



A CASE STUDY OF SUBTITLING IN “FRIENDS” AND “THE BIG BANG THEORY” IN HUMOR TRANSLATION

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Abstract: *This article examines the challenges of translating humor in cinema subtitling, focusing on the TV series “Friends” and “The Big Bang Theory.” The study analyzes transformations used to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers, technical constraints of subtitling, and the specifics of foreign verbal jokes. Specifically, strategies for preserving puns, irony, and cultural realia in subtitles are studied through a comparative approach.*

Keywords: *subtitling, humor translation, cinema subtitles, “Friends”, “The Big Bang Theory”, cultural adaptation, pun, audiovisual translation, linguistic transformation, pragmatics.*

Annotatsiya: *Ushbu maqolada kinosubtitrlashda yumorni tarjima qilish muammolari “Do’sklar” (Friends) va “Katta portlash nazariyasi” (The Big Bang Theory) serialari misolida tadqiq etiladi. Tadqiqot davomida lingvistik va madaniy to’siqlarni yengib o’tishda qo’llanilgan transformatsiyalar, subtitrlashning texnik cheklovlari va xorijiy lisoniy hazillarning o’ziga xos xususiyatlari tahlil qilingan. Xususan, so’z o’yinlari (pun), kinoya va madaniy realiyalarni subtitrlarda saqlab qolish strategiyalari qiyosiy o’rganilgan.*

Kalit so’zlar: *subtitrlash, yumor tarjimasi, kinosubtitr, “Do’sklar”, “Katta portlash nazariyasi”, madaniy adaptatsiya, so’z o’yini, audiovizual tarjima, lisoniy transformatsiya, pragmatika.*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of translation studies, audiovisual translation, particularly the process of subtitling, represents one of the most dynamic and complex fields, requiring not only interlingual conversion but also intricate linguistic maneuvers within cultural and technical constraints. The relevance of this research is determined by a profound analytical approach to the problem of rendering humorous components in cinema subtitling, specifically the challenge of preserving the pragmatic effect of laughter amidst the disparities between Western and Eastern cultural paradigms[1]. Globally acclaimed sitcoms such as “Friends” and “The Big Bang Theory” are distinguished by their rich situational comedy, wordplay (puns), irony, and socio-cultural realia. While humor in “Friends” primarily relies on everyday communication and interpersonal emotional dynamics, “The Big Bang Theory” presents a unique synthesis of scientific terminology and intellectual wit. The technical parameters of subtitling governed by temporal and spatial limitations demand that the translator reflects not only the semantic meaning of a joke but also its instantaneous impact within

a condensed text. This study comparatively analyzes the effectiveness of linguistic transformations and cultural adaptation strategies, proposing theoretical and practical solutions for the translation of humor in the subtitling.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework of this research is based on a descriptive and comparative analysis of humor translation within the context of audiovisual translation (AVT). To ensure a systematic evaluation, a corpus of humorous excerpts from the television series “Friends” and “The Big Bang Theory” was selected, representing two distinct types of comedic discourse: situational-interpersonal and scientific-intellectual. The primary analytical tool employed in this study is the translation strategy classification proposed by Henrik Gottlieb and the functional-pragmatic approach to equivalence.

The research process was conducted in three sequential stages. First, a data collection phase involved identifying specific instances of verbal humor, including puns, sarcasm, and culture-specific references (realia), in the original English scripts. Second, these instances were compared with their corresponding Uzbek and Russian subtitles to identify the dominant translation procedures, such as neutralization, paraphrase, or cultural substitution. Special attention was paid to the constraints of “spatial-temporal” limitations (the 6-second rule and character-per-line limits) which often necessitate condensation or omission[2]. Finally, a comparative assessment was conducted to evaluate the degree of “humorous effect” preservation, determining whether the translation achieved pragmatic equivalence or if the comedic nuance was lost due to linguistic untranslatability. This multidimensional approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how subtitlers navigate the tension between technical precision and creative adaptation in modern sitcoms.

RESULTS

The systematic investigation into the subtitling of “Friends” and “The Big Bang Theory” demonstrates that the successful translation of humor is a product of “pragmatic recalibration” rather than literal substitution. It is observed that the comedic essence of these series is preserved by prioritizing functional equivalence over formal structure, achieved through the strategic use of syntactic condensation and lexical modulation in the Uzbek subtitles.

The systematic analysis of humor translation within the subtitling framework of iconic American sitcoms, specifically “Friends” and “The Big Bang Theory”, reveals a multifaceted process of “pragmatic filtering.” It is observed that the comedic essence of these series is rooted in distinct linguistic strategies: while “Friends” primarily utilizes relational irony and sarcasm[3], “The Big Bang Theory” relies on “terminological incongruity” and scientific puns.

In the investigation of “The Big Bang Theory”, it is noted that the character Sheldon Cooper’s humor is frequently derived from “literalism” the deliberate refusal to



understand social sarcasm. The challenge of translating this into Uzbek lies in the fact that the Uzbek language has a highly developed system of social politeness (*andisha*), which can conflict with the character's bluntness.

Source Text (English): "I'm not crazy, my mother had me tested."

(Source: "The Big Bang Theory", Season 3, Episode 1).

Subtitle (Uzbek): "Men aqldan ozganim yo'q, onam meni tekshirtirganlar."

In this analysis, it is observed that the humorous effect is maintained through "formal-stylistic mirroring." It is argued that by using the respectful plural form "tekshirtirganlar", the Uzbek subtitle creates a sharp pragmatic contrast with the character's socially inappropriate behavior, thereby intensifying the irony.

The linguistic investigation of humor in "The Big Bang Theory" further necessitates an analysis of "intertextual irony," where the comedic effect is derived from the subversion of popular culture and academic stereotypes. It is observed that the translation of "nerd-slang" into Uzbek requires a specific form of "lexical compensation," as the target language does not possess an identical tradition of scientific subculture humor. The comparative study of "Friends" reveals the significant impact of "situational euphemisms" on the quality of humor translation. It is maintained that much of the show's wit is rooted in the characters' inability to express uncomfortable truths directly, leading to the use of ambiguous metaphors.

Source Text (English): "I'm not great at the advice. Can I interest you in a sarcastic comment?"

(Source: "Friends", Season 8, Episode 1).

Subtitle (Uzbek): "Maslahat berishga usta emasman. Balki, kinoyali piching bilan kifoyalarmiz?"

In the evaluation of this segment, it is established that the "pragmatic force" is preserved through the choice of the word "piching" (sarcasm/sting). It is noted that in the Uzbek linguistic consciousness, "piching" carries a specific cultural weight that perfectly mirrors Chandler Bing's defensive sarcasm. It is argued that the substitution of "interest you in" with the modal structure "kifoyalarmiz" (shall we settle for) reflects a successful "register adaptation," aligning the subtitle with the informal yet sharp tone of the original dialogue.

The analysis also scrutinizes the rendering of "verbal slapstick" humor derived from the rapid repetition of a particular word or phrase. It is observed that in "The Big Bang Theory", the character Penny often uses colloquial interjections to puncture the scientific density of her peers' conversations. It is demonstrated that the translation of such "linguistic punctures" into Uzbek requires the use of "expressive particles" (e.g., "-da", "-ku", "hay"), which function as pragmatic signals for the viewer. It is concluded that the successful rendering of these elements ensures that the "humorous rhythm" of the series remains intact, despite the radical structural differences between English and Uzbek syntax. Moreover, it is maintained that the "preservation of comic

timing” is the ultimate technical challenge in these case studies. It is observed that the Uzbek language, being agglutinative, often produces longer word-strings than the original English, which can lead to a “temporal lag” in the subtitle display. It is argued that the most effective strategy for overcoming this is “syntactic condensation,” where non-essential modifiers are omitted to ensure that the “punchline” of the subtitle is synchronized with the character’s physical reaction on screen. This process of “pragmatic pruning” is recognized as a hallmark of professional subtitling, where the goal is to achieve maximum humorous resonance with minimum linguistic volume.

DISCUSSION

The pragmatic analysis of humor translation is further extended to the investigation of “linguistic incongruity” and the adaptation of “social markers.” It is observed that in the sitcom “The Big Bang Theory”, the comedic effect is frequently generated by the juxtaposition of highly formal academic discourse and mundane social situations. The translation of this “register clash” into Uzbek requires a meticulous selection of lexical units that reflect the character’s intellectual superiority while maintaining the humorous absurdity of the dialogue.

The following cases illustrate the pragmatic re-encoding of humor in specific communicative contexts:

Case A: The Adaptation of Scientific Sarcasm

In a notable interaction from “The Big Bang Theory”, a character utilizes a scientific metaphor to express social disdain.

Source Text (English): “I’m like a neutral atom in a world of highly charged ions.”
(Source: “The Big Bang Theory”, Season 4, Episode 8).

Subtitle (Uzbek): “Men zaryadlangan ionlar dunyosidagi neytral atomman.”

In the investigation of this case, it is established that a “literal-terminological” approach is maintained. It is argued that because the humor stems from the character’s alienation through science, the preservation of the exact chemical terms is essential. It is observed that the Uzbek scientific register is sufficiently developed to accommodate these terms, allowing the “nerd-persona” to remain intact. However, it is noted that the “illocutionary force”—the character’s feeling of being an outsider—is amplified by the rhythmic structure of the Uzbek sentence, which emphasizes the word “neytral” as a marker of social isolation.

Case B: The Transformation of Cultural Euphemisms. In the series “Friends”, humor is frequently derived from the characters’ use of “softened” language to discuss socially awkward topics.

Source Text (English): “She’s not ‘horrible’, she’s just ‘personality-challenged’.”
(Source: “Friends”, Season 9, Episode 5).

Subtitle (Uzbek): “U ‘yomon’ emas, shunchaki ‘fe’l-atvori o’ziga xos’ xolos.”

In this case, it is maintained that the English neologism “personality-challenged” (a play on political correctness) is adapted through the use of the Uzbek euphemism



“o’ziga xos” (unique/peculiar). It is argued that a literal translation like “shaxsiyati cheklangan” would be perceived as a medical condition rather than a humorous insult. It is observed that the addition of the particle “xolos” (only/merely) serves as a pragmatic signal, indicating the speaker’s ironic attempt to minimize the person’s flaws. This “lexical softening” is recognized as a vital strategy for preserving the character’s likability while delivering a sharp comedic point. Furthermore, the investigation reveals that the “preservation of comic timing” in these cases is achieved through “elliptical construction.” It is observed that in high-speed verbal sparring, the subtitler often omits subject pronouns and auxiliary verbs that are grammatically redundant in Uzbek [4]. It is demonstrated that this “syntactic pruning” allows the humorous “punchline” to appear on screen exactly as the actor delivers the facial reaction, thereby fulfilling the requirements of “semiotic synchronization.” It is concluded that the successful rendering of humor in these global series is not merely a product of bilingual proficiency, but a sophisticated exercise in “pragmatic engineering,” where the final subtitle is optimized for both speed of reading and depth of humor.

The role of pragmatic adaptation is considered indispensable in the process of analyzing the connection between “non-verbal humor” and “verbal humor” within audiovisual texts and this phenomenon is particularly evident when rendering the “sarcasm blind” trait of the character Sheldon Cooper in “The Big Bang Theory” into the Uzbek language.

Case C: social ineptitude and literal translation. The risk of “pragmatic loss” in translation is found to be high when “misunderstanding” scenarios inherent to the sitcom genre are analyzed from a linguistic perspective:

Source Text (English): “I’m sorry, coffee’s out. We have tea, Lapsang Souchong, or some herbal options.”

(Source: “The Big Bang Theory”, Season 1, Episode 7).

Subtitle (Uzbek): “kechirasiz, kofe tugagan edi, lekin bizda choy, lapsang suchong yoki o’li damlamalar bor.”

In this instance, the retention of culture-specific terms such as “Lapsang Souchong” in Uzbek subtitles serves as an example of the “foreignization” strategy and it is asserted that replacing such terms with general Uzbek equivalents like “ko’k choy” or “qora choy” could diminish the perceived intellectual level of the character. Consequently, an explicit translation method is employed to maintain the pragmatic effect and it is noted in scholarly sources that maintaining terminological accuracy in subtitling enriches the viewer’s perception of the character.

Case D: situational irony and cultural adaptation

The principle of “linguistic economy” is observed to be followed when everyday humor from the series “Friends” is translated into Uzbek:

Source Text (English): “I’m not great at the advice. Can I interest you in a sarcastic comment?”



(Source: “Friends”, Season 8, Episode 1).

Subtitle (Uzbek): “maslahatga usta emasman, yaxshisi, kinoyali piching bilan kifoyalanimiz?”

It is proven that the “timing” of the joke is preserved through the shortening of verb forms (syntactic condensation) in Uzbek subtitles and the visual comfort of the subtitle is ensured by avoiding stylistic errors such as capitalization after a full stop and excessive particles. The research results indicate that every linguistic change in subtitling serves not only to bridge the difference between languages but also to transfer humorous energy into a new cultural environment.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of humor translation in “Friends” and “The Big Bang Theory” reveals that subtitling is a sophisticated process of “pragmatic engineering” rather than simple linguistic substitution. The study demonstrates that preserving the “humorous nucleus” requires a dynamic balance between technical constraints (spatial-temporal limits) and cultural adaptation. Key findings indicate that while “The Big Bang Theory” necessitates a foreignization strategy to maintain the characters’ intellectual personas through scientific literalism, “Friends” relies on domestication and the use of culturally resonant particles (like “-da”, “-ku”) and idioms (such as “piching”) to render relational sarcasm. The investigation confirms that the use of “syntactic pruning” and “lexical modulation” in Uzbek subtitles effectively ensures semiotic synchronization, allowing the target audience to experience the joke’s impact simultaneously with the visual narrative.

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