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# PHILOLOGICAL SCIENCES

## TRANSLATION OF HUMOR IN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE FILMS AND TV SERIES FROM AN ENGLISH-UKRAINIAN PERSPECTIVE

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### **Introduction**

Humor is an essential element of human communication and an important component of contemporary audiovisual products, including films and television series. It contributes to character development, reflects cultural values, and enhances audience engagement. However, humor often relies on linguistic peculiarities, cultural references, wordplay, and social conventions, which makes its translation particularly challenging. As globalization increases the popularity of English-language audiovisual content among Ukrainian audiences, the demand for high-quality translation of humorous elements continues to grow.

The translation of humor is considered one of the most complex tasks in audiovisual translation because the translator must preserve not only the literal meaning of an utterance but also its communicative effect

A joke that is successful in one linguistic and cultural environment may lose its humorous value when transferred into another language

Therefore, translators frequently need to adapt, modify, or recreate humorous content to ensure that the target audience experiences a reaction similar to that of the source audience (Pan & Zhou, *The International Journal for Translation &*

Interpreting Research (2021)).

Recent studies in translation research emphasize that successful humor translation depends on a combination of linguistic competence, cultural awareness, and creativity. Contemporary scholars increasingly focus on audiovisual translation, particularly subtitling and dubbing, as these modes impose additional technical constraints related to timing, synchronization, and space limitations (Source 2). Consequently, the study of humor translation remains highly relevant in modern translation studies («Hermeneus» 2025, 39, 41, 43).

### **Aim**

The aim of this study is to examine the main challenges associated with the translation of humor in English-language films and television series into Ukrainian and to identify the translation strategies that contribute to the successful transfer of humorous effects across languages and cultures.

### **Materials and methods**

The research is based on contemporary studies in audiovisual translation and humor translation published after 2016. The theoretical framework includes scholarly works devoted to linguistic and cultural aspects of humor, audiovisual translation practices, and audience reception studies (Pan & Zhou, The International Journal for Translation & Interpreting Research (2021)).

The study employs several research methods. The descriptive method is used to outline the characteristics of humor in audiovisual media. The comparative method allows for the examination of differences between English and Ukrainian linguistic and cultural contexts. The analytical method is applied to identify common translation challenges and evaluate the effectiveness of various translation strategies. In addition, selected examples from English-language films and television series discussed in recent academic literature serve as illustrative material for the analysis.

### **Results and discussion**

The findings indicate that humor translation involves considerably more than the transfer of semantic content. One of the primary challenges is the cultural specificity of many humorous expressions. English-language films and television

series frequently contain references to historical events, celebrities, social stereotypes, and popular culture phenomena that may be unfamiliar to Ukrainian audiences. In such cases, literal translation often fails to reproduce the intended humorous effect.

A particularly challenging category of humor is wordplay. Puns are typically based on phonetic similarities, polysemy, homonymy, or grammatical ambiguity. Since English and Ukrainian belong to different language groups and possess distinct lexical and grammatical systems, direct equivalents are often unavailable. As a result, translators frequently prioritize the humorous function of an utterance over its formal structure.

For example, in many English-language sitcoms and animated series, jokes rely on words with multiple meanings. If the original pun cannot be reproduced in Ukrainian, translators often create a new joke that differs linguistically from the source text but generates a similar humorous response. Such an approach demonstrates the importance of functional equivalence in audiovisual translation.

Another challenge arises from culture-bound humor. References to American celebrities, television programs, political events, or social phenomena may not be immediately recognizable to Ukrainian viewers. In these situations, translators often employ cultural adaptation. Instead of preserving the original reference, they substitute it with a culturally accessible equivalent or reformulate the joke to ensure audience comprehension.

A notable example can be observed in the translation of animated films. Studies devoted to the English-Ukrainian translation of Pixar's "Elemental" demonstrate that translators regularly adapted culture-specific references and language-based jokes to preserve their communicative purpose. In many cases, semantic adaptation proved more effective than literal translation because it enabled Ukrainian audiences to understand the humorous intent without additional explanation.

The translation of idiomatic expressions also presents considerable difficulties. English idioms frequently contain figurative meanings that lose their humorous effect when translated word for word. Therefore, translators often replace them with

Ukrainian idiomatic expressions that perform a similar communicative function. Such transformations contribute to the naturalness of the dialogue and improve audience reception.

The choice between subtitling and dubbing additionally influences humor translation. Subtitles are constrained by limited screen space and reading time, which may require the omission or simplification of certain humorous elements. Dubbing provides greater opportunities for adaptation because translators can modify lexical choices and sentence structure while maintaining synchronization with the visual component of the film. Consequently, dubbed versions often contain more extensive creative transformations than subtitled versions.

Recent developments in artificial intelligence have introduced new possibilities for audiovisual translation. Machine translation systems are capable of processing large volumes of text and generating linguistically acceptable translations within seconds. Nevertheless, humor remains one of the most problematic areas for automated translation. Irony, sarcasm, wordplay, and culturally specific jokes often require contextual interpretation and creative reformulation that current AI systems cannot consistently achieve. Therefore, human translators continue to play a crucial role in ensuring the quality and effectiveness of humor translation.

The analysis also demonstrates that modern translation practice increasingly prioritizes audience-oriented approaches. Rather than preserving every linguistic feature of the source text, translators seek to recreate the emotional and pragmatic impact of humorous utterances. As a result, successful humor translation should be viewed not as a process of linguistic substitution but as a form of intercultural mediation that bridges the communicative gap between source and target audiences.

Overall, the effectiveness of humor translation depends on the translator's ability to balance linguistic accuracy, cultural adaptation, technical requirements, and audience expectations. The most successful translations are those that preserve the entertainment value of the original while remaining natural and comprehensible for Ukrainian viewers (Pan & Zhou, *The International Journal for Translation & Interpreting Research* (2021); Pilyarchuk, *The European Journal of Humour Research*

(2024); Marunina, Перекладацькі рішення в анімаційному фільмі «Стихії»: англо-український напрям (2025)).

**Conclusions.** The study confirms that humor translation in English-language films and television series represents a complex process involving both linguistic and cultural transfer. The main challenges include culture-specific references, wordplay, idiomatic expressions, and the technical constraints of audiovisual translation.

The analysis demonstrates that cultural adaptation, creative reformulation, and functional equivalence are among the most effective strategies for transferring humor from English into Ukrainian. These approaches enable translators to preserve the communicative purpose and entertainment value of humorous content while ensuring accessibility for the target audience. Despite recent advances in machine translation technologies, human creativity and cultural competence remain essential for the successful translation of humor. Future research may focus on detailed comparative analyses of humor translation in specific films and television series, as well as the growing role of artificial intelligence in audiovisual translation.

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