

Original Paper

The Reproduction of Humor in the Subtitle Translation of Sitcoms from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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Received: July 15, 2026

Accepted: July 29, 2026

Online Published: August 17, 2026

doi:10.22158/elsr.v7n3p72

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/elsr.v7n3p72>

Abstract

Based on Relevance Theory, this thesis takes humor and subtitle translation as two starting points and selects representative humorous subtitles from the American sitcom Good Luck Charlie for case analysis, aiming to explore the reproduction of humorous elements in subtitle translation within the context of cross-cultural communication. The focus of this study lies in translation strategies, which mainly analyzes and discusses how translators preserve the humorous effect of the source text by adopting different translation strategies and a series of specific translation techniques under the guidance of Relevance Theory, while seeking the optimal relevance between the source language and target language. It is found that successful translation in sitcoms requires translators to deeply understand the original meaning, find expressions that can produce similar effects in the target language, so as to ensure that the audience can obtain the best contextual effect through minimal processing efforts and that the desired communicative and humorous effects can be achieved.

Keywords

Relevance Theory; humor; subtitle translation

1. Introduction

In the current context of accelerating globalization, cross - cultural communication has become increasingly frequent. As an important carrier of cultural dissemination, film and television works are exerting growing influence worldwide. Sitcoms, with their relaxed and humorous style and life - related content, are deeply loved by a large number of audiences. In the cross - cultural dissemination of sitcoms, subtitle translation plays a crucial role. It is not only a process of language conversion but also a bridge for cultural transmission and emotional resonance. Humor, as one of the core attractions of sitcoms, its effective representation in subtitle translation is of great significance for maintaining the attractiveness and appeal of the original drama.

However, humorous elements are often closely related to specific languages and cultures, which brings many challenges to subtitle translation. How to accurately convey the connotation of humor through subtitle translation in a cross - cultural context and arouse the resonance of target - language audiences has become an urgent problem to be solved in the field of translation. As a cognitive - pragmatic theory, the Relevance Theory provides a new perspective and powerful theoretical support for the representation of humor in subtitle translation. This theory emphasizes that language communication is a cognitive process, focusing on explaining context effects and utterance understanding from the perspective of the listener, which helps to deeply analyze the cognitive mechanism of humor generation and provides guidance for the effective transmission of humor in subtitle translation.

2. An Overview of Relevance Theory and Humor Translation

2.1 The Core Concept of Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory was proposed by Sperber and Wilson in 1986, according to which successful communication depends on the perception of relevance in the communicated information by the receiver. As it comes to translation, this theory holds that translators have to make sure to retain the relevance of humor in the target language while being faithful to the source at the same time.

2.1.1 Overview of Relevance Theory

According to Sperber and Wilson, language communication is the ostensive-inferential process (1986). As a communicative inference theory, Relevance Theory endeavors to explain the process in which a listener infers the meaning intended by the speaker. In other words, the intention of the speaker has to be transmitted to the listener as explicitly as possible in communicative actions (Lai, 2016). In 1991, drawing on the foundational work of Sperber and Wilson from 1986, Ernst-August Gutt introduced the Relevance-Theoretic Approach to the field of translation studies, which provided a new perspective for translation studies.

Gutt claims that translation is an example of a communication based around a cause-and-effect model of inferencing and interpretation. Any successful communication is said to depend on the communicator's ensuring that his or her informative intention is grasped by the receiver, and this is achieved by making the stimulus (words, gestures, etc.) optimally relevant to the extent that the receiver can expect to derive adequate contextual effects without spending unnecessary effort (Gutt, 2000, p. 32). That is, the communicator gives the hearer communicative clues that allow the inference to be made (Munday, 2004, pp. 101-102).

According to Gutt (1991), the goal of a translator is to achieve optimal relevance in their work as an interlingual interpreter of texts. During the translation process, the translator's task is to fully take into account the cognitive environments between the source text and target text readers, allow the target text reader to obtain adequate contextual effects with necessary effort, and then successfully fulfill the

communicative task. As a result, during the subtitle translation of a sitcom, a successful translation should enable the target language audience to fully comprehend the communicative intention of its original language creator and assist the target language audience in achieving the optimal relevance. In other words, a qualified translation will finally accomplish successful communication while achieving the optimal contextual effects with the least processing effort. In this process, due to the differences in cognitive context, the translator is expected to analyze and compare the cognitive contexts of both original readers and the target readers to create sufficient contextual effects and convey the most relevant messages to the target readers, so that they can have a full understanding of the message in the original text.

2.1.2 Principle of Relevance and Optimal Relevance

The “Principle of Relevance” and “Optimal Relevance” are concepts also proposed by British linguists Sperber and Wilson, primarily applied in the fields of linguistics and communication studies. However, their application in the field of translation has also attracted extensive attention and research, mainly focusing on understanding and interpreting source language (SL) texts to achieve the optimal translation effects of target language (TL).

Sperber and Wilson introduced a pair of principles central to relevance, initially termed the cognitive principle and subsequently the communicative principle.

Cognitive Principle of Relevance:

Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance.

Communication Principle of Relevance:

Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

(S & W, 2001, p. 260)

As the Cognitive Principle suggests, human are inclined to seek the maximization of relevance. “That is to say, in verbal communication, the hearer attempts to process the utterance as productively as possible, aiming to get as great a cognitive effect as possible for as small as possible a processing cost” (Li, 2008, p. 25).

Building upon the Cognitive Principle, the Communicative Principle of Relevance proposed the notion of optimal relevance, which occupies a pivotal role within the framework of Relevance Theory.

Presumption of Optimal Relevance

- (a) The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee’s effort to process it
- (b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator’s abilities and preferences.

(S & W, 2001, p. 270).

The Principle of Relevance suggests that in communication, individuals tend to select information that is most relevant to their current cognitive state and context. This implies that in communication, people are more inclined to choose information that achieves the maximum cognitive effect with the least cognitive effort.

Optimal Relevance refers to the goal of achieving “optimal relevance” in information exchange, which involves selecting the most relevant information within a specific context. This means that individuals not only seek relevant information but also hope that this information is somehow the best choice in meeting their cognitive needs to the fullest extent possible. That is to say, “to be consistent with the principle of relevance, an interpretation does not actually have to be optimally relevant to the addressee; it must merely have seemed so to the communicator.” (S&W, 2001, p. 169).

According to Gutt (1991), “translation is a process in which the translator seeks optimal relevance between the cognitive contexts of the original language and the target language.” Optimal relevance means that the translator expects the TL readers to achieve adequate contextual effects without unnecessary processing efforts when inferencing the intention of the author of the original language and understanding the original language (Zhou, 2014).

Just as optimal relevance is pursued in communication, translation, as a communicative activity, also acquires optimal relevance. However, due to the obvious differences in individual cognitive environments, the translator, as a transmitter of information, “is responsible for trying to make the intention of the author in the original text match the expectations of the readers of the translated text (Lin, 1994, p. 7),” providing the optimal contextual effect for the readers of the translated text and creating optimal relevance.

2.2 Definition and Classification of Humor in Sitcoms

Humor is a multi-faceted phenomenon in the linguistic sense, and its essence is rather hard to define in one sentence.

From a semantic perspective, humor can be understood as an intelligent use of word meanings resulting in witty effects in case of semantic deviation, semantic transformation, or semantic contradiction. In sitcoms, there are many instances of polysemy when speakers take advantage of the polysemantic nature of words and create ambiguity leading to humor.

From a pragmatic perspective, humor is a particular pragmatic function performed by means of verbal communication in a certain communicative situation. Thus, it is not about the linguistic aspect alone but has much to do with communicative intentions of the participants, their common ground, and context. Humorous messages usually violate some of the basic principles of effective communication as defined by Grice (1975) – the Cooperative Principle. By breaking the maxim of quantity, quality, relation, or manner, they arouse a sense of surprise in the listeners, thereby generating humor.

Taking into account the fact that humor is a key factor in defining the story and capturing the audience’s attention, it is important to consider different types and classification of humor that exists in sitcoms. Humor is a phenomenon that is widespread across cultures and that may be achieved through different

approaches and factors. Based on the source and expression of humor, it can be classified into linguistic humor, cultural humor, and universal humor.

2.2.1 Linguistic Humor

The term linguistic humor refers to a kind of expression which takes advantage of the features of polysemy, ambiguity and phonetic aspect of language in order to elicit a feeling of amusement by using the flexible manipulation of language structure, vocabulary, grammar, phonetics and so forth. Linguistic humor performs an essential role in sitcoms and can be one of the ways to develop the story and play jokes.

2.2.2 Cultural Humor

The concept of cultural humor is based on certain cultural norms, traditions, values or customs and thus, is highly dependent upon cultural knowledge. Sometimes it is necessary to know about the culture to understand humor. It is quite natural that cultural humor often works well in some society or among certain group of people since they find their cultural identity in it.

2.2.3 Universal Humor

Universal humor refers to a kind of humor that can be easily understood and appreciated by diverse people regardless of particular languages and cultures. Such kinds of humor may include certain experiences of humans, emotional experiences, human behaviors, as well as some social events and human weaknesses that exist all over the world. The nature of universal humor is such that it can transcend both language and culture because it can reach out to the shared human experiences to make people laugh. In the context of sitcoms, universal humor is always associated with specific dialogue situations and funny plots.

2.3 *Application of Relevance Theory in Humor Translation*

According to Relevance Theory, the assumptions related to context and the cognitive environment are very important in order for the listeners to conduct inferencing. The communication consists of the process in which the listener will work with implicature through the effects of context and effort, thus, the inferential process of relevance takes place. The translation can be regarded as the exchange between languages and cultures, the purpose of which is to make the reader comprehend the meaning. According to such point of view, Relevance Theory may be used in the field of translation studies, in particular, in humor translation. In this regard, since the effects of humor imply implicit and cultural information, it becomes necessary to make the readers of the target language understand the context of the humor. Since humor translation often involves contextual, inferential and cognitive factors, Relevance Theory can help translators solve some difficulties encountered in humor translation so as to achieve relevance, from which the target readers can gain contextual effect and understanding (Sun, 2022).

Humor translation, which can be seen as a dual ostensive-inferential communication, should meet the standards below: to perceive humor as much as possible, and to retain the wordplay as much as possible (Ma, 2020, p. 15). Considering that the purpose of the translation of humorous words is to bring happiness to people, it will lose the meaning of the translation if it fails to make people laugh. The field of translating

verbal humor has long lacked a powerful theoretical framework as a guidance; it is believed that Relevance Theory has a strong explanatory power for humor translation. Relevance Theory provides an effective methodology for translating humorous utterances. The study of humorous utterances translation from the perspective of Relevance Theory is a relatively new perspective, which allows translation of verbal humor to be more flexible. The translator can feel free to deal with the source text dynamically, so that the translation can be similar to the original text in the best interpretation to achieve communicative intention (Zhu, 2007).

3. Case Studies— Reproduction of Humor in *Good Luck Charlie*

The objective of any sitcom is to make people laugh. Therefore, whether or not the humor generated through the use of language is conveyed successfully in the translated subtitles plays an instrumental role in the popularity of a sitcom abroad. In humorous subtitle translation, the main issue is how to preserve the humor in the original text and guarantee the comprehensibility of the punchlines to the target reader. In order to overcome such problems, Gutt (2004) put forward two important translation strategies, namely, direct translation and indirect translation. Both of these strategies have the common goal of maintaining interpretive consistency.

These two strategies encompass different techniques adopted in particular parts of a text. But whatever strategy and technique are adopted, what matters most is to keep the core and intention of humor alive and guarantee that the target readers are able to understand and enjoy it. It is important to adapt these two strategies appropriately according to different situations.

3.1 Direct Translation

3.1.1 Literal Translation

In humor translation, literal translation can sometimes be used to create jokes or retain the humorous effect of the original text. Although literal translation is usually regarded as a way of translation that may lead to ambiguity or unnatural translation, in some cases, translating the literal meaning of the source text directly into the target language can also produce expected humorous effects.

Example 1:

Source Text:

Emmett: How'd you learn to do that?

Bob: When I was in high school, I had my own band... the bob duncan experience.

PJ: You were in a band? How come I never knew that?

Bob: Because whenever I start a story with "when I was in high school," you zone out.

PJ: I'm sorry. What?

Translation:

艾米特：你怎么会弹这些的？

鲍勃：我在上高中的时候，那时我也自己组了个乐队.....鲍勃邓肯体验乐队。

PJ：你竟然玩过乐队？怎么我一点也不知道啊？

鲍勃：因为每当我想谈谈我以前的故事，“想当年我在高中的时候”，你就充耳不闻。

PJ：我很抱歉。你刚才在说啥？

The type of humor in this example is universal humor, which is conveyed through the last line of PJ. In this case, the direct expression in the source language is also effective in the target language, so the translator choose to apply literal translation to convey the humorous effect of the original text to the target language audience, as well as the intimacy and humorous interaction between the characters. According to Relevance Theory, successful communication depends on the relevance of information. Through literal translation, the translator retains the direct information and humorous elements of the original text, so that the target audience can understand the humorous context with minimal effort.

Example 2:

Source Text:

Spencer: Ah. It's Nicole. I should probably take this.

Teddy: Oh sure. Go for it. I have to call Austin anyway.... Once he's old enough to have a phone.

Translation:

斯宾塞：啊，是妮可尔打来的。我得接一下电话。

泰迪：没问题。接去吧。我也得和奥斯丁通个话.....等哪天他的年龄到可以拥有手机的时候。

This example also belongs to universal humor. The conversation takes place after Spencer and Teddy broke up. Spencer had a new girlfriend Nicole, but Teddy has not completely let go of her feelings for Spencer. Out of self-esteem, Teddy pretended to have a new boyfriend Austin. But in fact, Austin is only a ten-year-old boy and he did not have a phone. In this case, literal translation is sufficient, because owning a mobile phone is usually associated with a certain age and maturity, which is a common cross-cultural phenomenon. Relevance Theory emphasizes that the purpose of communication is to maximize the expected effect. Through literal translation, the translator expects that the audience of the target language can understand and appreciate the same humorous effect as the audience of the source language, so it can effectively reproduce the humorous effect of the original text.

3.1.2 Annotation

Annotations in translation refer to the supplement of additional information, explanations or comments to the translated text to help readers better understand the intention, details or cultural background of the original text. This additional information may include explanations of specific words, phrases, sentences or cultural references in order to provide the reader with sufficient context to grasp the meaning of the original text more accurately. In humor translation, annotation can be used as an important strategy to

convey those humorous elements that may be lost in literal translation, so that readers in the target language can understand and appreciate the humorous effect of the original text.

Example 3:

Source Text:

(PJ bought a dummy online)

PJ: I'm gonna put him in my car. That way I can use the carpool lane when I'm making kwikki chikki deliveries.

Translation:

(PJ 在网上买了一个人体模型)

PJ: 我要把他放在我车里, 这样我就可以在为咕唧炸鸡送外卖的时候使用拼车车道了。

(注: carpool lane 只有在车上有两人及两人以上的时候车才可以在那里行驶)

This example can be classified as cultural humor. In this example, the translator effectively reproduces the humorous effect of the original text while maintaining the relevance of the information. By providing the necessary information about the rules governing the use of carpool lanes, readers in the target language can better understand the ingenuity and source of humor of PJ's plan. This is in line with the basic principles of successful communication in Relevance Theory. In this way, the translator enables the readers of the target language to experience the same sense of humor as the readers of the source language.

Example 4:

Source Text:

Amy: Okay, I see the trap. Bob, I'm not so sure this is a possum.

Bob: What do you mean?

Amy: Well, are possums black with a white stripe?

Bob: What? No, get out. That's not a possum. That's a...Skunk.

Translation:

艾米: 好了, 我看到捕鼠夹了。老公, 我觉得这不像负鼠哎。

鲍勃: 你是啥意思?

艾米: 那个, 负鼠是黑一道白一道的么?

鲍勃: 啥? 天, 快出来。那不是负鼠, 是.....是臭鼬啊。

(注: 北美臭鼬大小如猫, 蓬松大尾, 一日受喷, 一月不退, 本剧翻译深受其害过。)

This example also belongs to cultural humor. Because the humor here may be difficult for readers who are not familiar with the skunk's habits. By annotation, the translator makes the audience aware of the appearance and destructive role of the skunk, provides the necessary cultural background and guarantees that both the intention and effect of the humorous text can be conveyed through different languages. As Relevance Theory suggests that the information provided should be relevant, the translator gives

additional information about the skunk through annotation so that the readers of the target language can readily grasp the humorous effect of the conversation.

3.2 Indirect Translation

3.2.1 Adaptation

The term adaptation refers to the technique of modification of the original text during translation so that it fits well into the target language and the target culture. Through adaptation, it is possible to ensure the preservation of the meaning and feelings of the original text so that the audience can easily comprehend and accept the translation. Humor translation requires adaptation mainly to preserve the original humor and feelings. This may involve the adjustment of the language structure, vocabulary choice, cultural reference and the transformation of cultural connotation of humorous elements.

Example 5:

Source Text:

Emmett: What do you think?

PJ: Well, he's pretty good.

Emmett: But I'm not sure if he has the right look.

PJ: What do you mean?

Emmett: Well, you and me are so hot. And he's so... Not.

Translation:

艾米特：你的意下如何？

PJ：这个吗，他演奏的很好。

艾米特：但我觉得他的长相不够正点。

PJ：什么意思？

艾米特：你看，我们俩都如此玉树临风。可是你看他.....好挫。

This example belongs to linguistic humor to a large extent. Through adaptation, the translator maintains the humorous intention of the original text and the optimal relevance of the relevant information. With the expression like“不够正点”、“玉树临风”and“挫”, the translator conveys the exaggerated evaluation of the appearance in the original text, and at the same time makes the dialogue more in line with the Chinese expression habits. In this way, by creating a contextual effect similar to that felt by the source audience, the target audience does not need to make great efforts to obtain the contextual effect in the original dialogue and can understand the humor more easily.

Example 6:

Source Text:

Emmett: You've been beat up before?

PJ: No, but I've heard bad things.

Translation:

艾米特：难道你以前打过架吗？

PJ：是没有，不过没吃过猪肉总看过猪跑。

This example belongs to universal humor. In the translation, the adaptation part is “没吃过猪肉总看过猪跑”. This expression is a Chinese slang which means that even if you have not personally experienced something, you can still understand some truths or situations by observing or hearing about other people’s experiences. Through such adaptation, the translator takes into account the cognitive environment and expected effect of the target reader. By selecting idioms which are equivalent to the humorous effect of the source text, the translator ensures that the transmission of information is relevant and sufficient, which is in line with the basic principles of successful communication in Relevance Theory.

3.2.2 Addition

Addition refers to adding words or some details to the target language in the process of translation in order to better convey the meaning of the source text or enhance the understanding of the target language readers. In humor translation, addition is a common technique to enhance the humorous effect of the original text or to make the translation more interesting. In the process of translation, the translator can add some additional elements of humor to enhance the humorous effect and make the translation more vivid.

Example 7:

Source Text:

PJ: Let’s go with number five. At least it’s not painful.

Two number fives, please. Thank you.

Translation:

PJ: 我们就要第五个吧。至少这个不会痛。

来两份五号套餐。谢谢。

This scene is that PJ and Emmett will be punished by the fat man for speaking ill of him. The fat man found them and gave them a list of different kinds of punishments and let them choose one. It can be classified into universal humor. In the translation, the additional part is “套餐”, which supplements the “number five” in the original text in order to increase the humorous effect. The original meaning of “套餐” is to package a variety of goods or services together and provide them to consumers at a preferential price, which is in sharp contrast to “punishment”. If it is literally translated into “五号”, the humorous effect will be less obvious. According to Relevance Theory, the translator expects that the readers of the target language to be able to capture the humorous effect as in the source text. So addition is applied to enhance the humorous effect in the target language.

Example 8:

Source Text:

Bob: Oh, man! He ate all the egg salad sandwiches.

PJ: Oh, yes! I love that bear.

Translation:

鲍勃: 不是吧! 它把所有的鸡蛋沙拉三明治都吃光了。

PJ: 哦, 猛啊! 我爱熊老大。

This example also belongs to universal humor. The additional part in this translation is “老大”, which usually refers to “boss” or “leader” and contains a hint of authority or respect in Chinese culture. This not only echoes PJ’s compliment of the “bear” in the original text, but strengthens the sense of humor by adding “老大” in the target language. Such addition enables the readers of the target language to experience the humorous effect that may not be found in the original text, and at the same time makes the translation more in line with the Chinese expression habits and cultural background. Meanwhile, Relevance Theory emphasizes that the information communicated should be relevant. By adding “老大”, the translator provides a cultural reference related to “bear” in the original text, which makes it easier for readers in the target language to understand and appreciate humor.

3.2.3 Imitation

Imitation refers to imitating the style, tone, rhythm or other linguistic features of the source text in the process of translation to reproduce the charm and effect of the original text in the target language. It does not pursue word for word translation, but allows the translator to adjust and modify the text to a certain extent to imitate the rhetorical devices or sentence structure of the original text so as to maintain the style and form of the original text. Imitation is a common strategy in humor translation because humor often depends on culture, language and specific expressions. Through imitating, the translator can better retain the humorous elements in the source text, while making the translation more natural and understandable.

Example 9:

Source Text:

little girl: Why are you wearing a cat?

Teddy: Because in my country we have a saying: “ the house looks its best when a cat’s on your chest.”

Translation:

小女孩：你为什么把猫咪戴在身上呀？

泰迪：因为在我的祖国有句谚语叫做“猫咪在怀，房子不坏”。

In this example, the type of humor is universal humor and the imitation part is the phrase “猫咪在怀，房子不坏”. This imitation retains the meaning and tone of the original text. “Best” and “chest” in the original rhyme with each other, and the two characters “怀” and “坏” in the translation also achieve the rhyming effect, so that the same humorous effect can be conveyed. Instead of translating directly, the translator imitates the rhyming form of the original proverb through subtle adjustment, creating a new and culturally adaptable Chinese proverb “猫咪在怀，房子不坏”, which also maintains the optimal relevance of humorous information between the source language and target language.

Example 10:

Source Text:

Gabe: Well, looks like the foot’s on the other shoe now, isn’t it?

Teacher: Don’t you mean the shoe is on the other foot?

Translation:

盖比：看来真是三十年东河，三十年西河啊。

老师：你是不是想说三十年河东，三十年河西。

This example belongs to linguistic humor. In the original text, Gabe uses an English proverb “the foot’s on the other shoe now”, which is a misuse of the more common idiom “the shoe is on the other foot”. Through imitation, the translator adapts the humorous elements of the original text to the Chinese cultural background. “三十年河东，三十年河西” is a Chinese idiom used to describe the changeability of the world. The translator imitates Gabe’s error in the original and adjusts it into “三十年东河，三十年西河”，which keeps the humorous intention of the original text and the optimal relevance of relevant information.

4. Conclusion

Based on Relevance Theory, this research deeply explores its application value in the humor translation of sitcom subtitles. Through systematic analysis and empirical cases, a series of key results have been obtained. At the theoretical level, it clearly reveals the crucial guiding effect of the core elements of Relevance Theory in the translation process, strongly supports the choice of humorous translation strategies and practical operations, and effectively deepens the understanding of the cognitive mechanism of humor cross-language conversion. In the practical dimension, through a variety of cases in *Good Luck Charlie*, it comprehensively verifies the practical feasibility and effectiveness differences of direct translation, indirect translation strategies and their techniques in humor reproduction, and accurately extracts translation paths suitable for different humor types. Literal translation can directly convey universal humor, and annotation can break through the understanding barriers of cultural humor; in indirect translation, adaptation makes the translation fit the target language environment, addition enhances the humorous appeal, and imitation retains the characteristics of the original text.

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