same in both source text and its translation.

Applied to humor, this means that translators, teachers and researchers of texts where humor is an ingredient, especially if it is an important one, would benefit from a "map of humor", i.e. a series of classifications, definitions, and examples of instances of humor and humor-types, as well

as models and insights like the ones laid out in the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo and Raskin 1991; Raskin 1985; and Ruch et al. 1993). The bulk of the cartographic work should presumably be done by humor scholars and then picked up by translation researchers and translators, who ultimately must make their own decisions on whose map to use or whether they might have to draw up their own, hopefully on the basis of a sound model. Research into humor is done by scholars who have one foot in at least one other discipline, and this should be exploited to disseminate their findings from one field to another. The same can be said for spreading translation theories.

3.   Traditional approaches to translation

Before we move forward let's take a step back and look at what is usually prioritized in translation. Common sense, and even common practice, tells us that translation is about being faithful to the words, the meaning, the contents, the intention, the effect of a text. So the common practice and general rule, when it comes to translating humor, could be summed up as ''translate the words and/or the contents and then keep your fingers crossed and hope that the humor will somehow come across with the rest''. To the extent that this formula quite frequently fails to work, many experts reach the rather hasty conclusion that humor is untranslatable, although they may differ on the degree or the circumstances of untranslatability (see Delabastita 1994, for the issue of translatablity). The translatability of humor could be a vital component of the common ground shared by translation and humor studies.

   The fact is that a joke (as an instance of humor, though not the only one, as many are quick to point out) can be told in lots of different ways, so where does that leave such a fearful respect for preserving the words? The point of a joke is often far removed from its semantic value, so where does that leave the importance of meaning and contents, and what is one to do about non-sense humor? A text might resort to humor as a means of making the author's intention clearer or more effective, but what do we do if humor is detrimental to the author's goals in the new environment of the translated version? If, on the other hand, humor is the goal of the text (as in comedy) or social intercourse (breaking ice, gaining trust, salesmanship), what is the point in translating the contents if the humor is made to disappear in the process? What translators need is

an awareness of the nature of humor and its relative importance in different contexts. Nevertheless, our commitment to humor should not lead us to prioritize it in situations where it may have to be sacrificed to some extent to allow for a satisfactory rendering of other textual items that are actually more important.[1]

4. Joke-types for translation

Humor scholars have produced many classifications for types of humor and types of jokes. Here, I will simply outline distinctions that are important from the point of view of the translator. These parameters are proposed to be considered for ''mapping'', when appropriate, i.e. they could be used as "types" (e.g., for Figure 1). Mapping and solution-types are the focus of part 6 of this paper.

- Unrestricted, Inter-/bi-national

Some jokes and types of humor offer very little or no resistance to translation (in a sense they are unrestricted) when the source and target languages and cultural systems overlap, when the text users of both communities have the same shared knowledge, values and tastes that are necessary to appreciate a given instance of humor in the same way. A translator may not worry so much that a joke might be considered international, much less universal, as long at it is bi-national, i.e. it can easily cross from the source-text community to the target-text (translation) community, without any need for adaptation or substitution because of linguistic or cultural differences; it can be literally translated with no loss of humor, or content, or meaning.

(1) Gobi Desert Canoe Club (English) → Circolo di Canottagio del Deserto del Gobi (Italian)

This example, borrowed from Attardo (2002), is unrestricted in the sense just outlined if we consider that the Gobi Desert has exactly the same referential and connotative values for the intended readers of the English version and the Italian version, and likewise for canoe clubs, what they are and what they might represent. In his paper, Attardo reaches the unoriginal conclusion that absolute translation is impossible; this is an age-old redundancy, since anything, including translation, upon which impossible conditions are imposed is impossible to achieve. No translation is completely without restrictions since the very presence of restrictions is

what distinguishes a translation from a photocopy, for example. It is in the nature of translation for the target text to be different to the source text in some ways, and similar in others. The complication arises from the fact that the precise differences and similarities are so variable, often hardly even predictable. What really matters in jokes like example (1) is that funniness is not restricted by any (meta)linguistic or cultural-knowledge barrier. For jokes to properly fall into this category nor would there be any differences in how such a joke as example (1) would be perceived according to the rest of the parameters outlined below.

- Restricted by audience profile traits

Some jokes and types of humor are challenging for the translator due to specific difficulties (restrictions) that have to do with the text users' linguistic or encyclopaedic knowledge, or their degree of familiarity or appreciation for certain subject-matters, themes, genres, and types of humor. So, a language-restricted, or linguistic, joke is one that depends on the knowledge of certain features of a given language (e.g., which words are homonymic, paronymic, alliterative or rhyming); an ethnic joke is one that depends on the knowledge of certain features of a given ethnic group for its understanding, and an appreciation of a certain brand ethnic humor for its funniness (this includes a stereotype of the group's language and discourse varieties). A joke might be theme-restricted if it deals with a theme that is not at all common within a given community (e.g., lawyers jokes in Spain), despite its popularity elsewhere. Likewise for script-restricted humor. Many of these restrictions fall into the category of ''culture bumps'', i.e. culture-specific items of interpersonal communication and social dynamics. To sum up this category, here is a list of the main problem areas.

- Semiotic and linguistic differences, including metalinguistic devices
- Knowledge (of social and cultural institutions, themes, genres, etc.)
- Frequency-restricted (rare, marked v. familiar)
- Appreciation (of humor-value of theme, approach, presentation, occasion)

The reason why this category stresses the profile of the audience is because there are, for instance, no objective linguistic restrictions, only the extent to which the audience might be ignorant of, or inexperienced in, a given (aspect of) language. Most people are ignorant of certain aspects or words of their own language, and a lot of people know certain things

about certain foreign languages, sometimes to a great degree of proficiency and sophistication. So, what must be measured is not the difference between the languages involved, but the cognitive distance between the knowledge required to decode a message (i.e., to understand and appreciate a text) and the knowledge one assumes one's audience to have. In this sense, concepts such as ''knowledge resources'', which is part of the General Theory of Verbal Humor, come in very handy. Example (1) may be unrestricted linguistically speaking, however, the fact that it belongs to T-shirt slogan humor may be problematic for countries where very few people walk around with funny slogans on their T-shirts (Spain is one such example). The same could be said for bumper stickers, as a binational difference between Spain and the USA. Example (1) might be considered untranslatable, not on the basis of any knowledge resource required for decoding the text, but simply because one might not be able to find a manufacturer for such T-shirts (or bumper stickers). Internet, on the other hand, is a domain where jokes travel to many different countries, sometimes in one language, sometimes through translation. So, the mode of discourse and social occasion are important sociocultural factors to take into account.

- Intentionality

Another important distinction for translators to watch out for is whether or not the humor is part of the author's intention or is caused by something else; e.g. text user seeing things in the text that the author did not — or did not intend to — say, funny mistakes, like translators' errors (example [3]), or the specific circumstances in which the source — or the target — text is received, i.e. situational factors, happy or unfortunate coincidences. Unintended humor by punning and other means may be a by-product of either the source text or its translation, though by no means necessarily for the same reasons. As in the previous case, we can see that interpretation depends as much on what is in a reader, listener or viewer's mind as what is on the page, the stage or the screen. Translators are often warned against unintended punning (example [2]), especially for sensitive texts. For example, Bible translator and theorist, Eugene Nida (1964) shudders at the thought of Biblical translations that might produce sniggering from the pews, so he proposes translators use ''donkey'' rather than ''ass''.

(2) Monsignor to new priest, ''When David was hit by a rock and knocked off his donkey, don't say he was stoned off his ass.''

(3)   In a Norwegian cocktail lounge: ''Ladies are requested not to have children in the bar.''

- Improvisation

Humor may be carefully contrived and rehearsed, or may be more spontaneous. Both kinds of humor can often be very difficult to translate, for different reasons. Elaborate humor, or humor that is part of an elaborate rhetorical style, is difficult when one wishes to translate the nuances and innuendo as well as the more obvious aspects of the text. Spur-of-the moment punning and joking is a typical nightmare for interpreters because they have no means of backtracking or foreseeing where the pun is going to fall unless warned some time before the speaker's performance, by getting a copy of the speech, for example.

- Signals (of the intention to joke)

Translators, like other text users, may miss certain jokes, either because they ''don't get it'' or because they fail to identify the presence of a joke that has not been overtly signaled (for joke signals, see Nash 1985). Because of the difficulties involved in translating humor, the translator may feel the need to turn covert forms of humor into more overt manifestations, especially if the translation is less effective than the original, in this case the translator conveys that there has been attempt at being funny, while acknowledging failure to render the actual funniness (the problem is that the public usually have no way of knowing whether such a failure is the translator's or the source text's). In any case, this kind of practice is quite common in translation on the whole, so much so that it has given rise to the hypothesis that translations have a universal tendency to be more explicit than their source texts. The down side of this practice occurs when humor is based, or relies on subtlety, tongue-in-cheek, irony, allusion and other such covert devices, but the translator resorts to broad brush, bluntness and denotative meaning to spell everything out to the text user in no uncertain terms, thus shredding the very fabric of this kind of humor. Sometimes, however, puns might be designed to be particularly difficult to spot, when the translator (and/or author) wishes to get around the censor, for instance.

- Private (or in-group) jokes

A typical hindrance to humor appreciation is for the text user to be ''left out'' of a private joke, or humor that relies heavily on people belonging to certain groups. The nature and size of such groups covers a whole range of possibilities. Even people of the same country, village, or school

may be "left out", so foreigners are much more likely candidates, and the principle still works when the group is a whole nationality. In the latter case, "private national-group" would overlap with the category of "restricted by necessary knowledge and appreciation of culturally bound items". Smaller groups may be defined by small geographical regions, certain social classes or professions, interest groups, political parties, minority groups, and so on. Often such groups are characterized by their sociolect or dialect, or particular language awareness.

- Wordplay v. narrative (linguistic v. textual)

Humor may be produced by wordplay, as in puns, one liners, limericks, witticims, and so on, or by funny situations that gradually unfold or suddenly become apparent in the narrative or plot. The latter case is not necessarily difficult to translate, although translators who have their noses too close to the page may not be able to see the forest (narrative twists and turns) through all the trees (words and sentences). It is also a good reminder that how we translate a single sentence or even word does not depend entirely on the word or sentence itself, or even its immediate surroundings, but may depend on passages that are far removed form the part of the text we happen to be translating at any given moment. Compensation both of kind and place must be taken into account when exploring possible solutions. Compensation of kind involves achieving the same effect by different means, thus compensating for not using the one appearing in the source text. Compensation of place refers to the practice of making a certain source-text item or feature appear in a different place in the translation in order to avoid loss of meaning, effect, function or intention.

- Target

Usually the most interesting jokes and other instances of humor involve some sort of victim, or target. Victimless humor tends to be either child-like humor, such as toilet humor, or intellectual games, such as riddles or linguistic awareness (examples [4] and [5]). Victims may be people, individuals or groups, institutions, ideas, common practices or beliefs, etc. Needless to say all of them may be perceived differently in different communities and this affects the strategies and the success of translating victim-related humor. Victimless humor is not usually any easier to translate because it tends to be metalinguistic, and in-group related. Finally, all of the mechanisms used to produce victimless humor may also be used when there is an identifiable victim, so the translator (and any other

text user for that matter) should not be misled by the initial appearance of an instance of humor.

(4) Whose cruel idea was it for the word "lisp" to have an "s" in it?

Whether we consider example (4) to be victimless or otherwise may actually depend on the routine, or text, it is a part of, and how it is performed or presented.

- Meaning

We have already stressed the importance of meaning in mainstream translation. Translating humor is complicated by the fact that it often relies on double meaning, ambiguity, metaphorical meanings, and sometimes not on meaning — in the traditional sense of the word meaning — but rather on absurdity, surrealism, or abstract or symbolic meaning. Again none of this is exclusive to humor (which makes it interesting to translation studies in other areas such as poetry and advertizing jingles).

- Optionality and familiarity (regarding theme, genre, etc.)

Certain instances of humor may be expected so strongly as to be virtually compulsory. An example of this could be public speeches for special occasions. In English-speaking countries such occasions are much more numerous and the need to show a sense of humor much more pressing than in other countries. On other occasions (e.g., a prosecutor seeking the death penalty for the defendant) humor may be rare, or at least a certain brand of it. One of the translator's jobs will be to assess to what degree the presence of humor responds to demands of the genre, or social occasion, and likewise, what the consequences will be for including or excluding humor from the translation, regardless/because of its presence/absence in the source text.

- Taboo (embarrassment, offence, etc.)

Taboo is an instance of a culture-bound factor in the specific nature of each taboo, although the notion and presence of taboo is universal. Taboo can either be an external factor or a component of humor. In the first case, I am referring, for instance, to jokes about aspects of society that are associated to taboo (typically, bodily functions, sex, religion, politics), or that deal with these subjects in a light-hearted manner. In the second case, I am referring to occasions when humor itself is taboo, or certain brand of it. Obviously, the two could appear simultaneously. The fact that these parameters vary from one community to another forces the translator to assess the risk involved in rendering certain types of humor with little or no change. An example of this can be seen in the variety of

laws and regulations from one country to another that deal with humor on television; what words can be used, which institutions and groups can be targeted, and so on.

- Metalinguistic humor

By metalinguistic humor we mean that its object is language, and its objective language awareness. Obviously, translation is nearly always about changing from one language into another and that tends to pose serious difficulties for finding a way to translate these jokes. One could almost say that translation itself is a word game, and rendering metalinguistic humor in another language is a particularly challenging riddle. Wordplay forms include pun, acrostic, rhyme, anagram, witticism, etc. It is important not to forget the function of wordplay in case it is more important than form. Wordplay functions include: phatic, image-enhancing; part of a game, entertainment, educational, mind-teaser, tongue-twister; mnemonic.

(5)   I'm not a pheasant plucker, I'm a pheasant plucker's son;
       I'm only plucking pheasants 'till the pheasant plucker comes.

- Verbal and non-verbal combined, or iconic representation of idiom and metaphor.

A further consideration in translating humor is related to the fact that humor, like most aspects of human communication, can be produced by verbal or non-verbal means, or by various combinations of the two (see Hammond and Hughes 1978; for a study in visual punning). People tend to think of translation as pertaining exclusively to the verbal domain, but even if this were true for translators they still often have to compensate for culturally bound meanings that are expressed non-verbally in the source text and would lead to considerable gaps in the communication if not accounted for somehow. Comic books, films and television readily come to mind as illustrations of this challenge. See Figure 2 for an example of how this can be incorporated into a model of humor translation.

- The forms of humor (and contrastive studies)

Translating is to a large degree a decision-making process, and much of this involves deciding what to do with the form of expression and how it relates to the author's underlying intentions and reasons for choosing one form over another. We also know that form and performance (the packaging and delivery) are key components of the potential success of humor. Sometimes a change of scenery (i.e., moving the text to a different country) will require a change of form, but any strategy has to be

carefully thought out since it is easy to change for change sake with no real gain involved. In talking about form I am referring to rhetorical devices such as: irony, paradox, contradiction; parody, caricature, imitation; hyperbole, understatement; analogy, simile, metaphor, definition; joke/comic formulae (structures, codes, patterns, performance-styles).

5.   Targets and victims of humor

In a slightly more detailed look at victim-targeting humor, we notice two important broad categories. At least they are important for the translator, who might consider that it is worth changing or adapting one or more of the variables that fall under these categories. One category covers aspects of the victim's identity, the other the function and nature of the attack.

- Victim's identity, human or otherwise

The victim may be the author, or a group the author is perceived as being a member of, likewise for the text user, or the victim may be a third party individual or group. On the other hand the victim may not be any particular person but something associated to human beings: feelings, behavior, relationships, death, war, health, education, ideals. Otherwise the victims might be animals, aspects of the environment, technology, etc. but even these often end up as instruments for criticizing people who have something to do with these non-human victims. One cannot be aggressive to a tree, says Attardo (2002), and indeed one cannot offend a tree. But one can show either a certain degree of madness or anti-tree obsession; or one might be openly targeting trees, and between the lines be having a dig at human groups or institutions, environmentalists, local authorities, tree-loving children (if a comedian reads this and makes a routine out of it I hope to receive some acknowledgement). In any case, depending on the formulation of the joke, it may not be totally bizarre to say that the victims of some jokes are trees (or cars, or the weather, or insects). Identity is important in translation because there are shifts of perspective very much like the changes that are made when shifting from direct quoting to reported speech. Differences between source and translation tend to involve some combination of different people in different places at different times. For example, if the source has taken its readers as the victims we need to ask how is this going to work when the readers are no longer the same? British humor (e.g., BBC comedy) about the British simply cannot travel abroad, even in English, as the same thing entirely; abroad, you

have foreigners laughing at the British, not the British poking fun at their own failings. Either that or you create an analogical situation of foreigners making the same kind of fun about themselves in such a way that Britishness is erased from the equation. This tends to be called adaptation in translation studies.

- Function and nature of the attack

The reasons why a certain victim is chosen or certain kind of victim-related joke is told must be known to the translator as a basis for deciding whether those reasons will still hold water for the foreign version. Establishing or strengthening some kind of relationship between the interlocutors is a possible reason for many kinds of humor. We might call this tenor defining (bonding, establishing authority, image-enhancing, etc.).

The humorist might be attempting to produce sympathy or empathy towards the victim, or on the contrary, use humor as a weapon to make the victim look somehow unworthy of sympathy, much less empathy. I like to refer to these two objectives as humanizing v. dehumanizing. When we talk about ethnic humor we might be referring to jokes that pick out a certain ethnic group as their target or victim; however the term racist tends to apply to jokes that deliberately set out to dehumanize a given race or ethnic group, probably to provide support in constructing negative images of those people and justifying racist or otherwise discriminatory practices against them. Cartoons and jokes are rife in war and pre-war situations, and in the more metaphorical battles between rival social groups: political parties, religious groups, sports clubs, and so on.

When dehumanizing jokes are told — in different circumstances — by their intended victims it is often the case that irony is involved, and what is actually going on is a denunciation of such jokes, in a situation where tenor and function are closely intertwined. Failure to identify irony is a common problem when translating, precisely because the author claims something that does not portray his or her actual beliefs or opinions. The likely presence of irony and other potentially confusing signals means that the translator needs to strive to discriminate whether an instance of humor is attacking or serving a certain item or aspect of a given community or society (practice, ideology, social status quo, "common sense", tradition, etc.).

- Criticism (constructive or otherwise)

Humor is a powerful tool for criticizing because, among other reasons, it tends to provide ample opportunity to thwart or deflect any angry

reactions to it. For example, one can easily resort to the typical excuse "I was only joking". Here again, the translator will have to decide whether humor (or the same brand of humor) is the most effective way of producing the same kind of criticism, and before that whether humor is at the service of criticism, or whether the funniness of joke itself is more important than any criticism it might hold.

(6)   War doesn't determine who's right, just who's left.

A type of joke that may overlap with other categories is the one constituted by mind-teasers and food for thought. Although they may often be without any victim or criticism, this is not something that can be taken for granted. Here is a short list of examples of what I am referring to: puzzles, riddles and mysteries; witticisms; puns and wordplay; rhymes, songs, and other sound patterns; paradoxes and contradictions; proverbs, rules of thumb, folk wisdom; nonsense, surrealism. When this type of humor relies on special features of the language it is formulated in it is usually quite difficult to translate.

6.   Binary branching as a form of mapping

A translational model should be adaptable to a wide range of classifications for jokes. By this I mean that an adaptable translation model, or theory, is preferable to one that depends too heavily on new trends in neighboring fields of study, or worse still, that translation scholars should be called upon to resolve different schools of thought in humor studies, although we have already pointed out that discoveries in either field will often shed much-needed light on the other, but specialists should be given some credit for their efforts and insights. The diversity of typologies may be seen as a hindrance, or may simply respond to the need to highlight different kinds of relationships among jokes, depending on the occasion. Because this may in fact be part of the dynamics of a translator's behavior it might be contradictory to try to impose a definitive classification. There is probably a difference between categorizing jokes for (i) the purpose of understanding or explaining what a joke is and how it works, more closely related to "pure" humor studies or for (ii) establishing relationships between a source text (ST) and its target text (TT), more in line with a translator's daily bread and butter. Figure 1(a) is an illustration of an instance of mapping possibilities for translation according to a

binary tree structure (S-set or set of all possible solutions), where a typology of jokes has yet to be inserted on a particular joke for the purpose of its translation (problem P). A scholar can often afford to be cautious when classifying jokes and introduce a certain degree of fuzziness at some points. Translators cannot afford to go deep into the discussion of what constitutes funniness, or provide a definition for humor, or even translation for that matter, since this is work for the scholars. The binary structure, then, does not aim to do away with scholarly hesitations or fuzziness, but rather attempts to establish what kind of criteria might guide a translator's hand, what kind of restrictions are in the way of seamless consistency. If a joke, for instance, can also be regarded as a non-joke, then a translator will have to decide whether to classify the item as a joke, as a non-joke, or as a type of joke that may also function otherwise, or as an ambiguous type of non-joke. This is why the actual labels for each branch and the number of branches is left completely open, to be established anew for each case. At the end of the day, the typology is always the translator's, however his or her categories might be influenced (and informed) by proposals from scholars in humor studies, or elsewhere. A translator's typology may actually be established without full awareness of one's own behavior, and the translator might be unable to verbalize his or her criteria. Even then, the scholar will still be interested in setting out to find regular patterns of behavior. Binary branching is merely proposed as a research tool.

Category [1] covers all of the potential TT solutions that are regarded as still being essentially the "same" ST joke (for what might theoretically constitute the same joke see similarity metric in Ruch et al. 1993, in translation practice it involves deciding on what constitutes the same joke according to the translator). A solution within [2] would be any instance of the "same type" of joke although not essentially the same one; this is where differences of criteria among translators might cause different typologies to be applied. Solution [3] refers to any joke of any other type. Solution [4] provides that the translation may not render the joke as a joke, but may compensate for this by resorting to some other device such as hyperbole or simile. Solution [5] is for any remaining possibilities for translation, such as stating the author's intended message in straightforward, plain, blunt terms, unfunny and non-rhetorical.

It should be apparent that according to this kind of map, the translator, as well as the translation researcher, can greatly benefit from typologies that might be suggested by humor studies and theories, especially
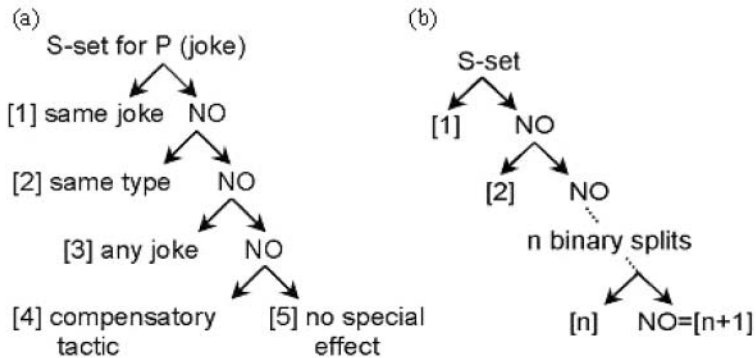
Figure 1.   *Set of solutions S: Binary branching tree structure for translating problem P*

for solution-types [1, 2 and 3]. Maybe less apparent, but equally impor-
tant is the fact that theories of humor should be aware of translational
practices regarding their field of interest. Figure 1(b) shows how the dia-
gram of type-within-type options for translation problems can be made
"telescopic", stretching out to any number "n" of types and subtypes.
Furthermore, Figure 1(b) shows how the diagram may be made more
abstract to be used for analyzing translation problems (P) other than
jokes and mapping their solutions according to a binary type-within-type
structure. Other translation problems that can be structured according to
various typologies in a similar way to the one outlined for humor are
metaphor, insult, irony, wordplay. Figure 2 shows potential ramifications
for verbal and non-verbal solutions, for L2 or other languages, and for
simple or complex solutions. By L2 we mean the language that is stated
as the TT language, L1 being the ST language. Simple solutions ($S°$) are
of the type: ST-joke-into-TT-item (textual items as discussed in section 2
above); or omission of joke. Complex solutions ($S° + X$) provide that, for
example, the ST-joke-into-TT-item (joke or whatever) be complemented
with something else (X); this could be a small introduction to provide a
few useful hints that the target-text audience might need, a glossary, a
footnote, or whatever.

   One aspect that is not visible in this model of binary branching is
the strategy of compensation of place, i.e. moving a joke or an instance
of humor to a different place within its text in order to preserve its
effectiveness. This does not mean that I am not aware of the strategy or
its importance, it is rather, that binary branching is meant to focus on the
sum total of all instances of a given feature (humor or whatever) for a

text or text corpus, as a translation problem, to see how that particular problem is or can be dealt within a given translation. Thus, if moving a joke enables it to remain the same in all respects, or at least all relevant respects, then it will be categorized as the same joke; whereas if moving it, or not moving it, entails a significant change, then the joke will have to be regarded as of a different type, or even as a non-joke, as the case may be.
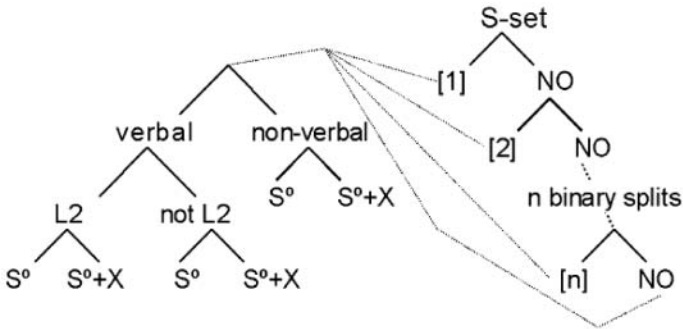

Figure 2.   *Verbal, non-verbal, interlingual and simple v. complex binary splits*

7.   The relative importance of humor v. other priorities

Mapping, i.e. becoming aware of all possible translation solutions and how they relate to each other, is not enough, however. Once we have a map we need a direction, and this is provided in translation by ranking needs and objectives according to a hierarchical set of priorities. A set of priorities for translation is not something that can be predefined by the theory, it is dependent on the task at hand, and the restrictions involved in the task. So, when translating humor, we need to know where humor stands as a priority and what restrictions stand in the way of fulfilling the intended goals (Zabalbeascoa 1996). The complexity of translation, then, arises from the range of possible combinations of so many variables. Priorities and restrictions may change considerably from translation to translation and even between the translation and its source text. Below is a short list of possibilities for prioritizing humor among other textual items. If a certain feature is perceived as a top priority it must be achieved at all costs, middle range priorities are highly desirable but share their importance with other textual features. Marginal priorities are the ones

which are only attempted as long as more important priorities are fully accounted for first. Priorities that are prohibited should not appear in the text at all, although they may be perfectly legitimate in other circumstances.

Top: e.g. TV comedy, a joke-story, one-liners, etc.
Middle: e.g. happy-ending love/adventure stories, TV quiz shows.
Marginal: e.g. as pedagogical device in school, Shakespeare's tragedies.
Prohibited: e.g. certain moments of high drama, tragedy, horror stories, laws, and any other inappropriate situations.

Attardo (2002) presents a very interesting and enlightening set of parameters for analyzing verbal humor. It seems highly likely that these parameters, or knowledge resources, as he calls them, could be applied very meaningfully to the scheme of mapping as presented here. It does not seem so clear that the hierarchical structure that he provides for the knowledge resources as a metrics for sameness can be applied mechanically by translators in all kinds of weather. First of all, an embedded joke may not be the translator's main priority in dealing with a text. Secondly, a translator may decide that funniness is more important than sameness of the joke, since the same joke may go down better in some places than in others, and Attardo's hierarchy involves preserving sameness, not funniness. On the whole, Attardo's suggestions for applying the General Theory of Verbal Humor to translation only seem to take into consideration joke-texts, i.e. jokes that make up the whole text, but their validity does not seem so apparent for translating jokes or other forms of humor that are items of a larger text. Of course, a map like the ones in *figure 1a* and *figure 3*, could easily be read as a hierarchy of equivalence, i.e. translators of jokes should first aim for [1] only if nothing can be found for [1], should they proceed to [2], then [3], and so on. But this is not the case because the binary branching map is meant as a descriptive tool for scholars, not a prescriptive guideline for translators, although they could use it to help them establish their own list of priorities. Furthermore, a certain passage that is analyzed as a joke, and is put under the scrutiny of a binary branching map, or is critically measured according to the General Theory of Verbal Humor similarity metrics hierarchy, might also be analyzed as something else (an insult, a metaphor, a friendly gesture, a speech opener), and the translator may have preferred to deal with the item according to a type-within-type scheme for, say, speech-openers. This may mean that translators are wrongfully blamed

by scholars and critics for not achieving sameness in their versions for aspects that that they actually had no intention of preserving, since they were working according to a different set of criteria. Critics and scholars should not, therefore, take for granted that translators approach a translation task, exactly as they would want them to, assuming that when the translation deviates from that approach it is not because the translator had something else in mind but that he or she simply was not up to the job, or that the text provides more evidence that translation is impossible. If we cannot always see the logic or the merit of a translation, it may be due to some failing of our own, it may be a matter of looking harder.

Let us take the Knowledge Resources, Script Opposition (SO), Logical Mechanism (LM), Situation (SI), Target (TA), Narrative Strategy (NS), Language (LA), as proposed in the general Theory of Verbal Humor and use them as parameters for joke typologies to analyze the translation of certain jokes. We could arrange them as in *figure 3*, following their hierarchical order. This would provide us with a potential "prescriptive" tool or illustration of degrees of similarity between the ST joke and its possible renderings.
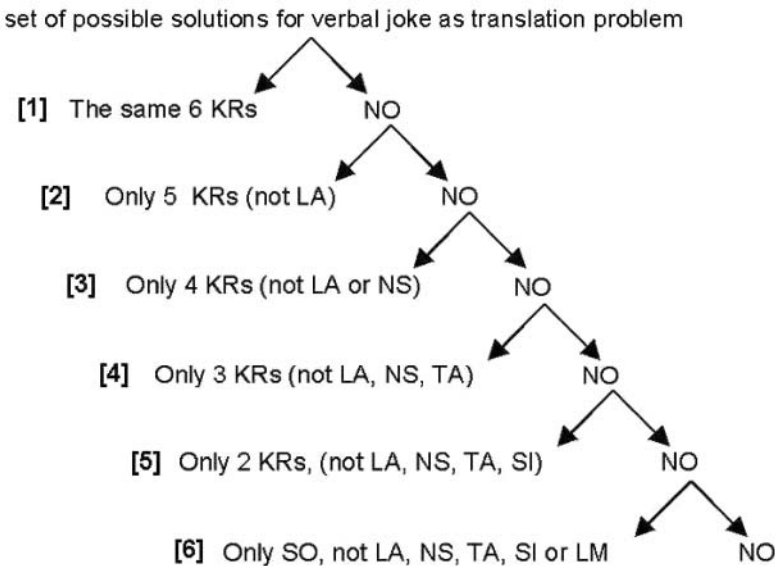

set of possible solutions for verbal joke as translation problem

[1] The same 6 KRs — NO
[2] Only 5 KRs (not LA) — NO
[3] Only 4 KRs (not LA or NS) — NO
[4] Only 3 KRs (not LA, NS, TA) — NO
[5] Only 2 KRs, (not LA, NS, TA, SI) — NO
[6] Only SO, not LA, NS, TA, SI or LM — NO

Figure 3. *Adapting the hierarchical organization of the GTVH Knowledge Resources to binary branch translational analysis*

Attardo (2002) spells it out as "if possible, respect all six Knowledge Resources in your translation, but if necessary, let your translation differ at the lowest level [starting with LA, at the bottom, and ending with SO, at the top] necessary for your pragmatic purposes". We have just seen how binary branching can represent degrees of equivalence. On some occasions we might wish to prescribe or simply advise the greatest possible degree of equivalence, or similarity, as Attardo does here, but translation scholars on the most part shy away both from prescriptive approaches to translation, and even — many of them — from the notion of equivalence, at least as a theoretical concept.

(7)   Here comes Joe with that dragon/cow/fox/rat/dog/worm close behind him.

Example (7) could be analyzed as an instance of humor, regardless of its quality or taste. The point is that "dragon/..." can be analyzed as an attempt at being funny, and we could apply a certain binary branching tree analysis to all the various potential translations as part of a study of the translation of humor within a larger text that example (7) might have been extracted from. However, "dragon/..." might also be analyzed as an insult, or a metaphor of Joe's boss. So, we could have at least three different trees diagrams like the one in Figure 1(b), one for P = item of humor, one for P = insult, and one for P = metaphor. The potential of dragon/... for humor, insult, or metaphor, may vary considerably from one community to another, depending on traditions and beliefs associated to (Chinese) dragons, (sacred) cows, and so on. The demand on researcher and critic alike, regardless of whether they are in translation or in humor studies, is to try and establish the translator's rationale for dealing with each item (his or her system of priorities) and the difficulties involved (his or her restrictions) against the backdrop of the text as a whole, and ultimately the situation in which it will be received.

8.   The translator among other restrictive forces

There are many obstacles to overcome during the translating process, restrictions of all sorts. Most notably, contrastive differences in any of the following areas:

- background knowledge of the two audiences
- moral and cultural values (taboo), habits and traditions

- traditional joke-themes (politics, professions, relationships) and types (T-shirts, graffiti, comic strips, music-hall, slapstick)

Some traditional theories of translation seem to forget the presence of the translator, unless it is to issue a series of do's and don't's, golden rules, and rules of thumb. These theories draw diagrams with arrows going from language A to language B via all sorts of routes but fundamentally bypassing the translator, the implication being that translations (should) come out the way they do regardless of who the translator is. The reasons for this attitude range from ''any old fool can translate'' to ''the translator must be fluent in two languages (and several other such conditions which are easy to prescribe but difficult to find in the real world)''. Whether such scholars are too demanding or simply patronizing, they often seem to be saying that basically what you need is their rulebook or recipe book. In the real world, each translator has different strengths and weaknesses that play a significant role in the end result and how each problem is approached, including humor. The perfect translator does not exist any more than the perfect translation does. The translator is a variable in the process, and understanding how translation works involves understanding translators' profiles and professional contexts. Of course, even translators are the butt of many a joke, translation itself may be a joke theme, or a sort of genre (i.e., ''lost in translation'' joke forms).

What is required, if we acknowledge that no translator, human or otherwise, is perfect or foolproof, is to find ways of reducing the human-limitation factor. Here is a short list of examples of the kind of areas where work can be done to improve translator performance.

- Hiring procedures, specialization and training
- More social, professional and academic recognition of the value and difficulties of translating
- Team work
- Technology and materials
- Awareness of goals and priorities

All of these general points are applicable to the translation of humor. Indeed, humor is an area where translators need a certain amount of guidance and practice. Translators who are not particularly brilliant at translating philosophical essays may be very good at translating humor, and vice versa, of course. So, if employers and the public at large really want translations that are good in conveying the humor of a foreign text, then they might be well advised to spend some time and effort in

finding the right person for each job, and be willing to pay a decent fee for the commission. Good translations should be praised and positively reviewed. To this end both translation and humor scholars should be interested in developing models for critical analysis of translated humor. It may not be enough to apply general models of translation or humor analysis, without stopping to think about the implications of the overlapping area between the two.

9.   Conclusions

From this study three main conclusions can be drawn. A knowledge of how humor works is an important asset for any translator and so it is also necessary for translation scholars. Sameness according to similarity metrics as the one proposed by the GTVH (Attardo 2002) does not entail that funniness will be preserved to the same degree. Neither sameness nor funniness are necessarily goals of the same importance for the translator in all instances of source-text humor production. A translator's goals depend on a host of variables of many different sorts. Analyzing or judging the translation of humor should involve understanding to the best of one's ability what the translator's motivations, criteria and circumstances were in dealing with each item of the text.

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Note

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1.   For more on the theory of translation see Kussmaul (1998); Nord (1997, 2001); Reiss and Vermeer (1984); Toury (1995); and Zabalbeascoa (1997).

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