

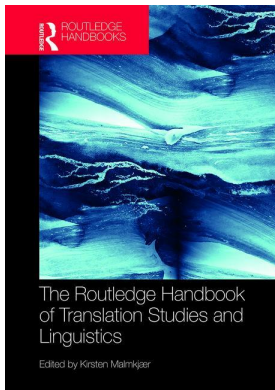
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Wordplay and translation

Ida Klitgård

Traduttore – traditore!

A pun is the lowest form of wit. It does not tax the brain a bit. One merely takes a word that's plain. And picks one out that sounds the same.

(Samuel Johnson 1709–1784)

The translation of puns is of marginal importance and of irresistible interest

(Newmark 1988, 217)

Introduction and definitions

This chapter opens with a number of long-standing paradoxes concerning the translation of wordplay. The famous play on words in the Italian expression “traduttore – traditore” is widely quoted in Translation Studies and carries the crux of the matter here as when translating the wordplay into English, for instance, the pair “translator – traitor” in fact loses the very play on words, and only a feeble alliteration and assonance survive. The English translation commits treason as it were on the original Italian saying, and in the same vein, translating wordplay is generally considered impossible.

A large number of types of language manipulation may be included under the umbrella term of “wordplay”: acrostic, malapropism, palindrome, rhyming slang, tongue twisters, spoonerism, riddle, chiasmus, etc. Here I will, however, focus on the type of wordplay which causes the most problems to translators and which has received the greatest attention in the field of Translation Studies: the pun. That is, the manipulation of sounds and meanings of words with the intent of being witty.

Unfortunately, such wordplay is often considered of lesser value than fancy metaphors or other stylistically sophisticated ways of expressing profundity. The great lexicographer Samuel Johnson coined the second famous saying above that “A pun is the lowest form of wit”, forever pushing double meaning witticisms into the shadows of bad taste as there is no significant sapience in them. And here the Italian saying appears as a perfect testimony to his claim that you merely pick a word that is plain and then take another that sounds the same: “traduttore – traditore”.

It is, however, not that simple. Wordplay may not only be a despised feature due to its apparent plainness. True, Johnson criticised the amusement of the pun as it only relies on homonymy in his view. He scorned the form and cared not for the multiple opportunities of rhetorical layers of meaning embedded in wordplay. But even though we today recognise wordplay as capable of giving rise to multiple humorous meanings – or maybe exactly because of this recognition – the pun is still a hated feature to some people. In China, for example, there has been an attempt to ban the use of puns as it breaches “the law on standard spoken and written Chinese, makes promoting cultural heritage harder and may mislead the public – especially children” (Branigan 2014). The State Administration for Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television believes in purifying the language in order to avoid cultural and linguistic chaos, but according to Branigan this is an attempt to eliminate the possibilities of joking at the expense of the country’s leadership and their policies. So puns are in reality not that plain. They enable us to say things that cannot otherwise be said, and that is why they are both repulsive and attractive at the same time, as Peter Newmark notes in the third epigraph of this chapter.

But how does wordplay achieve that power? In the online *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* and the online *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* we find the following definitions of “wordplay” and “pun”, which seem to be used interchangeably:

OED:

wordplay n. [compare German *Wortspiel* (17th cent.), and also *play* n. 8c] (a) the action of playing with words; witty use of words, esp. of verbal ambiguities; (b) an instance of this, a play on words (see *play* n. 8c), a pun.

Merriam-Webster:

wordplay: playful or clever use of words

OED:

pun n. Etymology: Origin unknown. Perhaps shortened < *punctilio* n. or its etymon Italian *puntiglio*. The use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect; a play on words.

Merriam-Webster:

pun: the usually humorous use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more of its meanings or the meaning of another word similar in sound

It appears that “wordplay” is a more broad term for the action of trifling with words, whereas a “pun” expresses a more specifically ambiguous meaning based on words with similar forms and sounds. A pun may also be referred to as a *paronomasia* in rhetoric. These conceits are widely used in literature, advertisement, jingles, slogans, brand names, organisations, journalism, politics, songs, comedy and everyday language, but in this chapter I will restrict my illustrations to literature.

Since the above definitions rest on such words as “meanings”, “use of a word” and “same sound” – words and expressions that may themselves be perceived as ambiguous or at least imprecise – we need to outline a typology of wordplay and puns from a linguistic point of view. This will enable a qualified discussion of the reasons to shun the pun in the context of translation.

A lexical-grammatical description of wordplay

If we turn to the field of lexical grammar, we get an idea of how language patterns elicit meaning: we get both a typology and a description of the capacity of wordplay. In his article “A linguistic account of wordplay: The lexical grammar of punning”, Partington (2009) tries to fill a lacuna in research on wordplay, as the prevalent taxonomic approach with lists of kinds of puns is unable to explain the underlying structure and function of wordplay in authentic discourse. In his use of various concepts from lexical grammar based on corpus linguistics, Partington allows for a wider understanding of what happens in the construction of wordplay and why it may be so (un)funny – or as Newmark (1988, 217) puts it: “of marginal importance and of irresistible interest”. But it must be noted that even though the title of Partington’s article speaks of “wordplay” and “punning”, it is the latter he in fact analyses.

Partington quotes Koestler’s (1964) definition of the pun as a bisociation formed through an acoustic knot, i.e. a simultaneous mental association of one idea with two different fields not normally associated with it by way of sound similarity. This can be expressed through the equation $SS1(M1)$ and $SS2(M2)$ (SS = sound sequence and M = meaning) (Partington 2009, 1795). And rather than only speaking of either homonymic or homophonic puns, he speaks of a more fundamental distinction between “near” puns and “exact” puns:

1. Near puns – $SS1(M1) \approx SS2(M2)$ – resemblance:
Here two sound sequences are involved which resemble each other phonologically, such as in the before-mentioned pun on “traduttore - traditore”.
2. Exact puns – $SS1(M1) = SS2(M2)$ – identity:
Here two sound sequences are involved which are identical. They may be split into either homonymy (words alike in sound and spelling) or homophony (words alike in sound only):

2.a. Homonymic exact pun:

“Do you believe in *clubs* for young people?”
“Only when kindness fails.”

The word “club” here means both a place for people to hang out and a kind of weapon to hit young people with when good upbringing fails.

2.a. Homophonic exact pun:

“Why is a defective condom called a Welsh letter?”
“Because it has a *leak* in it.”

A “leak” is a hole, but the homophone “leek” is the national symbol of Wales.

In both examples there is a combination of something expected and something which is unexpected. Clubs to hang out in and holes in condoms would be what we expect the respective question to be about, and so the second association takes us by surprise and evokes humour. But why do we expect one meaning over the other? This aspect is what Partington refers to as lexical priming, a term which he borrows from Hoey (2005). But to understand that concept, we need to understand the concept of collocation.

A collocation is a specific sequence or arrangement of words that seems to occur more often than randomly, and when such arrangements turn into conventional set combinations, they become predictable phraseological collocations – such as “blonde hair”. We conventionally speak of blonde hair, not yellow hair – as in the corresponding “red hair”, “brown hair” and “black hair.” Hoey explains:

The subversiveness of collocation has rarely been noted, but it is as important a property as its pervasiveness and stems from it. The ubiquity of collocation challenges current theories of language because it demands explanation, and the only explanation that seems to account for the existence of collocation is that each lexical item is primed for collocational use. By primed, I mean that as the word is learnt through encounters with it in speech and writing, it is loaded with the cumulative effects of those encounters such that it is part of our knowledge of the word that it co-occurs with other words.

Collocation priming is not a permanent feature of the word. Each use we make of the word, and each new encounter, either reinforces the priming or loosens it, if we use it in defiance of the priming. It may accordingly shift in the course of an individual’s life-time, and if it does so, and to the extent that it does so, the lexical item shifts slightly in meaning and/or function. This may be referred to as drifts in the priming.

Collocational priming is sensitive to the domain in which the lexical item is encountered. Part of our knowledge of a lexical item is that it is used in certain combinations in certain kinds of text. So the phrase in winter is primed for use in travel writing whereas the phrase during the winter months, which means more or less the same thing, is primed for use in gardening writing.

(Hoey 2004)

To this can be added the tendency for lexical items to either attract or avoid certain grammatical categories, which is called colligation, or certain grammatical positions, which is called *textual* colligation (Partington 2009, 1797). Partington explains that “in winter” primes an occurrence of the present tense and “timeless truths” as well as a position in the beginning of a sentence. The complete array of such combinatorial expectancies is called a priming prosody (Partington 2009, 1798). In extension to this, I propose that such grammatical preferences or expectancies may explain the translation teacher’s all too habitual urge to tell students that this or that translation just “sounds better” or that one’s “intuition” tells one that this or that solution is to be preferred, while being quite unable to explain why.

According to Hoey, the fluency of native speakers originates in the subconscious process of language learning that includes noticing and recording lexical priming:

More specifically, whenever a native speaker encounters a word, he or she makes a mental note, quite subconsciously, of:

- the words it occurs with
- the grammatical patterns it occurs in
- the meanings with which it is associated.

They also make a subconscious note of:

- whether it is used to be polite (or rude)
- what kind of style it tends to occur in

- whether it occurs more often in speech or writing
- whether the speaker is someone younger or older.

They also notice where the person who has used the word comes from and whether he or she was being humorous or serious. They notice, too, whether the word or phrase is typically used in particular kinds of text, in academic writing, for example, rather than novels, advertisements or newspaper writing. They even notice whether it is associated with the beginnings or ends of sentences or with paragraph boundaries.

(Hoey 2009)

That is why it is crucial for foreign or second language learners to immerse themselves in or expose themselves as much as possible to the foreign language to get a feel for lexical priming.

To return to wordplay, or puns, they function as a combination of words and meanings that are both expected and unexpected at the same time. The conventional semantic expectancies are disrupted. In the homonymic exact pun above, our first favoured reading, or what we hear at first, is the meaning of the word “club” as a society for young people, presumably because the combination “clubs for” tend to lead to that conclusion. The secondary meaning of a weapon used for hitting is what is unexpected and thus lays a filter of shocking ambiguity on top of the word, eliciting laughter. The same is the case with the homophonic exact pun above where we expect the meaning of a hole at first as it is primed to collocate with a container, here a condom, whereas vegetables are not.

Partington then consequently speaks of two basic principles of language organisation, referring to Sinclair’s (1987) distinction:

1. The collocational (idiomatic/phraseological) principle: discourse is constructed by way of a series of (semi-)preconstituted blocks chosen at a time
2. The open-choice (terminological) principle: discourse is a series of open-ended choices of empty slots having to be filled by a word chosen one by one.

(Partington 2009, 1798)

According to psycholinguistic studies, the collocational (idiomatic/phraseological) mode is the dominant, default mode of interpreting discourse because it is the fastest way to comprehend communication. Thus, readers or listeners access idiomatic interpretations of preconstituted blocks before literal interpretations. And it is the very interplay, “the enforced switching from one mode of interpretation to another, from the idiom to the open-choice, which is at the heart of a great part of wordplay” (Partington 2009, 1799). When readers or listeners are forced to (also) use the open-choice analytical mechanism instead of purely interpreting the priming prosody of the idiomatic block, they encounter a kind of relexicalisation: “The effect achieved is a general revitalisation of the language at that point in the text. Novelty breathes life into the discourse” (Partington 2009, 1799). Or as Walter Redfern puts it: “extracting the maximum juice of words” (Redfern 1997, 267). Of course such interpretation only works if the receiver shares the lexical primings due to the same knowledge of the world, and that is one of the reasons why humour often travels very badly across cultures and languages.

The same may be said of the sub-category of the so-called delexicalised puns where the reverse is happening. The key word in such puns is in conventional everyday use emptied of its full literal meaning, such as the verb “take” in “take a bath”, but in delexicalised puns the full meaning has returned as in “taking a bath” interpreted as removing or stealing a bath.

That is, the distinct contribution of the word to the meaning of the utterance has been reduced to an unexpected literal meaning. This may also be termed a zeugma.

Another kind of interpretation is the reworked/reconstruction pun. This is the case with near puns where the nearness of two different meanings through sound resemblance (M1 and M2) as in “traduttore – traditori” forces the receiver to couple the surprise effect with a piecing together of the actually expected blocks. So, in relexicalised puns a surprise effect occurs through a true sense of novelty and revitalisation, whereas in reworked puns, the surprise effect is coupled with the receiver’s active contribution in seeing the unexpected connection between the lexical items.

Partington concludes his study by trying to explain what makes a good pun and what makes a bad pun. The good, or justified/motivated pun relies on a kind of kinship or similarity between the combined ideas or senses, whereas the bad, or unmotivated/hollow pun rests on a missing link, so to speak, between the two meanings which unite it. We may smile, but not burst into laughter, when hearing a bad pun. Or we may say that that was a poor joke. As psychologists searching for the world’s best joke have concluded: the necessary ingredients in a good joke are shock and surprise – but more importantly “the kick of the discovery” that you are suddenly turning your thinking around and shifting your perceptions (Weems 2014). That is why wordplay is both of marginal importance and irresistible interest. It combines the expected mundane world with an unpredicted sensation of freshness.

So far we have dwelled on wordplay as a play on words in single phrases or full sentences – except for the by now exhausted “traduttore – traditore”. This, however, may be an example of an elliptical sentence saying that a translator is like a traitor. Furthermore, Partington also speaks of “lexical cascading” which is an accumulation of words and phrases from the same lexico-grammatical class which together form a kind of extended wordplay as in “*Food* features large on summit *menu*” or “*Novel voting system: Literature at the polls: New and retiring candidates* choose their favourite” (Partington 2009, 1808). But is wordplay only possible as an acoustic knot incorporated into a collocational arrangement of words? What about single words in themselves? Partington says that “puns generally do not play with single words but phrases, larger units of discourse” (Partington 2009, 1795). Admittedly, the word “club” on its own, for example, does not give rise to any surprise effect or the slightest laughter even though it has more than one meaning. But so-called neologisms or blends do.

When it comes to word formation, a kind of revitalisation, playfulness and (amusing) double meanings may, however, indeed be applied to achieve a witty effect. We speak in general of neologisms, but this broad term is misleading as only very few words may be said to be actual new coinings. Instead we may speak of lexical innovation in word formation and break this down into a variety of morphological processes such as derivation, compounding, semantic change, functional shifts, initialisms, borrowings, back-formations, blends and coinings (Ayto 1996, 65), from which only blends and coinings (true neologisms) are relevant in this context.

A neologism is a word which is newly coined and thus new to the language, such as the Martian word “grok” denoting life, water and an experience of ultimate empathy where the observer becomes part of the observed as invented in Robert A. Heinlein’s 1961 science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*; or James Joyce’s “quark” for the cry of a duck in *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Such words fill a lexical gap in a particular literary sphere and sometimes even in a subsequent broader context. The physicists George Zweig and Murray Gell-Mann, for example, deliberately borrowed Joyce’s “quark” to denote an elementary particle in matter. Gell-Mann explains:

In 1963, when I assigned the name “quark” to the fundamental constituents of the nucleon, I had the sound first, without the spelling, which could have been “kwork”.

Then, in one of my occasional perusals of *Finnegans Wake*, by James Joyce, I came across the word “quark” in the phrase “Three quarks for Muster Mark.” Since “quark” (meaning, for one thing, the cry of the gull) was clearly intended to rhyme with “Mark”, as well as “bark” and other such words, I had to find an excuse to pronounce it as “kwork.” But the book represents the dream of a publican named Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker. Words in the text are typically drawn from several sources at once, like the “portmanteau” words in “Through the Looking-Glass.” From time to time, phrases occur in the book that are partially determined by calls for drinks at the bar. I argued, therefore, that perhaps one of the multiple sources of the cry “Three quarks for Muster Mark” might be “Three quarts for Mister Mark”, in which case the pronunciation “kwork” would not be totally unjustified. In any case, the number three fitted perfectly the way quarks occur in nature.

(Gell-Mann 1995, 180)

However, striking literary neologisms most often remain so-called nonce words, i.e. words which are only used once and never catch on in a wider circulation of language.

A blend, on the other hand, is the merging of parts of words into a new word, as in “brunch” coined by “breakfast” and “lunch”; and as in “cyborg” coined by “cybernetic” and “organism”. Such cases of clipping of splinters of words and packing them into one word is also known as “portmanteau words”, which in itself is a new word originating in Lewis Carroll’s novel *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871).

Both neologisms and blends may have an extreme freshness and image-making power, as with wordplay in phrases. But the blend is closer to the pun in nature than the neologism. As the pun was a simultaneous mental association of one idea with two different fields not normally associated with it by way of sound similarity, the blend, I suggest, is a simultaneous mental association of one idea with two different fields derivatively associated with it by way of hybridity. The blend is more free than the pun as all sense-making parts of words may be put together to form entirely new words as long as they follow general morphological, syntactic and phonetic rules in language. The pun is dependent on the acoustic knot which ties two meanings together. This may be explained thus:

- the pun: one word with two meanings primarily based on the collocational principle, as in “club” in the above-mentioned sequence of sentences
- the blend/portmanteau: one meaning depending on two words primarily based on the open-choice principle, as in “brunch” as mentioned above.

Main research methods

The distinctions between puns and portmanteaux have been thoroughly discussed in Delabastita’s vast studies on wordplay and translation on which a number of subsequent studies draw significantly (e.g. Klitgård 2005; Pérez 2008; Marco 2010; Low 2011). His definition of wordplay is often quoted in Translation Studies:

Wordplay is the general name indicating the various *textual* phenomena in which *structural features* of the language(s) used are exploited in order to bring about a *communicatively significant confrontation* of two (or more) linguistic structures with *more or less similar forms* and *more or less different meanings*.

(Delabastita 1996, 128)

Delabastita explains the pun as contrasting linguistic structures with different meanings based on formal identity in terms of four specifications: homonymy (identical sounds and spelling), homophony (identical sounds, but different spelling), homography (identical spelling, but different sounds) and paronymy (slight variation in both sounds and spelling). The two contrasting linguistic structures – what Partington called an “acoustic knot” – may exist concurrently in the same portion of text (vertical wordplay – cf. Partington’s exact puns) or one after another in the text (horizontal wordplay – cf. Partington’s near puns). The grid of the eight typologies in Table 15.1 is often quoted in the literature relying on Delabastita’s work (here I provide explanations of the four categories in square brackets).

As with Partington’s lexical grammar, Delabastita also speaks of punning as a textual phenomenon relying on specific textual settings, such as either verbal or situational contexts, and based on either the collocational or open-choice principle, even though these are not the exact terms he uses. The verbal contexts originate in our expectations of (a) grammatical well-formedness; (b) thematic coherence; (c) conventional sequence of phrases (Partington and Hoey’s “priming”) such as titles, collocations, proverbs, etc. The situational contexts refer to dialogue situations and multimedia texts (Delabastita 1996, 129). The revitalisation which Partington speaks of is here described as always already existing in tangles of potential ambiguities and associations in the punster’s deliberate exploitation of the following linguistic features:

1. The phonological and graphological structure, such as soundplay in alliteration
2. The lexical structure, such as polysemy and idioms
3. The morphological structure, such as “Is life worth living? It depends on the liver.” This type of pun is structured as a compound/derivative which is etymologically incorrect, but semantically effective
4. The syntactic structure, such as “Players please” which can be read as a praise of the cigarette brand or as a request in a shop

(Delabastita 1996, 130–131)

Table 15.1 The eight typologies of pun (after Delabastita 1993, 81)

<i>Homony</i> [same spelling and pronunciation, but different meaning]	<i>Homophony</i> [same pronunciation, but different spelling and different meaning]	<i>Homography</i> [same written form, but different pronunciation and different meaning]	<i>Paronymy</i> [derivative word with related meaning]
VERTICAL Pyromania: a burning passion	VERTICAL Wedding belles	VERTICAL MessAge [name of mid-1990s rap band]	VERTICAL Come in for a faith lift [slogan on church]
HORIZONTAL Carry on dancing carries Carry to the top [article on ambitious young dancer called Carry]	HORIZONTAL Counsel for Council home buyers	HORIZONTAL How the US put US to shame	HORIZONTAL It’s G.B. for the Beegees [article on pop band touring Britain]

And “For this massive dormant associative power of words and structures to become effective, they need to be employed in specifically contrived textual settings” (Delabastita 1996, 129).

Delabastita’s typology, however, does not leave room for morphological puns such as blends/portmanteaux which are single-word wordplay not necessarily disrupting the textual structure. Here Lladó’s rhetorical typology may supplement Delabastita’s. Besides wordplay based on either consonance (defined as phonetic similarity), polysemy and homophony, Lladó also proposes wordplay based on transformation “which includes all figures based on the alteration of the phonetic and graphic structure of a word in order to create a different one, such as anagram, *portmanteau* word, metathesis, metagram, heterogram and palindrome” (Lladó 2002 translated and quoted in Marco 2010, 267).

Since wordplay is always already there in the covert associative power of language, or as Hofstaedter (1997) says, “there are hidden puns lying around at all times” (Hofstaedter quoted in Low 2011, 63), one might assume that the translation of both phraseological puns and morphological puns is a simple matter. But the pun is the lowest form of wit, Johnson said, maybe because it is exactly not artfully constructed but just lying around everywhere only waiting to rise and shine: “The pun [. . .] is not just an ambiguity that has crept into an utterance unawares, to embarrass or amuse before being dismissed; it is ambiguity *unashamed of itself*, and this is what makes it a scandal and not just an inconvenience” (Attridge 1988, 141).

One major problem in translating puns is that the “covert associative power of language” is not the same across time and socio-linguistic cultures. The power of primed “hidden puns lying around” is not shared between different time periods and different languages if the codes and cultural references differ. As Chiaro for instance has demonstrated, in the interlingual translation of sexual and political jokes, problems of equivalence and thus understanding arise when the source and target cultures do not share the same views on for example what is taboo and what is not, or the same sociocultural knowledge of historical or topical events (Chiaro 1992, 77–84).

According to Delabastita, however, this does not mean that wordplay is untranslatable. The various translation strategies he lists testify to a number of legitimate techniques which are at the translator’s disposal. Here I quote Delabastita’s famous list of strategies at length with added numbers:

1. PUN → PUN: the source-text pun is translated by a target-language pun, which may be more or less different from the original wordplay in terms of formal structure, semantic structure, or textual function
2. PUN → NON-PUN: the pun is rendered by a non-punning phrase which may salvage both senses of the wordplay but in a non-punning conjunction, or select one of the senses at the cost of suppressing the other; of course, it may also occur that both components of the pun are translated “beyond recognition”
3. PUN → RELATED RHETORICAL DEVICE: the pun is replaced by some wordplay-related rhetorical device (repetition, alliteration, rhyme, referential vagueness, irony, paradox, etc.) which aims to recapture the effect of the source-text pun
4. PUN → ZERO: the portion of the text containing the pun is simply omitted
5. PUN ST = PUN TT: the translator reproduces the source-text pun and possibly its immediate environment in its original formulation, i.e. without actually “translating” it
6. NON-PUN → PUN: the translator introduces a pun in textual positions where the original text has no wordplay, by way of compensation to make up for source-text puns lost elsewhere, or for any other reason

7. ZERO → PUN: totally new textual material is added, which contains wordplay and which has no apparent precedent or justification in the source text except as a compensatory device
8. EDITORIAL TECHNIQUES: explanatory footnotes or endnotes, comments provided in translators' forewords, the "anthological" presentation of different, supposedly complementary solutions to one and the same source-text problem, and so forth.
(Delabastita 1996, 134)

Furthermore, all these strategies can be combined in various ways, such as a pun being suppressed (PUN → NON-PUN) with a footnote explaining why (EDITORIAL TECHNIQUES) and perhaps with a compensatory pun elsewhere (NON-PUN → PUN). So – and this may come as a surprise to some – shunning the pun in (2) and (4) is a valid translation strategy according to Delabastita. This is supported by Pérez who says "Claiming that puns are untranslatable implies considering that those strategies are not good enough to qualify as genuine translation" (Pérez 2008, 36).

Current debates

Deciding which strategy to use depends on a number of factors impinging on the translation situation. In his corpus study of the translation of wordplay in English literary texts by Oscar Wilde and Graham Swift into Catalan, Marco takes Delabastita's methods a step further. Reviewing the literature on wordplay, he makes a list of such factors:

1. Isomorphism: Kinship between the languages. The closer the languages, the greater chance of equivalence
2. Degree of cultural specificity of the elements in the pun
3. Translator-related subjected factors, such as talent, proficiency and willingness to work on solving the problems
4. Objective factors, such as working conditions
5. Translation norms of the target system
6. Textual genre/text-type
7. Intended target readership. E.g. differences in relevance to adults and children
8. Kind of linguistic structures played upon, such as the phonological, graphological, lexical, morphological and syntactic levels
9. Stylistic function and motivation, such as (a) the functions of humour (entertainment, social criticism, pedagogical moralising intention); (b) mental state or attitude (bitterness, cynicism, irony, etc.); (c) scope (local or global in the text); (d) relationship between the wordplay and the composition of the text (plot, characters, themes, etc.)
10. The relative frequency of wordplay in the text
11. Type of wordplay, e.g. horizontal and vertical
12. Domain(s) of experience and knowledge/isotopies: "the greater the distance between the two (or more) isotopies activated by wordplay, the more surprising the effect".
(Marco 2010, 271–73)

Even though Marco revises Delabastita's techniques slightly in this study, he finds that the various ways in which punning activity are lost in translation from English to Catalan are the most prevalent strategies, including translating a pun into zero puns or a pun into a non-pun. They account for 62.72% of his cases, whereas the techniques that constitute a neutral

approach, such as translating a pun to a similar or different pun, account for around half of that, 31.82%. There are no cases of a positive balance, such as a non-pun translated into a pun or zero pun translated into a pun, and the most recurrent factors behind these strategies seem to be (in this order taken from the above list):

9. stylistic function
8. the kind of linguistic structure
2. cultural specificity
12. domain of experience
1. degree of isomorphism

To this he adds the factor of *skopos* which includes (6) textual genre and (7) target audience. One is left to wonder whether there is no author-related factor, i.e. taking the author's habitual, characteristic or famed use of wordplay into consideration. Oscar Wilde, for instance, is an equilibrist writer who puts Johnson's scorn for puns to shame, and since this is such a strong characteristic of Wilde's voice, the translator is forced to put extra effort into making translation equivalence happen.

As I have previously argued (2005), on a par with Marco's later finding of the most prevalent translation factor, the stylistic function of punning is indisputable. But not only does the translator have to make isolated qualified choices with both vertical and horizontal singular puns, s/he may also have to consider wider syntagmatic contextual patterns, networks or clusters of related wordplay throughout a literary text – and this approach validates a greater focus on the author factor in future research on the translation of wordplay. A poignant case is James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1922) as it is a vast playful fabric of interconnected multilingual imagery, motifs and extensive "cascades" of wordplay, as Partington calls it (Klitgård 2007), which includes both vertical, horizontal and single-word puns (portman-teaux). The examples in the following section have been taken from *Ulysses*.

Examples

In the "Sirens" episode of *Ulysses*, the main character Leopold Bloom writes a letter to his admirer Martha Clifford while listening to music in a bar. His pondering thoughts about her previous letter to him are telling of the problems in translating puns: "How will you pun? You punish me?" (Joyce 1922/1986, 11.890–891 – referring to episode and line number.) His stream of thoughts is interrupted rendering only half of the word "punish", which I jokingly suggest turns into a question from James Joyce to the reader-translator: How will you pun – and thereby punish me? I.e. being a "traditore" to his art. The reader is immediately presented with the surprise effect as "pun" is not typically primed with "How will you". And then we are presented with the originally intended word "punish" which reassures us that everything is back to normal – but not without having planted in us the novel relexicalised feeling that punning and punishment may be associated with each other which makes this a case of constructed paronymy. As Herman explains: "The text itself reflects on the formation of puns via the transposition of morphemes". It is "a procedure that at the limit furnishes the logic of puns – roots itself in the phonic substance of a given material language" (Herman 1995, 76). But how do you translate that into a different language where there may be no shared derivation?

The recent much-celebrated Danish retranslation of *Ulysses* by Karsten Sand Iversen retorts to the strategy of translating a pun into a non-pun as he writes: "*Hvordan vil du straf? Du straffe mig?*" (Joyce 2015, 300) which uses the translation of "punish" into the Danish

equivalent “*straffe*”. No pun intended in this strategy. The last of three attempts at the first Danish translation by Boisen (1949, 1970 and 1980) has “*Hvordan vil du smæ? Du smække mig?*” (Joyce 1980/1990, vol. 1, 329) which translates into the English *spanking*. Boisen interprets the punishment in a certain way and renders this without modesty. But again, the pun on the linguistic structures between punning and punishment is lost.

An example of the contiguous use of a vertical homophone in *Ulysses* is the expression in the “Wandering Rocks” episode: “Tell him I’m Boylan with impatience” merging the similar (Irish) pronunciations of the character Blazes Boylan’s name with the verb, “boiling”. This is cunningly repeated twice in a completely different context in the subsequent musical “Sirens” episode: “With patience Lenehan waited for Boylan with impatience” and “I’m off, said Boylan with impatience”. These two examples have been stripped from their punning content and turned into jesting nonsense in the second example and a literal meaning in the third example where Boylan has actually entered the bar and is about to leave. This network has been translated thus [back-translations are provided in square brackets]:

1. “Tell him I’m Boylan with impatience” (Joyce 1922/1986, 10.486)

Mogens Boisen:

“*Sig til ham, at jeg er Boylan af utålmodighed*” [Tell him I’m Boylan with impatience] (Joyce 1949, 239)

Strategy: PUN ST = PUN TT

“*Sig til ham, at I am Boylan af utålmodighed*” [Tell him *I am Boylan* with impatience] (Joyce 1980/1990, vol. 1, 275)

Strategy: PUN ST = PUN TT

Karsten Sand Iversen:

“*Sig til ham han får med boylan hvis han ikke*” [Tell him he’s going to get beaten with the hanger if he doesn’t] (Joyce 2015, 250)

Strategy: PUN → NON-PUN

2. “With patience Lenehan waited for Boylan with impatience” (Joyce 1922/1986, 11.289–290)

Mogens Boisen:

“*Med tålmodighed ventede Lenehan på Boylan af utålmodighed*” [With patience Lenehan waited for *Boylan* with impatience] (Joyce 1980/1990, vol. 1, 310 – the same in 1949)

Karsten Sand Iversen:

“*Med tålmodighed ventede Lenehan på Boylan med utålmodighed*” [With patience Lenehan waited for Boylan with impatience] (Joyce 2015, 283)

3. “I’m off, said Boylan with impatience”. (Joyce 1922/1986, 10.426)

Mogens Boisen:

“*Jeg går, sagde Boylan med utålmodighed*” [I’m leaving, said Boylan with impatience] (Joyce 1949, 274)

“*Jeg er gået, sagde Boylan med utålmodighed*” [I’m out of here, said Boylan with impatience] (Joyce 1980/1990, vol. 1, 314)

Karsten Sand Iversen:

“Jeg går, sagde Boylan med utålmodighed” [I’m leaving, said Boylan with impatience]
(Joyce 2015, 287)

As we can see in the first example, Boisen reproduces the difficult source text homophone in its original formulation without actually translating it, hoping that this will lend the sentence an unexpected local aura. Sand Iversen, on the other hand, manages to translate the pun into a Danish expression *“få med bøjlen”* [get beaten with a coat hanger] as the word *“bøjlen”* has almost the same pronunciation as “Boylan”. This is of course clever, but the Danish reader has no idea that the original reads “Boylan” as the context does not help us here, and is thus unable to link the two into a pun. The punning quality is thus lost. In the subsequent two examples where Joyce plays with the literalised expression “with impatience” and “with patience”, the Danish translators have been unable to link them to the pun in the “Wandering Rocks” episode and thus maintain the contiguous nature of much wordplay in the novel.

Elsewhere Bloom amuses himself by making a cascade of horizontal homonymic puns on the words “waiter” and “waits” in the senses of serving at a table in a restaurant and pausing/delaying:

Pat is a waiter who waits while you wait. Hee hee hee hee. He waits while you wait. Hee hee. A waiter is he. Hee hee hee hee. He waits while you wait. While you wait if you wait he will wait while you wait. Hee hee hee hee. Hoh. Wait while you wait.

(Joyce 1922/1986, 11.916–19)

This passage is obviously a challenge to any translator into a language which does not contain any words with the ambiguity carried by “wait” in English. This is the case with Danish where a waiter in a restaurant is called *“tjener”*, and the verb for “waiting” in the sense of serving is *“betjene”* while the verb for “waiting” in the sense of pausing is *“vente”*. Someone who waits – “a waiter” – would be literally called *“en der venter”* [someone who waits] or perhaps playfully *“en venter”* [a waiter]. Thus there are no concurrences between serving and waiting in Danish in any of the cases. Here are the Danish translations:

Mogens Boisen:

“Pat er en tjener som henter mens man venter. Hi hi hi hi. Han henter, mens man venter. Mens man venter, hvis man venter vil han hente, mens man venter. Hi hi hi hi. Ho. Henter mens man venter” (Joyce 1980/1990, vol. 1, 330 – the same in 1949)

Strategy: PUN → RELATED RHETORICAL DEVICE.

Karsten Sand Iversen:

“Pat er en opvarter som varter mens man venter. Hi hi. En varter er han. Hi hi hi hi. Han varter mens man venter. Hi hi hi hi. Hoho. Varter mens man venter” (Joyce 2015, 301)

Strategy: PUN → RELATED RHETORICAL EFFECT

Boisen’s translation is amusing as he compensates for the homonymic punning by playing with the tongue-twisting rhymes in *“venter”* [waits] and *“henter”* [fetches] throughout the passage, which both recaptures the effect and makes good sense as a waiter is someone who fetches things for the customers.

Sand Iversen also struggles with the puns as he changes the word “waiter” into the Danish “opvarter” which is archaic Danish for a waiter and today more or less synonymous with “servant”, etymologically related to the German *Aufwärter*. The derived Danish verb “opvarte” [serve] – related to the German *aufwarten* – has been cut short into “varte” which is archaic Danish for *serve* as the verb “opvarte” can be split into “varte op” meaning *to serve, attend*. As an extra benefit, the word “varte” alliterates with “vente”, and thus the original phonological effect is achieved but at the cost of an exact homonym.

An example of the difficulties of translating the morphological one-word pun – i.e. a blend/portmanteau – is the title “Father Cantekissem” (Joyce 1922/1986, 14.816) blending “catechism” with the Irish pronunciation of “can’t he kiss them”. The Danish translations are the following:

Mogens Boisen:

“fader maaikkekysses” (Joyce 1949, 413) [father maynotbekissed]

Strategy: PUN → NON-PUN OR PUN → RELATED RHETORICAL DEVICE

“fader Seul-i-bed” (Joyce 1980/1990, vol. 2, 31) [father alone in bed]

Strategy: PUN → PUN

Karsten Sand Iversen:

“Fader Katekusmis” (Joyce 2015, 431) [Father Catecukitty]

Strategy: PUN → PUN

Boisen’s 1949 translation strips the word of its transforming blend, spells out one of the meanings and rejects the other meaning. However, by splicing the words “maa ikke kisses” [may not be kissed] he achieves the effect of a blend nevertheless. In his second translation, he couples the French word “seul” [alone, on his own] with the English “bed” which together with the Danish “i” [in] happen to be phonologically almost identical with the Danish word “cølibat” [celibacy]. In this way Boisen maintains the kinship between the Catholic isotopy and the meaning referring to the celibacy rule of priest abstinence. This is a highly successful and teasing multilingual solution which forces the Danish reader to actively construct the pun. There is no collocational priming disruption which gives rise to a surprise effect as there is no underlying, ready logic behind the components of this portmanteau. It is truly artfully crafted and thus takes a toll on the Danish reader’s patience.

Sand Iversen’s suggestion is closer to the original as the Catechismus isotopy has been preserved, now coupled with references to the first part of the Danish word “kusse” [cunt] and “mis” [kitty] which is Danish slang for the vagina equivalent to the English “pussy”. This also works very well in the context, and thus both translators demonstrate that they do not shun the morphological pun but contribute to a creative, revitalised and surprising expansion of language. As Attridge says in a poststructuralist vein:

The portmanteau shatters any illusion that the systems of difference in language are fixed and sharply drawn, and reminds us that signifiers are perpetually dissolving into one another: in the neverending diachronic development of language; in the blurred edges between speech and writing; in errors and misunderstandings, unfortunate and fruitful; in riddles, jokes, games and dreams.

(Attridge 1988, 151)

Conclusion and future directions

The marginally important and irresistibly interesting pun – both the phraseological and the morphological one – defies all kinds of simple equivalence in translation. It may be the lowest form of wit, but it tells us something about lexical priming, about the collocational processes of discourse and about the heart of humour. Wordplay is not just an isolated feature to be put into tables and boxes of stringent typology. Future studies would do well to undertake contrastive lexical-grammatical or psycholinguistic analyses of underlying primed collocational structures in source text wordplay and target text translations in order to reach a deeper understanding of the strategies applied and the factors involved.

Further reading

Delabastita, D. 1994. Focus on the pun: Wordplay as a special problem in translation studies. *Target* 6(2), pp. 223–243.

This is a review article surveying the historical landmarks and crucial debates in the research on the translation of wordplay.

Delabastita, D., ed. 1997. *Transductio: Essays on Punning and Translation*. Manchester: St Jerome Publishing.

A collection of essays on the translation of puns from a wide variety of perspectives, including linguistic, cognitive linguistic, cultural, feminist and post-structuralist, on a number of different genres, such as Bible translation, literature and television comedy.

Heibert, F. 1992. *Das Wortspiel als Stilmittel und seine Übersetzung*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag. This is an extensive, groundbreaking and stringent linguistic study on the translation of wordplay in James Joyce's *Ulysses* combining descriptive approach with evaluative criticism and prescriptive norms.

Vandaele, J. 2010. "Wordplay in Translation". In *Handbook of Translation Studies*. Vol. 2., edited by Y. Gambier and L. van Doorslaer. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Gives a brief overview of main concerns, people and results in the field of translation and wordplay.

Related topics

Stylistics and translation; Tropes and translation.

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