

Additional Aspects and Concerns in Humor Translations When Dealing with Translating Humor from English to Korean

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Abstract

The motivation for this research is the need for more and better defining parameters above and beyond the original sets of inherent and understood issues of translating that occur when dealing with translations of English to Korean or Korean to English and more specifically when that translation includes humor. The special problem that arises in dealing with these types of translations are the need to include additional variables to take into consideration the cultural differences that affect and at times may even determine what is or is not humor.

It is not enough to only consider the cultural differences based on language barriers alone if humor is in fact to be conveyed. Yes, it is important to consider the aspects of familiar expressions, popular and fad language and even pop culture references, but at its very base, especially when working with translations of English to Korean and by doing so working from a democratic philosophy to communicate to one steeped in Confucian thought, consider the very things that make these cultures differ.

We have taken a look at several different instances where these differences can occur and impede or entirely block successful translations. By adding the further variables to take into consideration the age of the speakers or listeners and audience, the relationships of the same and also aspects of their social status, the possibilities are greatly increased of successfully translating humor and humor elements.

Age considerations are approached from many different aspects of the communication model. That is, there are differences to take into account whether the speaker is older than the audience, the same age, or younger.

Relationship considerations are also viewed from several different aspects that encompass familiarity to blood relations.

Social status considerations are more varied as they also contain the cultural differences found in the separate cultures. This includes the different way levels in social status are seen by occupation as well. For example a teacher in Korea would be considered of the highest social standing while in America though respected by some the position is not universally seen as such and seen by some as one of servitude or settling. Opposing views can also be seen in instances of self-ownership of a business or entrepreneurship, which is admired in the west and seen as unstable and undesirable in the East.

We applied these additional values to humor found in television programs and provide examples that encompass a full range of types of humor and varying participants. In particular the long-running and popular animated American television series “The Simpsons” provides the basis for many of the comparisons and examples.

We found that although it is difficult to finitely quantify the results or the increases in successful translation, as it is just as difficult to judge humor and the acceptance factor across even a homogenous or monoglot based group, these factors cannot be ignored when dealing with translations of humor from English to Korean or from Korean to English and do raise the probabilities of success substantially.

Introduction

There is a common saying that goes something like ‘if you have to explain and say that something is a joke, then the joke has failed.’

Humor translations have often simply had no choice but to fall back on this device due to the added complexities of translating humor whether it is based on word play, puns, or situational humor. There are other areas of humor though that can be greatly aided by some simple additions of considerations and understandings prior to the translations. We will attempt to deal with those here and offer up three important aspects that play a large role in the success, or failure, or any given translation of humor.

In the disciplines of research and theoretical studies of literature there are a wide variety of approaches and constructs at play in analyzing and understanding. These ranges are found anywhere from areas of linguistics for word choices to sociology to historical references and inferences (Chiaro, 1992). All of which may at one time or another come into play within a single work

whether it be a full-length novel or a simpler sonnet. Few would argue that point or the necessity of applications of interdisciplinary studies to thoroughly understand a given work.

Although translation studies is now accepted as an interdisciplinary field of research taking points from sociology, linguistics, psychology, among other areas for approaches of constructs and theoretical models, there are a multitude of factors at play in translation of humor as well which is enough to support translation of humor as an interdisciplinary study as well (Toury, 1995). As of yet, no acceptable models for application in humor translation have been developed that hold up to multiple instances of success in being carried out.

All of these things become even more complicated when translating either from English to Korean or Korean to English as well as when translating texts in Japanese to English or English to Japanese. Here we will focus more on translations dealing with English as the source language and Korean as the target language.

Another difficulty for the translator arises from the often ambiguous nature of texts which leads to uncertainty as to whether something is indeed humor, meant as humor, or accidentally humorous based on the position of the reader. For scholars dealing with translation there is plenty of room for leaving some grey areas and most scholarly models for translating provide for that ambiguity. However, in the case of humor translation the lines are more finely drawn as to what is required to be conveyed in the text (Gutt, 1991).

Generally Accepted Considerations

Taking a look at the issues and barriers to translation in general shows us just how many different variables may come into play in both the proper language translation and the conveyance of authors' meanings. Aspects affecting understanding come into play such as the language in use at the time of the writing, cultural references, and even changes in accepted common knowledge. In fact, there are so many different variables that a definitive list has yet to be compiled though attempts have been made. When considering this issue from the standpoint of humor, and does the real or intended meaning carry over from the original language to the target language, take for example the following list:

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

- b. the language(s)/culture(s) one is translating into
- c. the purpose(s) and justification(s) for the existence of the translated version
- d. the nature of the text, including parameters such as textuality, genre, style and discourse
- e. the intended recipient(s), what they are assumed to be like
- f. the client(s) or translation initiator(s), their needs and demands
- g. the expectation(s) for the translated text and prejudice towards translations and translators
- h. the translator(s): human (individuals or teams), fully automatic, or computer assisted
- i. the conditions in which the task is carried out (deadline, materials, motivation, etc.)
- j. the medium, mode and means of communication: oral, written, audiovisual, private, mass media, etc. (Zabalbeascoa, 1996)

While all of these factors and more may come into play in the translation of any of a number of different works or types, the issues are compounded when dealing with humor.

Another difficulty for the translator arises from the often ambiguous nature of texts which leads to uncertainty as to whether something is indeed humor, meant as humor, or accidentally humorous based on the position or perspective of the reader. For scholars dealing with translation there is plenty of room for leaving some grey areas and most scholarly models for translating provide for that ambiguity. However, in the case of humor translation the lines are more finely drawn as to what is required to be conveyed in the text.

This does not mean successful translation of humor is impossible. It does mean however that more instances of situation and context need to be taken into consideration to improve translations and the transference of humor.

In dealing with translations of all types and languages both source and target language factors need to be considered. When dealing with languages of similar cultures, for example those where grammar, word order, and other syntactical elements are also similar, fewer issues occur, but when cultures have little similarities more problems arise.

Although with all of the factors listed before that need to be considered when translating any texts, much less those containing humor, there are additional check points when dealing with languages

from Eastern Asian countries, especially those steeped in Confucianism. Certain social aspects become more important and when dealing in particular with translations from Korean to English or English to Korean or other Eastern Asian languages to western languages especially English.

In fact, we believe that by focusing on three key areas as the basis, translation of humor can be accomplished more successfully. Three of the basic requirements we believe often to be neglected though essential to understanding and to be taken into consideration prior to conveyance of a translation of humor includes age, relationship, and social status.

Age considerations

Let's take a look at the first of these; age.

Age is a factor in translation in a number of ways for example relative to the speakers or the audience, but for the purpose of this discussion we would like to consider age from some different perspectives.

First, age is a determining factor in setting levels of speech in some languages, especially Korean.

A younger person is required to speak in terms of respect when speaking to anyone older than them even if that age difference is only a few days. That rule is more closely and firmly held to the larger the age difference. There are other factors that come into play in the age difference/reverence system of speaking that is prevalent in Korea, but for now let us confine our discussion to this area.

If someone were to refer to a person they met as 'grandpa' or the more respectful term of 'grandfather' this might be seen as humor in English. But when this is translated into Korean there would be no humor found as it is even common to address total strangers with these terms as a sign of respect.

The same would be true in reverse. Especially in American English it is quite common to jokingly call an elderly person by a term designated for a younger person. Sometimes this is seen as humor or as a sign of flattery. For instance, if the handsome young salesman refers to an obviously older woman as 'young lady' this might be seen as humor. The humor of this does not translate however when Koreans would simply see this as a mistake or worse, an instance of just pure rudeness.

An American comedy such as "The Simpsons" television program is very difficult for Koreans to understand no matter how well it is translated since the situations themselves between the boss and

Homer, between Bart and his father, Homer, or even between Bart, the oldest son, and his younger sister Lisa are not seen as humor but more as acts of disrespect.

Because in most Eastern Asian societies the idea of first regarding age as a separator of distinction in the manner to be chosen for communication is the most highly held rule, when a younger person, especially a much younger person, speaks with a casual attitude, language or word choice, or especially in a directly disrespectful manner it is not only not seen as humor it is sometimes incomprehensible.

In real time, real life communications, using formal language to speak to someone younger than you most often results in blank stares. This is true when the case does not involve humor, but the degree of difficulty for understanding has been exponentially increased when humor is an added or the desired intent. This problem is only made more complex when dealing with texts.

In societies where social mores are still heavily if not predominantly influenced by the ideals of Confucianism these instances of humor are going to be very difficult to successfully translate. In an instance such as the one mentioned that involves a television series where the audience has time to come to know the characters, settings, and typical methods of interaction, it is possible for the audience to eventually ‘get the humor’, but in literary contexts this is more problematic as there is less time to come to know the characters or to see them interact.

In the cases where Bart, the son, speaks very casually to or about his father’s boss, the greatest gap in ages can be seen and the intent of humor whether successful or not is clearly understood by most western audiences but is seldom completely grasped by Eastern Asian audiences such as the Korean audience which is our focus here. Bart derides Mr. Burns, Homer’s boss, for the simple fact of being old. This is not seen as humor to Korean audiences.

Relationship considerations

This leads us to another of the problems that is perhaps more prevalent in translations from English to Korean than in many other translation situations which is taking into consideration the relationship of the speakers.

In the Simpsons example, a school age boy speaking disrespectfully to or about an older business man is enough of a disparity in age to be problematic, but there are also the boundaries of relationships to consider.

When Lisa, Bart's younger sister, who the show clearly establishes as having greater intellect and academic abilities than her older brother, speaks to Bart, she often treats him as an equal or even speaks down to him. This is accepted in western society as siblings may have an established pecking order within the family structure but that order differs from family to family and even from generation to generation whereas in Korean society the younger sister would and could speak her mind but would need to do so in honorific and respectful terms.

The speech practices of Homer, the father, and Bart, the son, are also difficult here since though Bart is the eldest son and therefore socially endowed with the rights to be treated with greater respect among the family members, Bart often speaks to his father as though the father were a younger brother, or even worse, as a person without family ties who was younger. The very act of speaking in this manner might be seen as humorous to some in both Eastern and Western societies, but the greater part of Western society sees the humor more in what is said than in the manner in which it is said while it serves more as an instance of shock value language to Eastern society.

This holds true as well in the relationships of Homer to his boss, Bart to his father's boss, Bart to his mother or father, and Lisa to Bart her older brother. For Lisa this is also complicated and compounded due to the fact that Bart is not only her elder brother but also the eldest son in a patriarchal and Confucian society. No one in her position would ever speak in this manner, so it is for the most part incomprehensible in translation.

In western society context or environment might also play a role here. That is, if the conversations were to take place in private or within the residence, many of the understood and most strictly adhered to social mores might be overlooked. Yet, in Korean society where something happens is less likely to change the acceptability of any given form of communication. These restrictions might be relaxed in a private environment, especially one where consumption of alcohol was taking place, but even though a person in the upper relationship position might say directly to someone under them that it was unnecessary to stand on ceremony, the younger would most likely adhere to it out of habit, a sense of not being comfortable otherwise, or even fear of later retaliation when the situation might have changed.

In older television and movie instances of western production these situations can be seen as well, but the loosening of those rules of standards in regards to age, relationships, and social positions has rapidly increased. Even two decades ago people held specific places in a communication model and the level of respect was one that was held to. Or in some instances a much younger person was seen as precocious or cute when stepping outside those boundaries. Today however, sometimes situations

that depict the clinging to those ways of communication are now seen as the actual humor. This is particularly troublesome to the translator and requires a deeper understanding of the culture in order to translate the texts more effectively.

Relationships and their understanding also comes into play in cases not involving familial situations, but also in their establishment in terms of past history and their length (Kussmaul, 1998). That is, if the two people have known one another for a great period of time or have experienced much in life together this might have an effect on whether they hold to the socially accepted standards when communicating, to what extent and in what context or location.

Social status considerations

This brings us to another key and deciding factor which is that of social position. The age of a person is almost always a factor of varying impact on communication in virtually all social systems and situations, but the social position also comes into play in a more widely varied way (Grimm, 1997).

This may seem to need little explanation or argument, but there are many cases where the social status of one or both of the individuals plays a key role in the communication between or about them, and these situations and cases vary from country to country. One might expect that the boss or owner of a company might always be deferred to in most conversations in which they are participants in most cultures, but when that party is not present the level of discourse is often governed by different rules. That is, talking about the boss with a friend of the same age might be a very different conversation where the boss is referred to by using terms of less respect either intended or not. In Korean society this is most often not the case.

When a person holds a position in society, that person is always in that position. Humor about them reflects that as well. In American English for example the very fact of referring to one's boss as 'sir' when talking to him and then saying 'that guy' when talking about him is not only common but might also be a source for humor depending on the time lapse between the two references. While in Korean this kind of situational humor might be conveyed by switching from a term that translates as 'sir' to 'human' or to just 'person', in regular conversation it seldom occurs.

Another complication occurs because while in most societies social status and position play an important role in methods and levels of communication, those statuses and positions themselves are not universally set in the same rank.

In the west, a doctor would most often be held in the greatest regard as would a lawyer or police officer. Their social positions are established and humor comes from that understanding. Across western society these positions are held in high esteem and therefore shown deference in communications. This deference often is maintained when directly communicating with them or even when communication only involves them (Nord, 1997). Their positions inform the humor. The establishment of the rank of their position is not necessary as it is understood. Although a lawyer might be talked about in lower terms, there is also a high likelihood of humor being directed at them as victim or villain because of a shared understanding of who they think themselves to be as opposed to what or how they are seen by society as a whole. These positions are held with a much lower sense of regard and esteem in Korea.

In the west, a teacher or university professor might be seen as ambiguous as to their social status. These social positions are seen as being generally underpaid or underappreciated. They are sometimes seen as ones people take in order to avoid living in what the rest of western society sees as the real world, the world outside of a school. The positions also require higher education which is itself sometimes the focus of humor in English while held in very high regard in Korea. The positions in Korea are of the highest regard in society and held above even those mentioned before of being a doctor or lawyer.

This is true of other positions as well. To be the owner of your own business, to be the one who set out to create a new business, or to leave an established business to begin either a new career or to join a less successful one in western culture is often seen as being something that is respectable, to be admired. This is often true regardless of the outcome. The simple act is one that deserves respect.

In Korean society this would be seen as the source for humor and an invitation for derision rather than a call for respect even if the move was a successful one. To belong, to be a part of something established is the greater goal. To strike out on one's own would be seen as foolish or worse a sign of selfishness or even failure. This is viewed as humor or a basis for it.

Social position is also based on sex as well. In the west it could be seen as a step down to be an airline employee of any sort much less an actual flight steward and even more so if that person were male. Yet in Korea, for females to be a flight attendant for any airline, but especially for Korean Air, the major airline, is seen as the ultimate in success while it is so often the actual focus of humor in the west.

Conclusion

As you can see there are a wide range of variables which need to be considered when dealing with translations of any kind but even more so when dealing with or attempting to translate humor. This work is more difficult when there are aspects other than grammar and word order at play as well. When dealing with cultural differences that include such differing views of age, relationships, and social position, the current list of considerations may appear only to have been made longer. And while the task may seem daunting, it is possible when a better understanding and consideration is given to the additional areas including age, relationship and social position.

When a better understanding of these elements of age, relationships, and social positions in the source language and the target language exists, it is more likely that successful translation can occur. While the formulation of a precise and consistent model is still outside of our grasp, adding these elements to the current models will greatly increase the quality of translations and allow humor to be conveyed much more readily.

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