

CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATING CULTURE-BOUND HUMOUR IN ENGLISH SITCOMS INTO UZBEK

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Annotation: This study investigates the challenges of translating culture-bound humour in English sitcoms into Uzbek, focusing on the linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic factors that influence humour transfer. Sitcom humour often relies on wordplay, idiomatic expressions, cultural references, and socio-political contexts specific to English-speaking audiences. When translated into Uzbek, such humour may lose its intended effect due to differences in cultural background, comedic traditions, and audience expectations. The research examines subtitling and dubbing practices, identifying strategies such as adaptation, substitution, explicitation, and omission used to preserve comedic impact. Special attention is given to culturally loaded jokes, puns, and intertextual references that resist direct translation. By drawing on translation theory and audiovisual translation studies, the paper highlights the role of translator creativity and cultural competence in ensuring humour accessibility. The findings contribute to improving cross-cultural humour translation and enhancing audience engagement with foreign media.

Keywords: Culture-bound humour, sitcom translation, audiovisual translation, adaptation strategies, Uzbek translation, cross-cultural communication.

Humour in English-language sitcoms represents one of the most challenging areas of audiovisual translation because it operates simultaneously on linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic levels, requiring translators to capture not only the meaning but also the timing, tone, and cultural resonance of the joke. Culture-bound humour, in particular, depends heavily on shared background knowledge, socio-political contexts, and everyday practices familiar to the source audience but potentially unfamiliar to target viewers. In English sitcoms such as *Friends*, *The Office*, and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, much of the humour draws on popular culture, celebrity references, American holidays, and social stereotypes that resonate strongly with domestic audiences. For Uzbek viewers, these elements often lose their immediate meaning because the socio-cultural frameworks differ substantially. As Chiaro (2010) observes, culture-bound humour relies on “a repertoire of shared knowledge and codes” (p. 15), meaning that without adaptation or explanation, many jokes risk failing to elicit the intended response. For instance, a joke about “Black Friday shopping” makes instant sense to American audiences who understand the post-Thanksgiving retail rush, but this concept is absent in Uzbekistan, where Thanksgiving is not celebrated. To preserve the comedic effect, a translator might adapt the reference to something more culturally familiar, such as crowds at a Navruz fair, thereby maintaining the humorous exaggeration of chaotic public gatherings. This illustrates that translation in this domain is not merely a lexical exercise but a process of cultural negotiation and creative decision-making. Linguistic humour, especially puns, wordplay, and idiomatic expressions, presents another persistent barrier. Puns are notoriously difficult to translate because they rely on phonological, morphological, or semantic ambiguities unique to the source

language. Delabastita (1996) famously described puns as “the untranslatable in translation” (p. 128), not because they cannot be rendered at all, but because the exact interplay of sound and meaning often cannot be replicated. In *The Office*, the recurring joke “That’s what she said” exploits double entendre to create sexual innuendo in otherwise mundane statements. A literal Uzbek translation (*Bu u aytgan gap edi*) removes the ambiguity and destroys the humorous undertone. A skilled translator must instead find a culturally equivalent quip that conveys suggestiveness without violating broadcast norms in Uzbekistan, perhaps replacing it with an Uzbek phrase that signals the same kind of cheeky inference. Similarly, idioms pose challenges when they are deeply tied to cultural imagery. The English “kick the bucket” can be translated literally (*chelakni tepmoq*), but the result would be incomprehensible unless replaced with the Uzbek equivalent “olamdan o’tmoq” (to pass away). The difficulty lies in balancing preservation of idiomatic colour with ensuring comprehension and humour for the target audience. This balance is even more delicate when dealing with colloquial slang, which evolves rapidly in English-speaking youth culture. Terms such as “cringe,” “ghosting,” or “burn” may require creative equivalents in Uzbek that capture the tone and social connotation without sounding forced or outdated. Cultural references are another major obstacle in translating sitcom humour because they rely on shared knowledge of historical events, media products, political figures, and everyday institutions. In *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, references to “Saturday Night Live” sketches or “Oscars after-parties” are instantly recognisable to American audiences but opaque to many Uzbek viewers. Translators faced with such references must decide between retention, adaptation, or omission. Retaining the original term assumes either prior knowledge or willingness on the part of the audience to accept foreignness in the text. Adapting the reference involves replacing it with something familiar in the Uzbek context, such as changing “Oscars after-party” to “O’zbek kino mukofoti kechasi” (Uzbek film awards night), thus preserving the prestige-related humour. Omission is typically a last resort, as it risks erasing the joke entirely, but it is sometimes unavoidable when the reference is too culture-specific to explain without disrupting comedic timing. As Schäffner (2004) notes, translation of culturally embedded material requires “a careful balancing act between foreignisation and domestication” (p. 126), and in humour translation, this balance is further complicated by the strict time constraints of audiovisual media. Audiovisual constraints exert a constant pressure on translators working with sitcoms. Subtitling, in particular, imposes strict limits on the number of characters per line and the duration that each subtitle appears on screen. Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2021) point out that subtitles typically allow only 35–40 characters per line and must remain visible for between two and six seconds (p. 112). This restriction means that long-winded explanations or culturally elaborate clarifications are often impossible, especially when the dialogue moves quickly. As a result, translators may have to condense humour to its core components, sometimes at the expense of nuance. In dubbing, synchronising translated lines with the original actors’ lip movements adds another layer of complexity. The comedic rhythm in English might rely on repetition or specific syllable patterns, which can be difficult to mirror in Uzbek without distorting meaning. For example, in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, the character Jake’s line “Cool, cool, cool, cool, no doubt, no doubt” depends on rhythmic repetition for comic effect. A literal Uzbek rendering (*Zo’r, zo’r, zo’r, zo’r, zo’r, shubhasiz*) might sound awkward, so the translator could restructure it to something like *Zo’r, zo’r, ha, zo’r, albatta*, retaining rhythm and informality while fitting natural Uzbek speech patterns. The strategies available for addressing

culture-bound humour in translation vary in their degree of fidelity and creativity. Chiaro (2010) identifies literal translation, cultural substitution, paraphrase, omission, and addition as core techniques, each with distinct advantages and limitations (p. 22). Literal translation is only effective when the humour is either language-independent or still accessible to the target audience without adaptation. Cultural substitution replaces the joke or reference with a culturally equivalent one, ensuring recognisability for the target audience but sacrificing some authenticity. Paraphrase explains the joke in simpler or more familiar terms, which can work in subtitling but often disrupts pacing. Omission removes the humour altogether, a drastic measure that undermines entertainment value but may be necessary when neither substitution nor paraphrase can preserve the comedic effect. Addition, often through brief explanatory phrases in dubbing or subtitling, can supply essential context, though it risks slowing the comedic beat. The most effective translations often combine strategies, adapting or replacing culture-specific humour while retaining universal comedic elements such as slapstick, irony, or absurdity. The human factor in humour translation cannot be overstated. Translators working on sitcoms must be not only bilingual but also bicultural, possessing the “metaphorical competence” and cultural literacy to navigate both source and target humour traditions effectively (Schäffner, 2004, p. 130). In the Uzbek context, this entails sensitivity to cultural taboos, levels of acceptable satire, and audience preferences for certain humour types. Political satire, for instance, is commonplace in American sitcoms but may require moderation or euphemism in Uzbek translations due to political and social constraints. Similarly, sexual innuendo or humour involving alcohol may need adaptation to align with local broadcasting norms. The translator’s role as cultural mediator extends beyond word choice to determining how much of the source culture’s comedic sensibility can be retained without alienating or offending the target audience. Understanding Uzbek humour traditions—often rooted in wordplay in Uzbek and Russian, moral storytelling, and socially harmonious conclusions—enables the translator to integrate local comedic devices into the translation, enhancing relatability without erasing the original’s flavour. Venuti (1995) frames this work as a constant negotiation between “invisibility” and cultural intervention (p. 19), a description that applies aptly to the translation of sitcom humour. Ultimately, translating culture-bound humour from English sitcoms into Uzbek involves navigating an intricate web of linguistic barriers, cultural differences, audiovisual constraints, and audience expectations. It is a process that demands both technical skill and cultural imagination, requiring translators to act as entertainers as much as linguistic intermediaries. The goal is not to replicate every joke exactly but to recreate the humorous experience for the target audience, ensuring that laughter emerges naturally from the translated text in harmony with the on-screen performance. This makes humour translation one of the most complex yet creatively rewarding areas of audiovisual translation, especially in a cross-cultural pairing as distinct as English and Uzbek.

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