

“Get ready to eat some crow!”
“It is not as delicious as it sounds.”
Translating Verbal Humor to Mandarin Chinese

CHEN, SHARON

Taipei European School H1

Keywords: verbal humor, translation strategies, sitcoms, qualitative analysis

Instructor: Su Hong Kuan

September 2023

1. Introduction

1.1 Significance of research

Watching sitcoms (situation comedy) is one's way to relax after a tiring day of work or school. The comedic plot, humorous characters, and relatability give them the label "comforting" for everyone who had a rough day. However, with over 7,000 languages worldwide, how do these shows reach people worldwide? In this situation, the art of translation plays a big part in the success of sitcoms. Translation is not simply expressing words in different languages. Especially in comedy shows, it helps to break all language barriers and help people worldwide to enjoy international shows. This research focuses on the sitcom *Modern Family* and how it presents humor for overseas audiences through translation.

1.2 Previous studies and gaps

This research topic was chosen because of how exhilarating humor translation can be and because of the need for more verbal humor translation studies. Many famous researchers, such as (Buijzen et al., 2004) and (Bellman et al., 2016), focus on audiovisual elements instead of verbal elements. Additionally, only a few papers explored these elements in Chinese. Therefore, this research question is chosen explicitly because this paper wants to explore the world of verbal humor in Chinese translation in sitcoms.

1.3 Research question

Translation has always been a topic many linguists ponder over. Nevertheless, despite how often translations appear, few explorations have been made on humor translations in sitcoms with a particular focus on verbal humor. This paper will investigate the humor translations from English to Chinese in *Modern Family*. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the common verbal humor types?
2. How is verbal humor translated, and what are the mechanisms behind the interactions between translation strategies and humor?

2. Literature review

2.1 A typological perspective of humor

Berger(1976) created a typology for humor in verbal narratives for adults. He created four different categories: Language, Logic, Identity, and Action, where there was a total of 45 techniques were listed. He claims every joke contains at least two to three techniques he listed in this research. Berger's typology is one of the greatest inspirations for other researchers to dive into this topic, which is one of the first categorizations ever created for

humor. However, verbal narratives have a significant gap with sitcoms; some techniques may no longer apply in this paper.

Buijzen and Valkenburg (2004) researched developing a typology of humor in audiovisual media. They used Berger's research as a basis and added new techniques as they have a different research field. They created a typology by collecting samples from Dutch television for months and taped 216 hours of television. They later categorized much of the humor in television into eight main categories with some subcategorizations. This research can play a part in answering the first research question. Buijzen and Valkenburg's typology may help us understand the humor used in Audiovisual Media such as television. They have an extensive database, making it a reliable source. However, as their research is not based on comedies, they may hold different elements in certain aspects.

2.2 Humor in sitcoms

Bellman, Varan, and Jeckel (2016) researched explicitly to address and identify the humor styles used in sitcoms. With Buijzen and Valkenburg's research as their basis, they wanted to develop a new humor category suitable for the modern day. They first removed some techniques that we no longer see in modern-day sitcoms. Then, they devised their typology—using Berger's four prominent categories, Language, Logic, Identity, and Action, while putting each technique into the four categories. They then used many different sitcoms to test their typology. Their finding is a crucial typology for all sitcom humor translations. This research helps answer the first research question as it focuses on sitcoms. However, since it did not focus on verbal humor purely, some elements in their typology may need to be eliminated.

2.3 Translating humor

Chiaro (2008) explored the challenging parts of translating humor into different languages. Several challenging parts of translation were mentioned in her research: Wordplay and puns, cultural references and context, and literal and adapted translation. Translation word plays puns rely on linguistic nuances and need creative solutions to recreate similar wordplays and puns. He also referred to cultural references and context and addressed specific difficulties. Chiaro also suggested how vital the role of translation is in humor studies. Chiaro's research helps enhance the understanding of verbal humor translation, the challenges, and the specific characteristics the translations may have. Furthermore, it can also help the understanding of the second research question as this paper talks about translation strategies, such as literal translation and adapted translation.

Dong and Li (2021) based their research on the sitcom Friends and found a few principles, characteristics, and strategies for translation. Aside from developing and finding the characteristics and principles, they also researched domestication and foreignization translation strategies. This research would extensively use this paper as it generalizes specific translation categories. However, they did not purely base this research on humor. Instead, all translation examples would be in here. Dong and Li's research can help answer the second research question and part of the third question since this paper created specific translation principles and talks about when they may be used.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection

This research reviewed 113 minutes of Modern Family to select the 92 humorous lines. Holidays-related episodes across five seasons were selected: Christmas, Thanksgiving, New Year's Eve, Valentine's, and Halloween. The reason behind choosing the holiday episodes is that context could be a possible factor influencing the perception of humor (Scarpetta & Spagnolli, 2009). In addition, the picking of each of these holiday episodes is random. Once the episodes were selected, the current study manually selected all humorous lines from the show.

3.2 Labelling humor

The categorization of humor started from Bellman, Varran, and Jeckel's typology. One of the first things modified was the ruling out of action since this research is based on verbal humor. This study also combined a few of the terms and then reorganized them into separate terms, which were later divided into five main groups:

1. Surprise - Misleading the audience with sudden changes in concepts, sometimes coincidental.
 - a. Techniques include - Surprise (o), Surprise: Coincidental occurrence (o), Surprise: Clashing persona (*), and Surprise: Unintentional indignity (*).
2. Puns - Using the language to create humorous elements.
 - a. Techniques include - Pun: Homophones (x), Pun: Homophonic patterns (x), Pun: Mimes (x), Pun: Homonyms (x).
3. Comparison - When two incoherent, bizarre, or contradictory elements appear together to create humorous effects.

- a. Techniques include - Comparison (o), Comparison: Contradict the viewer's common sense (*), Comparison: Contradict different characters' beliefs (*).
- 4. Irony - The expression of one's meaning using language that usually signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect
 - a. Techniques include - Irony (o), Sarcasm (o), and Sarcasm: Mimic (x).
- 5. Other types
 - a. Wit: Ingenious humor (o), Self-deprecation: Expressing something negative about oneself (o), Exaggeration: intensifying elements, such as volume or emphasis of the voice. (o)

(*) new terms (o) Bellman, Varan, and Jeckel's research terms (x) common English terms

3.3 Identifying Translation Strategies

The research started by listing two commonly used phrases regarding translation: direct translation and domestication. While the footage was reviewed, more translation techniques were added and grouped to form a few strategies. Later, the translation technique is arranged from the principles that Dong and Li created. The three categories are principles of faithfulness (F), the principle of simplicity (S), and the principle of audience readability (A).

1. Direct translation (F) - Translating the script directly word by word.
2. Shortened (S) - Shortening the translation.
3. Removed subject (S) - Removing the subject of this sentence.
4. Translating the underlying meaning (S) - translating the meaning behind the phrase.
5. Emotional exaggeration (R) - Overly describing feelings in the translated phrases.
6. External explanation (R) - Providing extra explanation on unclear phrases.
7. Changes in language use (R) - changes the meaning of the words.
8. Topicalization (R) - placing the topic in the first position in this sentence (a common grammar difference between English and Chinese)
9. Domestication (R) - Adding phrases that only appear in the translated language

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Common verbal humor types

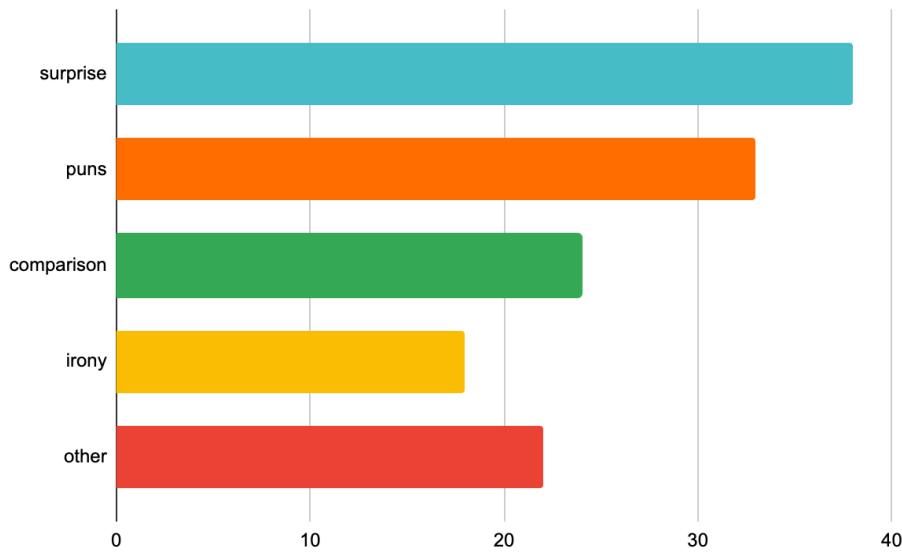


Figure 4.1 The distribution of humor types (Combined)

Based on Figure 4.1, surprise is the most commonly found verbal humor type due to its unexpected nature. Valitutti and Veale (2016) found that unexpected events can cause humor due to how unpredictable and surprising the event occurs. However, the least commonly found technique is irony. Sarcasm is one of the most unpopular humor types used within the irony category. Brown (2013) pointed out that sarcasm is considered a "face-threatening" act. Sarcasm is considered acceptable and humorous if two people share close relationships. However, too much sarcasm could be considered an offensive act instead of an act of intimacy, making it reasonable to come last in verbal humor types. Within these categories, the humor typology in surprise, puns, irony, and others is found in previous papers and defined in literature reviews. However, the comparison is a new category. Even though it is a technique listed in Bellman, Varan, and Jeckel's (2016) typology, it is not used as a category. However, this paper finds some situations, such as the contradicting beliefs between characters and viewers, that could be clearer through previously listed terms. The example below is an example of contradicting viewer beliefs. Due to the unreasonable example Claire suggested, the viewers would most likely disagree since the comparison is insufficient; therefore, a new category is needed for examples like this.

(1)

Season 3, Episode: Punkin Chunkin, 09:27 - 09:31	
Characters involved: Claire, holiday description: Thanksgiving	
Original (English)	Translation (Chinese)

Claire: One long table honey. If it was good enough for the Last Supper, it's good enough for us.	拼成一個長桌子吧，親愛的。耶穌最後的晚餐用的就是長桌，我們也應該效仿
---	------------------------------------

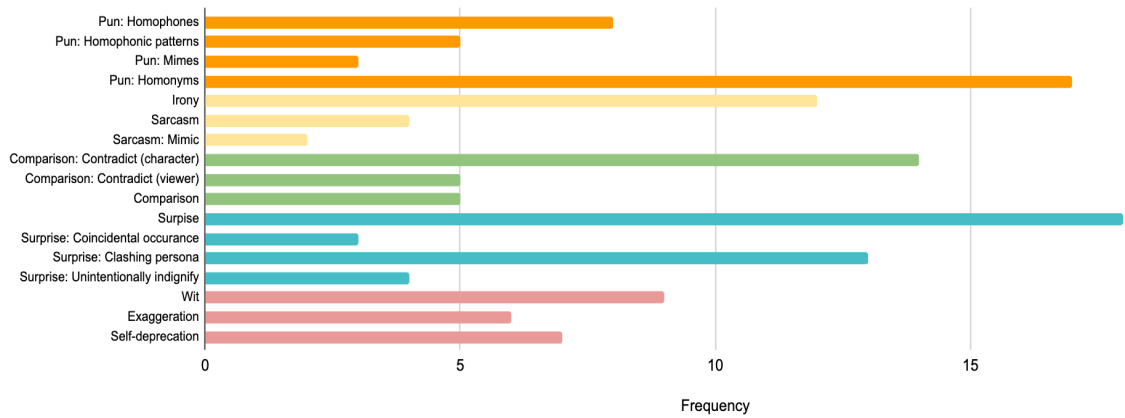


Figure 4.2 The distribution of humor types (Separate)

Figure 4.2 identifies more specific types of humor types in the collected episodes. Surprise is still the most commonly used verbal humor, as sudden changes easily entertain audiences. The next most common verbal humor is homonyms, a pun with the same sound and spelling but different meanings. They are easily found in sitcoms due to how well the audiences react to jokes, including homonyms.

"Comparison contradicts (character)" is also a verbal humor type often introduced in the sitcom. Contradictions are humorous because of the different opinions held by the characters, which creates a funny contrast. With a particular focus on This is a new term developed for this particular research because it is not found in any other humor typologies. Example 2 is a case where only contradicting character beliefs can be adequately explained. The humor lies in the fact that Phil and Claire hold different opinions on the same incident. With this category, this particular example will be easier to explain with any other humor techniques.

(2)

Season 1, Episode: Undeck the Halls, 05:12 - 05:15	
Characters involved: Phil, Claire holiday description: Christmas Eve	
Original (English)	Translation (Chinese)
Phil: I can forgive the smoking but I can't forgive the lie.	抽菸的是可以原諒，說謊的是不行。
Claire: Phil...	菲爾
Phil: Or the smoking	抽菸的事也不行

"Surprise: Clashing persona" is a verbal humor type in the top 5 most common. Clashing persona is a humor technique where the character says something unreasonable for their age,

creating surprising and unexpected humor. Example 3 is an example of a clashing persona. In this scenario, Manny is acting and speaking like someone above his age level, which is where the humor devries. This categorization is necessary to categorize humor related to (im)mature speeches correctly.

(3)

Season 1, Episode: Undeck the Halls, 14:12 - 14:23	
Characters involved: Gloria, Manny, holiday description: Christmas Eve	
Original (English)	Translation (Chinese)
Gloria: One day, you'll grow up and I'll miss things you used to do as a little boy.	你長大的時候我會很懷念你小時候做過的事情
Manny: Okay, but if this so-called Santa Claus does not bring me a Burgundy dinner jacket, we're going to have a big problem.	好吧, 但若這個所謂的聖誕老公公沒送我酒紅色的西裝外套場面就會難看了

Lastly, irony is the fifth most common verbal humor type. Irony is a verbal humor type where the character says something that opposes something that happened or was said before. It is one of the most commonly used techniques in Modern Family. Even though sarcasm and mimicking is not common humor technique used in Modern Family and most sitcoms, the irony is still easily controllable. Audiences enjoy jokes that backfire on something the character said beforehand. Therefore, irony is another commonly found technique.

4.2 Interaction between humor types and translation strategies

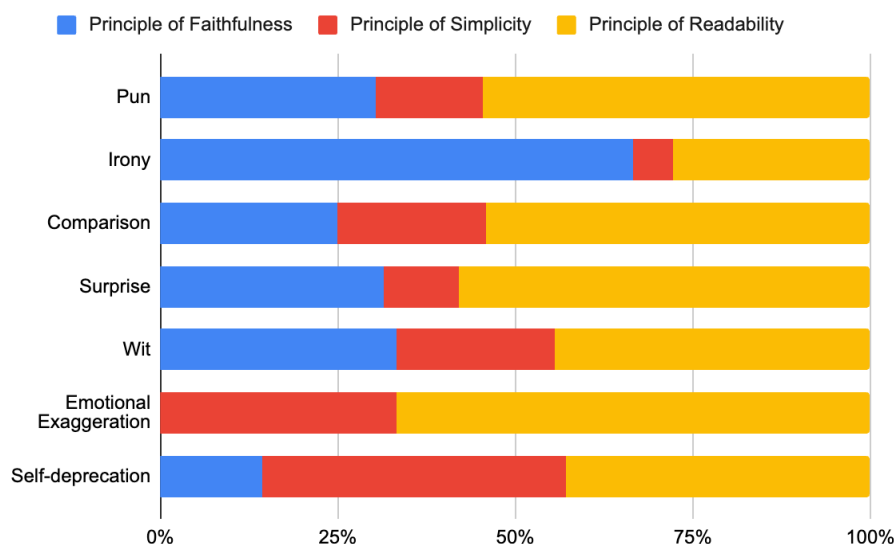


Figure 4.2 The interaction between humor types and translation strategies

Humor types in puns, comparisons, and surprise translations are based on more readability since they need to be put into simple words to be understood. They often need help

understanding. By focusing on readability, the audience would readily accept the humor. In this example, homophones are translated by translating the underlying meaning. Burrito and bur-right-to may sound similar in English. However, Jay uses this homophone to explain how Colombian and Mexican holidays are the same, while they are not.

(4)

Season 1, Episode: Undeck the Halls, 12:47 - 12:53	
Characters involved: Mitch, Jay, holiday description: Christmas Eve	
Original (English)	Translation (Chinese)
Jay: I got two Colombians at home trying to turn Christmas into Cinco de Mayo.	我家那兩個哥倫比亞人想把聖誕節變成獨立紀念日
Mitch: You know that's Mexican right?	你知道那是墨西哥節日吧
Jay: Ah! Burrito, bur-right-o.	都一樣啦

The irony translation is heavily based on the principle of faithfulness since if the humor were simplified too much, it would not be funny anymore. Emotional exaggeration contains no principle of faithfulness since the translation is exaggerated to create specific effects. The example below demonstrates how irony is often translated faithfully through direct translation. Since Martha Stewart is a famous chef, it is humorous how the kid had to eat cereal instead of well-prepared meals.

(5)

Season 11, Episode: Halloween, 09:26 - 09:30	
Characters involved: Deadpool dressed kid, holiday description: Halloween	
Original (English)	Translation (Chinese)
Deadpool dressed kid: Oh. She's dressed as Martha Stewart. Ironic, since I had cereal for dinner.	她扮成瑪莎史都華。很諷刺，因為我晚餐吃麥片

Self-deprecation is an excellent balance between simplicity and readability, as the joke is more challenging to comprehend when the audience is unfamiliar with the characters. In the example below, this research found that self-deprecation is translated with removed subject, topicalization, and shortened.

(6)

Season 1, Episode: Undeck the Halls, 06:14 - 06:20	
Characters involved: Phil, Haley, holiday description: Christmas Eve	
Original (English)	Translation (Chinese)

Phil: I guess you're not getting that car.	海莉, 你別想拿到車子了
Haley: I was getting a car?!	你們要送我車?
Phil: No, I was lying, because that's what we do now. Dunphys are liars.	騙你的, 因為鄧菲家的人都是騙子

Wit is one of the most well-balanced humor types when it is translated. It must be readable, faithful, and simple to understand the joke quickly. The example below is a dialogue of wit, including translation strategies of direct translation and shortened.

(7)

Season 3, Episode: Punkin Chunkin, 18:37 - 18:43	
Characters involved: Claire, Jay, Mitch, holiday description: Thanksgiving	
Original (English)	Translation (Chinese)
Jay: They're havin' fun over there, but you know it's gonna end in tears.	他們在那兒玩的真開心但最後肯定是悲劇結尾
Mitch: Yeah, always does.	對, 向來都是
Claire: Yeah, always does. Knock, knock. Who's there? Physics.	敲敲門, 是誰啊? 是物理學
Mitch: Thank you.	謝謝

5. Conclusion

This paper investigated the verbal humor in sitcoms and how they are translated into Chinese. Ultimately, this research discovered new categories and typologies for verbal humor in Modern Family and some specific translation strategies. This study also discovered how certain types of translation strategies are seen more often with a humor type. This paper can contribute to the new typologies of verbal humor and can be helpful for those interested in finding humor and translation strategies. It can also be helpful for a translator of verbal humor to decide what direction their translation should focus on. However, this research has limitations since this typology has yet to be tested in other sitcoms and the translation strategy. Additionally, the translation strategy may not work in other languages since things like removed subject and topicalization, are a part of the unique Chinese grammar that not many languages have. Overall, it is a helpful typology for researching verbal humor translation in Chinese.

References

- Brown, L. (2013). "Mind your own esteemed business": Sarcastic honorifics use and impoliteness in Korean TV dramas. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 9(2), 159–186.
- Scarpetta, F., & Spagnolli, A. (2009). The interactional context of humor in stand-up comedy. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 42(3), 210-230.
- Valitutti, A., & Veale, T. (2016). Infusing humor in unexpected events. In *Distributed, Ambient and Pervasive Interactions: 4th International Conference, DAPI 2016, Held as Part of HCI International 2016, Toronto, ON, Canada, July 17-22, 2016, Proceedings 4* (pp. 370-379). Springer International Publishing.
- Buijzen, Moniek & Valkenburg, Patti. (2004). Developing a Typology of Humor in Audiovisual Media. *Media Psychology - MEDIA PSYCHOL.* 6. 147-167.
10.1207/s1532785xmep0602_2.
- Chiaro, D. (2008). Verbally expressed humor and translation. In V. Raskin (Ed.), *The Primer of Humor Research* (pp. 569-608). Berlin, New York: De Gruyter Mouton.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110198492.569>
- Juckel, Jennifer & Bellman, Steven & Varan, Duane. (2016). A humor typology to identify humor styles used in sitcoms. *HUMOR.* 29. 10.1515/humor-2016-0047.
- Berger, A.A. (1993). *An Anatomy of Humor* (1st ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315082394>
- Dong, T., & Li, M. (2021). The Application of Domestication and Foreignization in the Chinese Translation of English Subtitles----Take the Sitcom Friends for Example. *Glob Acad J Linguist Lit*, 3.