A Semiotic Approach To Translating Jokes

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Key to Phonemic Symbols

/?/	as in	/?alam/	(pain)
/b/	as in	/bajna/	(between)
/ɢ/	as in	/ɢamil/	(beautiful)
/d/	as in	/madrasa/	(school)
/7/	as in	/7i?b/	(wolf)
/8/	as in	/ʕa8m/	(bone)
/ᴅ/	as in	/qa:di:/	(judge)
/t/	as in	tamr/	(dates)
/ᴛ/	as in	matʕam/	(restaurant)
/f/	as in	/gurfa/	(room)
/ɢ/	as in	/ɢani:/	(rich)
/h/	as in	/huna:k/	(there)
/ɴ/	as in	/sani:ɴ/	(true)
/x/	as in	/xila:l/	(during)
/k/	as in	/kasara/	(he broke)
/q/	as in	/qa:la/	(he said)
/l/	as in	/lima:7a:/	(why)
/!/	as in	/a!!a/	(God)
/m/	as in	/mana:m/	(bed)
/n/	as in	/nu:r/	(light)
/r/	as in	/raf/	(shelf)
/s/	as in	/sir/	(secret)

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/Ꮪ/	as in	/maᏚnaʕ/	(factory)
/s/	as in	/sa:hid/	(witness)
/Ɵ/	as in	/Ɵa:ni:/	(second)
/w/	as in	/waraq/	(paper)
/j/	as in	/jad/	(hand)
/z/	as in	/zura:fa/	(giraffe)
/ʕ/	as in	/ʕamil/	(worker)
Standard Arabic Vowels			
/u/	as in	/huwa/	(he)
/a/	as in	naʕam/	(yes)
/i/	as in	/ʔi7a:/	(if)
/a:/	as in	/la:/	(no)
/i:/	as in	/sadi:q/	(friend)
/u:/	as in	/ʕuju:n/	(eyes)
Dialeectal Vowels			
/o:/	as in	/jo:m/	(day)
/e:/	as in	be:t/	(house)
Dialectal consonants			
/Ꮯ/	as in	/Ꮯa:j/	(tea)
/g/	as in	/Ɵigi:l/	(heavy)

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Abstract

This paper sets out to discuss some issues in the semiotic translation of jokes. It aims to find an effective semiotic approach to translate English jokes into Arabic. It is found here that in order to achieve a semiotic equivalence in the TL and hence to convey as much of the humorous effect of the SL joke as possible, translators may resort to maintain, modify or even omit whole signs within a joke text.

Introduction

Sign is said to be a more comprehensive term than a word in that the former includes the latter. A word in itself is a verbal kind of signs taking its semantic value from the culture to which it belongs. A sound, for instance, does not mean anything per se, because meaning is constituted via the semantic values associated with a certain word. The word ﻻ - la:; for example, indicates prohibition in Arabic, but it does not signify anything in English. In French, however, it stands for the definite article used for the feminine singular noun. This being so, the meaning of a word is inherently associated with the potential value it derives from a certain language or culture.

Although signs are commonly associated with a specific culture, they are not restricted to it. Some signs are related to nature

or instinct; they are quite independent of the culture. When birds, for instance, migrate in winter for the sake of warmth, they respond to natural signs in weather. Still there are signs which are neither pure natural nor pure cultural in that they fluctuate between the two extremes. This is manifested in the reddening of the face 'blushing', which may signify shamefulness-although the process by which blood goes up to the face is a natural physiological phenomenon when a person is embarrased, the relationship of this phenomenen with bashfulness can only be accounted for by having recourse to culture.

In this paper an attempt is made to find an effective semiotic approach to translate some English jokes into Arabic.

Some Approaches to the Definition of the term 'sign'

Semiotics comes from the Greek word meaning 'to signify' and, having originated in Greek medicine for diagnosis by means of bodily symptom, it was used by the Stoic philosophers to include both logic and epistemology.

The terms 'semiology' and 'semiotics' are both used to refer to a science of signs. The difference between the two terms rests on the fact that the former is preferred by Europeans out of deference to Saussure's coinage of the term, while the latter tends to be preferred by English speakers out of deference to the American Pierce (Hawkes, 1977: 124).

The meaning of linguistic expressions is generally described in terms of signification, that is, words and other expressions are considered to be signs which, in a sense, stand for other things (Lyons, 1977: 95).

There is no consistency in the way in which various authors have defined the terms signs, symbols, signals, and symptoms. Some of them drew a distinction between signs and symbols; others between signals and symbols, or between symbols and symptoms. In what follows we shall review some approaches and definitions of the term SIGN.

De Saussure

In the course in General Linguistics, Saussure assumed that linguistics would be thought of as a model semiotic system and that its basic notions would be applied to other spheres of social and cultural life. He defines the linguistic sign as something "which unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and an acoustic image... a psychic entity with two sides" (Saussure quoted in Dinneen, 1967: 201). The following diagram illustrates this definition:

The linguistic sign =
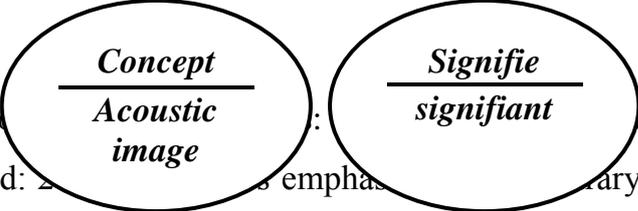
The sign has two ...

signifiant is linear (ibid: 2... ... emphas... ...ary

nature of the sign has diverted attention from the important role of

motivated signs in real communication, which can be either linguistic (e.g. onomatopoeia) or non-linguistic (e.g. a style of dancing) (Hatim and Mason, 1990: 108). Another shortcoming of this approach is that it puts undue restrictions on the concept of the sign and related concepts. Imposing a linguistic model on phenomena that are qualitatively different from language is an inherently risky undertaking (ibid: 107).

Pierce

Unlike Saussure, Charles Pierce's approach (1931) advocates that we begin with non-linguistic signs, then identify the status of language in them. Pierce defines 'sign' as "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (Hawkes, 1977: 126). He identified up to ten classes of signs, with further subclassifications. These were based on interesting criteria: One of the dimensions of his classification yields a distinction of three kinds of signs: symbols, icons and indices.

1. *Symbol:* Pierce's definition of symbol hinges on the conventionality or arbitrariness of the relationship between the sign and its signification (Lyons, 1977: 100).

2. *Icon:* Pierce uses icon to refer to non-arbitrary signs. He distinguishes icons from symbols as follows: "an icon is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence such as a lead-pencil

streak as representing a geometrical line; a symbol is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant (ibid). Iconicity is thought to be dependent upon some natural resemblance, geometrical or functional, between the sign and its object. Thus a diagram or a painting has an iconic relationship to its subject in so far as it resembles it (Hawkes, 1977: 128).

3. *Index*: Pierce defines this term as "a sign which would, at once lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant" (Pierce 1940 quoted in Lyons, 1977: 100). The pointing finger is a signifier whose relationship to its signified is indexical in mode. A knock on the door is an index of someone's presence. Smoke is an index of fire.

Barthes

Barthes is considered to be one of Saussure's most powerful interpreters in the matter of semiotics. He states in an essay titled 'Myth Today' that any semiotic analysis must postulate a relationship between the two terms: "signifier" and "signified" (Hawkes, 1977: 130). According to him, the sign is not an entity, but a correlation. That is, the sign, as the "associative" total of signifier and signified, is potentially greater than merely the sum of its parts (ibid: 131). A sign can thus comprise an expression (the bunch of roses), and a signified

(a kind of flower); in such a case, the associative total may in some contexts be taken as the sign "passion" (ibid). It is in this way that cultural beliefs are sustained . Indeed, whole myths can develop as a result. They may be said to span centuries and cross generations, thus helping to define the value systems of entire cultures.

Ogden and Richards (1923) speak of symbols as "those signs which men use to communicate with one another" (quoted in Lyons, 1977: 95). According to them, signification is commonly described as a triadic relation, which may be further analysed into three dyadic relations (ibid). This relationship can be represented by means of a diagram in the form of a triangle:

Concept

lexeme   *referent (thing)*
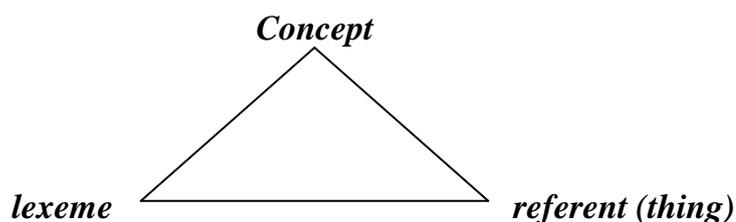
The relationship between lexeme and referent is indirect as represented by the broken line. It is via the concept that lexeme and referent are related.

Robins (1971: 21) states that signs in general are said to be events or things that in some way direct attention to, or are indicative of, other events or things.In his view, signs may be related naturally or causally, as when shivering is taken as a sign of fever; or they may be related conventionally and so used, and they are then called

symbols as, for instance, the conventional signs for churches, railways, etc on maps, roadsigns, and the colours of traffic lights (ibid).

Roman Jakobson suggests an approach to the sign-systems which begins by considering some general principles: "every message is made of signs; correspondingly, the science of signs termed semiotics deals with those general principles which underlies the structure of all signs whatever, and with the character of their utilization within messages, as well as with the specifics of the various sign systems, and of the diverse messages using those different kinds of signs" (quoted in Hawkes, 1977: 125-26).

Halliday (1985: 4) modifies the definition of semiotics as 'the general study of signs' considering it as 'the study of signs systems-in other words, as the study of meaning in its most general sense.' In this study, we shall advocate Halliday's definition of semiotics regarding the various forms of reference as signs in that, through them, we exchange meanings within a culture.

In this paper, we shall be concerned with semiotics as an effective means of translating jokes. A linguistic sign will be taken to stand for a word, a phrase, a sentence, or a whole text. In this connection, speaking of translation and its relation to signs, Haas (1968: 87) states "Translation is supposed to be possible on account

of a twofold relation of an entity, called 'meaning'; two expressions are viewed as 'vehicles' of the same meaning'.

Thus:

$$
\begin{array}{ccc}
& Sign1 & \\
& \uparrow & \\
Expression1 \longrightarrow & Meaning & \longleftarrow Expression2 \\
& \downarrow & \\
& Sign2 &
\end{array}
$$
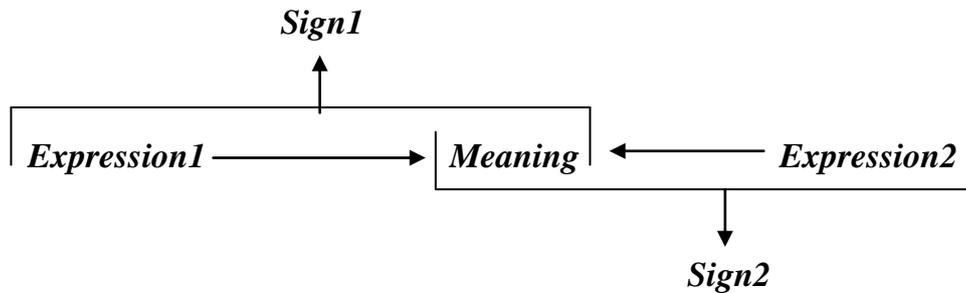
Here Haas presents a theory of meaning interpreting 'sign' as constituted by a relation of two distinct entities: an expression and a meaning (ibid).

The Data

The data chosen for this study are published jokes which are assumed to be representative of those in circulation in the population. So they are divorced from their social setting. and therefore provide no evidence regarding the characteristics of the tellers of jokes or the social circumstances under which they are told. Put differently, the jokes selected for analysis are self-contained texts (Attardo and Chabanne, 1992: 2). This circumstance facilitates their use as examples, since there is no need to provide contextual information, as in the case of a passage from a novel (ibid).

The data consist of six jokes taken from a miscellaneous collection of articles. The jokes are as follows:

➢ Did you hear about the little moron who stayed up all night studying for his blood test?

➢ Did you hear about the Irish centre-forward who missed a penalty but scored on the action replay?

➢ Did you hear about the Polish guy who locked his keys inside the car with his family? He had to use a coat hanger to get them out.

➢ Patient: Doctor, doctor, I keep thinking I am a dustbin.

Doctor: Don't talk rubbish.

➢ Why did the teacher have to wear sun-glasses?

Because his pupils were so bright.

➢ How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb?

Five. One to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table he's standing on.

Method of translation

As studies on the translation of jokes, to our knowledge, have not widely been investigated, we shall try to present a few ideas on their possible translation depending on a semiotic approach. First of all, the six jokes selected for the purpose of translation will be classified into two categories, namely cultural jokes and linguistic jokes. Then the suggested Arabic versions will be offered. Significantly, we shall try in our translations to achieve as much of the humorous effect of the SL jokes as possible through

accomplishing semiotic equivalence. Translators may arrive at semiotic equivalence by retaining, modifying or even omitting whole sequences within a text . Before we start, it is safe to quote the following statement from Raphaelson-West (1989: 140): "It is possible to translate humour if you keep in mind that the translation will not always be as humorous as the original".

Cultural Jokes

Lotman et al. (1975: 57) define culture as 'the functional correlation of different sign systems' (cited in Hatim and Mason, 1990: 105). These different sign systems work both within and between cultures, and semiotics deals with the processing and exchange of information both within and across cultural boundaries (ibid.). Translating can now be conceived of as the process which transfers one semiotic entity into another.

Cultural jokes are ones that are related to a specific nation. Many jokes may be the same semantically, but as far as pragmatics and culture are concerned, there is something missing that renders the joke untranslatable (Raphaelson-West, 1989: 130).

Ethnic jokes are considered to be among the universally acknowledged cultural jokes. Davies (1982:383) points out that the universal popularity of ethnic jokes and particularly those aimed at underdevloped ethnic minorities is to be demonstrated in terms of the general characteristics of industrial societies rather than the particular

circumstances of each separate society. They serve to show the social, geographical and moral boundaries of a nation or ethnic group (ibid). The most popular ethnic jokes in western industrial societies are those directed against groups supposed to be naïve and those groups supposed to be canny (ibid. 384). Almost every country has an ethnic minority on whom jokes are told. We believe that since ethnic jokes can be observed in almost every country making fun of minor groups, they can be adapted to any two nationalities favoured by the translator in order to narrow the gap cross-culturally in the process of translating.

The need for footnotes and explanations increases when a culture specific piece of work is being translated. But in the case of translating jokes translators would rather avoid using footnotes or explanations as much as possible for the simple reason that using such devices means killing the joke or sacrificing the dramatic effect of the joke, though they are useful for cross-cultural purposes.

The cultural jokes to be translated are as follows:

1. Did you hear about the Irish centre-forward who missed a penalty but scored on the action replay?

2. Did you hear about the Polish guy who locked his keys inside the car with his family? He had to use a coat hanger to get them out,

3. How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb? Five-one to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table he's standing on.

In order to perceive the communicative thrust of such jokes, we need to appreciate the semiotic dimension which regulates the interaction of the various discoursal elements as 'signs'. The interaction takes place, on the one hand, between various signs within the joke text and, on the other, between the producer of these signs and the intended receiver. Each joke begins with a signal that provides the reader/listener with a warning of an approaching joke. Such a signal is taken to be a sign which should be rendered into an equivalent sign in Arabic jokes. Arabic jokes take various froms of signals all of which fortell the joke's imminent appearnce. For instance, some signals come in the form of an anonymous character, e.g. wa: nid, fad wa: nid? anaduhum-one (of them) or in the form of interrogative words such as 'lima7a:-why', 'mun7u mata:-since when.... etc., or in the form of the existential opening as in: 'ka:na huna:ka/huna:lika-was/were there'. So the first sign is identified as the signals of the jokes as shown below:

Did you hear about....

How many....

⟶ Signs
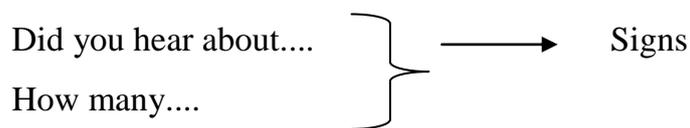
The second sign in the structure of such jokes is the orientation of the joke which is to be taken as the subject matter of a joke. So the

first joke is about an Irish centre-forward and the second and the third jokes are about Poles.

> The Irish centre-forward
>
> The Polish guy ⎯⎯⎯→ Signs
>
> Poles
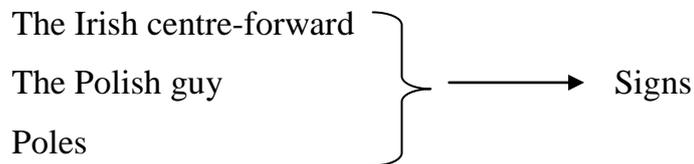
Certain stereotypes such as the traditioal figures of the mother-in-law, the miser, the peasant... etc. have been utilized as objects of ridicule in Arabic jokes. Also employed in Arabic jokes as objects for derision are the ethnic minorities. The most stereotypical character in the history of Arabic humour is Guna dating back to centuries who is distinguished by a set of stereotypes such as his donkey.Considered in this light, the orientation of the English jokes should be translated by equivalent signs taken from ethnic minorities.

The third sign in the structure of the English jokes is context of the joke. Here the context is considerded from a narrower sense to mean the element in which the joke operates. It provides the background which is necessary for the punchline to take effect. Nash (1985:35) distinguishes between two kinds of context, viz defined context and implied context. Jokes define a context in case of being exhaustively formulated, and do not define it in case of leaving something to conjecture. Following are the contexts of the   English jokes:

Who missed a penalty...

61
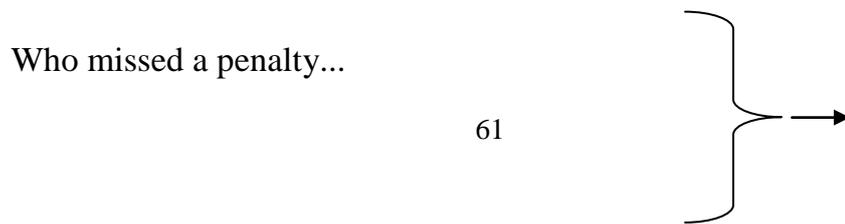
Who locked his keys inside the car with his family   Signs
does it take to screw in a light bulb

It is to be noted that each context may contain one sign or more which should be taken care of in the process of translating.

The fourth sign in the structure of the jokes is the punchline. It contains the most fundamental element in the joke text, viz., the incongruity. So it is regarded as an incongruous element in the joke. Indeed, it is the presence of the punchline which differentiates a joke from a funny story. Below are the punchlines of the   English jokes:

> But scored on the action replay.
>
> He had to use a coat hanger to get them out.
>
> Five. One to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table he's standing on.

The punchline as a sign also comprises one sign or more whose function is to discharge the joke.

Now that we have identified the main signs in the structure of the jokes, we shall try to offer the suggested Arabic versions for them.

Joke No.1: fad waːnid Dajjaʔ hadaf min Darbat Gazaːʔ bas saGGala

> laman ʔinʕaːdatil laqʈa.

Joke No.2: wa:nid qifal sajja:rta ?ibmafa:tinha: ʕala:ʕa:?ilta ra:n
Ga:b wa:jar nattaj talliʕhum.

Clearly, we have the equivalent Arabic signs for the English signs. 'The Irish centre-forward' and 'the Polish guy' have been overlooked in the process of translation since they are related to the English culture. Also, we have presented the jokes in colloquial Arabic as most Arabic jokes of this kind are told in dialectal forms. An attempt has also been made to render the English jokes in a way that is characterized by brevity, a feature that distinguishes Arabic jokes of this kind, viz., short jokes from other types of jokes. In translating joke No.2 we have tried to do away with 'coat hanger' on a semiotic basis by finding a familiar word in Arabic that is uesd in such situations, viz., the word 'wa:jar' since people in our society do not use 'coat hanger' to open a car in case of there being keys locked inside it. Rather, they use something like 'wa:jar' or 'silk' to get their cars opened.

Joke No.3.

Si:n kam Saʕi:dijjan janta: Gul miSda:nul kahruba:?ijju lijatarakkab.

Gi:m xamsu Saʕa:jdatin?anaduhum jumsikul miSba:h.

Wal ?arbaʕatul ba:qu:na jaqu:mu:na bitadwi:ril minDadati tantahu.

This translation may appear humorous because we have changed the sign of the SL joke, viz., 'the Poles' into an equivalent

sign in Arabic jokes, viz., ʿsaʕa:jda, which may be taken as an equivalent orientation in the TL joke since they are employed as objects of fun in some Arabic jokes, especially Egyptian jokes. In this rendering, one may dispense with the dialectal form since standard Arabic, we believe, can achieve, to an extent, the humorous effect of the SL joke. Finally, we have introduced two symbols in the translation namely, si:n and Gi:m to make the translated version sound more like Arabic jokes.

Significantly, all the three jokes translated are based on a contradiction of situations.

Linguistic Jokes

Linguistic jokes may be based on ambiguity and semantic deviation. In such jokes, words and sentences can be interpreted in more than one way. We believe that such jokes can be found in abundance in many, if not all, languages because language, by definition, is a rule-based and jokes rely on a violation of rules at different levels: Phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Since such jokes are language based, we expect them to be more difficult to translate than cultural jokes.

The linguistic jokes to be translated are presented below:

1. Did you hear about the little moron who stayed up all night studying for his blood test?

2. Why did the teacher have to wear sun-glasses?

3. Patient: Doctor, doctor, I keep thinking I am a dustbin   Doctor: Don't talk rubbish.

All the points raised in translating the cultural jokes can be made use of here, too. That is to say, we should look for signs in the TL jokes which are equivalent to the SL signs in order to achieve semiotic equivalence.

The version offered for the first English joke may run as follows:

wa:nid sihar tu:lil le:l ?uhuwa jiqra: lixtiba:ril laja:qa:.

The rendering is not expected to convey the humorous effect of the joke completely, or better said, the spirit of the joke. However, we have tried to change the reality to which the SL joke refers so that a possible equivalent TL pun can be achieved to convey as much of the SL humour as possible. In Arabic we normally speak of '?ixtiba:ril laja:qa' and not of '?ixtiba:riddam'. Moreover, if we keep the 'fanS' as the equivalent of 'test' we will lose the wordplay that is intended.

It is useful here to explain what is meant by pun. Pun, which is one of the devices on which many linguistic jokes draw in creating the incongruities, means single word or expression (Lederer, 1981:32). Punning takes us by surprise because it violates the law of nature which claims that no two things can fill the same space simultaneously (ibid.).

Joke No.2 may be rendered as follows:

65

Si:n lima:ʔa:ka:na ʕala:l muʕallimi ʔan jartadija na 8 8a:ratin
ꜱamssija.

Gi:m liʔanna ʈulla:bahu ka:nu: la:miʕi:na Gidda:

It clearly appears that the Arabic word 'la:miʕu:n' can be a possible equivalent sign to the English wordplay 'bright' in so far as both of them carry the sense of shininess and smartness. We have introduuced two symbols, namely si:n and Gi:m to make the joke sound more like Arabic jokes. In other words, adding such signs is part of preserving the form in which such Arabic jokes come.

Joke No.3, on the other hand, may be translated as:

ʔalmari:D jura: widuni: ꜱꜱuʕu:ru da:ʔiman biʔanni: sallat ziba:la

ʔadduktu:r la:tzabbil.

This version seems to have conveyed, to a certain extent, the humour of the joke by introducing into discourse the dialectal sentence 'la:tzabbil', which can be thought to be the equivalent sign to the English punning phrase 'talk rubbish'. Both 'don't talk rubbish' and 'la:tzabbil' can be interpreted, in association with 'dustbin' and 'sallat ziba:la' respectively, as meaning either 'produce foolish words' or 'throw away waste material'. So, the incongruity of the joke thrives on the double interpretation of 'la:tzabbil' in association with 'sallat ziba:la', which may give rise to the humour of the joke.

Concluding Remarks

Exploring the signs of a joke in order to derive insights into their functioning seems to be a promising project towards achieving an effective translation of it. Translators may accomplish semiotic equivalence by retaining, changing or even omitting whole sequences within a text. The main points arrived at in this paper can be summarized as:

1. The most difficult jokes to translate are those which are based on language. In case of coming across an untranslatable joke, translators may change the signs referred to in the SL joke. If the translated joke does not do well in the TL, translators may have recourse to the process of replacement, viz replacing an untranslatable joke text as a sign in the SL by another similar in topic or theme in the TL.

2. Cultutal jokes are less difficult to translate than linguistic jokes. In such jokes, translators may keep the cultural context, to locate the humorous aspect or aspects of the text, and to attempt at explaining or duplicating those aspects. If the targets or the butts used are funny in one language but not in the TL a translator may invent a new target-culture baued joke instead of translating the original.

3. Conventional expressions are better translated by the equivalent signs in the Tl, that is, the translator may substitute

them for their counterparts in the TL and not look at the meanings of the constituents.

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ملخص

طريقة رمزية لترجمة الطرائف

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يناقش هذا البحث بعض القضايا في الترجمة الرمزية للطرائف. يهدف البحث إلى إيجاد طريقة رمزية فعالة لترجمة الطرائف الإنكليزية إلى اللغة العربية. توصل البحث إلى ان المترجم ولكي يحقق مكافئ رمزي في اللغة المترجم إليها لنقل ما يمكن نقله من التأثير الفكاهي للغة الأصل، فانه قد يلجأ إلى إبقاء أو تعديل أو حتى حذف إشارات كاملة من نص الطرفة. ان الإشارة مصطلح اشمل من الكلمة لان الإشارة تتضمن الكلمة كما ان الكلمة في حد ذاتها نوع من الإشارة اللفظية تأخذ قيمتها من الثقافة التي تنتمي إليها. فكلمة "لا" في اللغة العربية، مثلاً، تدل على المنع لكنها لا تدل على شيء في اللغة الإنكليزية. بعض الإشارات لا تقتصر على الثقافة فحسب بل ترتبط بالطبيعة أو الغرائز مثل استجابة الطيور للإشارات الطبيعية خلال هجرتها.

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