
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cultural Challenges in Audiovisual Translation: A Case Study of Humor in Sitcoms

Fatima A. Hamid

Department of English Language & Literature, College of Languages and Humanities, Qassim University, Burayda, Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Fatima A. Hamid, **E-mail:** f.MOHAMMED@qu.edu.sa

ABSTRACT

Translating humor in sitcoms presents unique challenges due to the cultural, linguistic, and contextual layers that shape comedic meaning. In popular series like *Friends*, *The Office*, and *How I Met Your Mother*, jokes often rely on sarcasm, wordplay, or cultural references that do not easily transfer across languages. By comparing English dialogue with Arabic subtitles, this study investigates the strategies used to handle humor such as literal translation, adaptation, and omission and evaluates their effectiveness in retaining the comic effect. The analysis reveals that while simple phrases can survive translation, jokes grounded in cultural or tonal nuance often lose their impact. Subtitlers must navigate audience expectations, censorship limitations, and technical constraints while attempting to preserve both meaning and humor. These findings emphasize the translator's role as a cultural mediator and underscore the need for creative flexibility and intercultural awareness in audiovisual translation.

KEYWORDS

Audiovisual translation, humor, sitcoms, subtitling, cultural references, adaptation, literal translation, intercultural communication, Arabic subtitles.

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1. Introduction

In today's world, people watch movies and TV shows from many different cultures and languages. This has made audiovisual translation (AVT) very important. AVT allows viewers to enjoy foreign content through subtitling, dubbing, or voice-over. Because of the internet and streaming platforms like Netflix and YouTube, more people than ever are watching content that was not made in their language or culture. However, translating media is not just about changing words from one language to another. It often means changing the meaning, tone, and cultural references too.

One of the most difficult things to translate is humor. Humor often depends on the culture, word choices, tone of voice, and even the situation in which it is told. What is funny in one culture may not be funny or may even be offensive in another. Humor can include wordplay, idioms, sarcasm, or jokes about local traditions, which makes it hard to translate in a way that keeps the same effect for the new audience (Chiaro, 2010). That is why translating humor is not only a language task but also a cultural one.

This paper focuses on the translation of humor in sitcoms—comedy TV shows that reflect everyday life with humor and dialogue. Sitcoms like *Friends*, *The Office*, and *How I Met Your Mother* are full of jokes that rely on American culture, slang, and wordplay. These shows are popular in many countries, so they are often subtitled for international viewers. However, many of their jokes do not translate easily. For example, puns or jokes about holidays like Thanksgiving may not make sense in another culture.

The main challenge discussed in this paper is how translators can deal with cultural and linguistic barriers when subtitling humorous content. The goal is to look at what strategies translators use when they face a joke or humorous line that doesn't

work in the target language. Do they keep the joke as it is, change it, or remove it completely? And how do these choices affect how the audience understands or enjoys the show?

This study will use examples from sitcoms that have been translated from English into Arabic. It will focus on subtitling only, because this is the most common form of AVT in many countries, especially in the Arab world. The paper will look at specific scenes and subtitles and compare them to the original lines. It will analyze how humor was handled and whether the translator was able to keep the joke's meaning, effect, or tone.

Understanding how humor is translated is important not just for translators but also for media companies and viewers. Humor plays a big role in culture and identity. When it is translated badly, part of the meaning or enjoyment is lost. This research hopes to give insight into the strategies, problems, and creative solutions used in humor translation in sitcoms, and why these choices matter.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Humor in Linguistic and Cultural Contexts

Humor is a central part of human communication. It can make people laugh, build social bonds, or express criticism. However, humor is also one of the most difficult things to explain and even harder to translate. This is because humor depends on language, culture, and context (Chiaro, 1992). What people find funny in one country may not be funny in another. Sometimes, a joke cannot even be understood without knowing a certain cultural reference, wordplay, or social norm.

From a linguistic point of view, humor often plays with sound, meaning, or structure. For example, puns depend on words that sound the same but have different meanings. Irony and sarcasm are about saying something but meaning the opposite. These forms of humor need a shared understanding between the speaker and the listener (Ritchie, 2014). If the audience does not understand the hidden meaning, the joke is lost.

Cultural knowledge is also very important in understanding humor. Some jokes refer to local holidays, traditions, celebrities, or historical events. These are called culture-specific elements (Pedersen, 2011).

For example, in *Friends*, characters often make jokes about Thanksgiving or New York culture. These jokes may not make sense to viewers from other countries unless they are adapted or explained.

Many scholars agree that humor is deeply rooted in social norms and cultural identity (Attardo, 1994; Vandaele, 2002). It reflects how society thinks, what it values, and what it finds acceptable to laugh about. That is why humor translation is not just a language task, it is an act of intercultural communication. If the translator is not careful, the joke may become confusing, unfunny, or even offensive in the target culture.

Different types of humor present different challenges in translation. For example, wordplay may be untranslatable if the pun does not exist in the target language. Cultural references may need to be changed or explained. Sarcasm may lose its tone when written as subtitles. The table below summarizes some common types of humor in sitcoms and the problems they create in translation.

Table 1: Typology of Humor in Sitcoms

Humor Type	Definition	Example	Translation Challenge
Wordplay / Puns	Play on words or double meaning	"Suit up!" (HIMYM)	May not work in target language
Cultural Reference	Based on local values or customs	Thanksgiving joke (Friends)	May be irrelevant or unknown
Sarcasm / Irony	Saying the opposite of what is meant	"Great job!" (The Office)	Tone may be misunderstood

2.2 Principles and Modes of Audiovisual Translation

Audiovisual translation (AVT) refers to translating content that has both visual and auditory elements, such as TV shows, films, and documentaries. It is different from other types of translation because it must respect both what is said and what is shown on

screen. The translator has to deal with images, sounds, timing, and sometimes character emotions, all at once (Díaz Cintas Remael, 2014).

There are three main modes of AVT: subtitling, dubbing, and voice-over. Each mode has its own rules and challenges.

Subtitling is the process of translating spoken dialogue into written text that appears at the bottom of the screen. It is popular because it is cheap, fast, and keeps the original audio. However, it also has many limitations. Subtitles must fit into a small space and be shown only for a few seconds. This means the translator often has to shorten or simplify the text (Gottlieb, 1992). Also, humor that depends on intonation, timing, or rhythm may lose its effect in writing.

Dubbing replaces the original voice with a new recording in the target language. It is more expensive and time-consuming, but some viewers prefer it because they don't have to read. The translator must make sure that the new dialogue matches the character's lip movements and timing. This can be hard, especially when the joke relies on specific sounds or punchlines (Chaume, 2010)

Voice-over plays the translation over the original audio, which is still faintly heard. It is often used in documentaries and interviews. Voice-over is less common for sitcoms because it can interrupt the comedic rhythm and sound unnatural.

Each AVT mode affects how humor is translated. Subtitling, which is the focus of this study, is especially difficult for translating jokes because it offers no room for extra explanation, and the audience has to read fast while watching. Also, subtitlers cannot rely on tone of voice or delivery timing, which are important for many jokes.

The following figure gives a simple overview of the three AVT modes and some of their main constraints when translating humor.

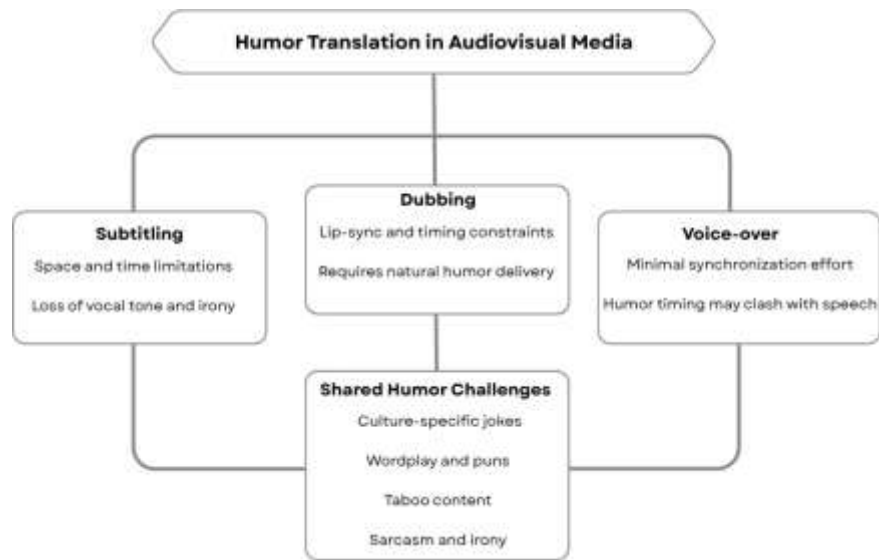


Figure 1: Common Strategies for Translating Humor in Sitcom Subtitles

2.3 Challenges in Translating Culture-Specific Elements (CSEs)

One of the biggest problems in humor translation is dealing with culture-specific elements, often called CSEs. These are words, phrases, or references that make sense only in one culture. They may include local holidays, traditions, foods, idioms, social customs, or famous people (Pedersen, 2011). When humor depends on these cultural elements, the translator has to decide whether to keep them, change them, or remove them.

For example, in the sitcom Friends, there are many jokes about Thanksgiving, which is a major holiday in the United States. But for viewers in countries where Thanksgiving is not celebrated, these jokes may be confusing or lose their meaning. A line like "It's not Thanksgiving without Chandler's sarcasm" depends on both cultural and character knowledge. A literal translation may not help the viewer understand why this is funny.

CSEs can also appear in references to places, celebrities, or brand names. In *The Office*, characters often joke about specific American companies or pop culture figures like “Chuck E. Cheese” or “Oprah.” These references might not be known in the target culture, so the translator has to choose whether to leave them in, explain them briefly, or replace them with something more familiar (Leppihalme, 1997).

Sometimes humor is also tied to social taboos or religious boundaries, especially in conservative cultures. For example, sexual innuendos or jokes about alcohol might be acceptable in the original version but would be considered inappropriate in other countries. In these cases, the translator may choose to neutralize or omit the joke to avoid offending the audience (Davies, 2003). Because CSEs are everywhere in sitcoms, the translator must understand both cultures very well. If the translator chooses the wrong strategy, the joke may not make sense or may create confusion. Worse, it can offend the target audience or even change how a character is understood.

Translating CSEs in humor is not about finding the perfect word. It is about finding a solution that makes the viewer laugh in the same way, or at least helps them understand the tone and intention of the joke. This is what makes humor translation so complex and creative at the same time.

2.4 Strategies in Translating Humor in AVT

When translators are faced with humor in audiovisual texts, especially in sitcoms, they often need to make tough decisions. Some jokes cannot be translated directly. Others may be confusing or inappropriate in the target culture. Because of this, translators use different strategies to deal with each case. The choice depends on the type of humor, the audience, and the translation mode (Munday, 2009).

One basic strategy is literal translation, where the joke is translated word-for-word. This works when the humor is simple and the same joke can be understood in both cultures. For example, a sarcastic line like “Great job!” (when someone obviously failed) can be translated directly if sarcasm works similarly in the target language. But often, literal translation leads to loss of meaning or awkward phrasing.

Another common strategy is adaptation. Here, the translator changes the joke to something more familiar to the target audience. For instance, if a joke in *How I Met Your Mother* mentions a New York politician that no one outside the U.S. knows, the translator might change the reference to a well-known local figure. Adaptation helps keep the humor effect, even if the words change (Venuti, 2008).

Omission is used when the joke cannot be translated or would sound offensive. Sometimes, translators remove the joke completely to avoid misunderstanding. This happens often with taboo jokes, sexual innuendos, or wordplay that has no equivalent in the target language (Delabastita, 1996). While omission avoids confusion, it also removes part of the character’s personality or the scene’s comic value.

Two broader approaches in translation are domestication and foreignization. Domestication means making the text feel local, familiar, and natural. Foreignization, on the other hand, keeps the foreign feel and introduces the audience to a new culture (Venuti, 2008). For humor, domestication is more common, especially in subtitles, because jokes often depend on familiarity.

In subtitling, translators also use condensation—reducing the joke to a shorter form without losing the meaning. Since subtitles are limited in space and time, this helps deliver the humor quickly and clearly (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2014).

Each of these strategies has pros and cons. Literal translation keeps the original words but may lose the humor. Adaptation can preserve the effect but changes the text. Omission avoids confusion but removes part of the meaning. The translator must always balance accuracy and audience enjoyment.

In sitcoms, these strategies appear in different ways depending on the type of humor and the translation context. In the next section, we will look at real examples of how these strategies were applied in selected sitcom scenes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Rationale

This study uses a qualitative and comparative case study design. The goal is to explore how humor is translated in sitcoms using subtitles, with a special focus on culture-specific jokes and wordplay. A qualitative method is best for this type of research because humor is complex and cannot always be measured with numbers. It needs to be understood through context, meaning, and effect (Dörnyei, 2008).

A case study approach is used because it allows the researcher to focus closely on real examples from selected TV shows. Instead of studying many random texts, the case study looks in detail at a smaller number of scenes that are rich in humor and cultural references. This approach makes it possible to understand the translation strategies in depth and see how they work in specific situations (Hollweck, 2015).

The aim is not to make general claims about all humor translation, but to understand the choices made by translators in actual subtitles. By comparing the English original lines with their Arabic translations, we can see how jokes were changed, kept, or removed—and what effect that had on the humor.

This research is also descriptive. It does not test a theory or hypothesis. Instead, it describes and analyzes what happens in real subtitle translations. It looks at patterns and strategies and connects them to existing theories in audiovisual translation.

3.2 Data Selection and Analytical Approach

The data for this study was collected from three well-known American sitcoms: *Friends*, *The Office* (U.S. version), and *How I Met Your Mother*. These shows were chosen because they are popular in many countries, full of different kinds of humor, and have been translated into many languages, including Arabic. They also include a wide range of wordplay, sarcasm, cultural references, and everyday jokes, which makes them ideal for studying humor translation.

The focus was on the English–Arabic language pair, because Arabic-speaking audiences often watch these shows with subtitles. Subtitling is more common than dubbing in many Arab countries, especially for adult content like sitcoms. Also, Arabic and English are culturally and linguistically very different, which makes the translation process more challenging and interesting to study.

To select the material, short scenes were chosen from each show. These scenes were picked because they clearly contained jokes or humorous exchanges, especially those that involved puns, culture-specific references, or sarcasm. Scenes were selected from early seasons of each sitcom, where character-based humor is most concentrated.

Each scene was transcribed in English and then matched with its official Arabic subtitle version, usually as found on streaming platforms or DVD releases. In some cases, fan-made subtitle versions were also consulted for comparison. However, the analysis focused mainly on professionally translated subtitles.

The analysis involved a line-by-line comparison between the original English dialogue and the Arabic subtitle. Each instance of humor was identified, and the translation strategy used was noted. For example, did the translator use literal translation, adaptation, omission, or another method? The effect of the translation was also described: Did the joke still make sense? Was it still funny? Was something lost in the translation?

All examples were handled respectfully. The aim was not to criticize translators but to understand the complex choices they must make when dealing with humor across cultures. No copyrighted video or subtitle content is reproduced in full—only short lines are used for commentary and analysis, which is acceptable under fair use for educational purposes.

This approach allows us to see not just how humor was translated, but why certain strategies were chosen and what impact those choices had on the audience's experience.

3.3 Analytical Framework

To analyze how humor is translated in the selected sitcoms, this study uses a comparative and descriptive framework. This means that the English original subtitles and the Arabic translations are compared side by side. The focus is not only on what strategy was used but also on how effective the translation is in keeping the humor. The main reference for the analysis is Pedersen's (2011) model of extralinguistic cultural references (ECRs) and the translation strategies he describes. These include strategies like re- tention, specification, direct translation, generalization, substitution, and omission. Although Pedersen's model is often used for cultural references in general, it is very useful when applied to humor because humor often depends on cultural knowledge. In addition, the study draws on the work of Delabastita (1996), who focused on the translation of wordplay and puns. His work helps classify cases where the hu- mor depends on similar-sounding words, double meanings, or play on structure. These cases are difficult to translate because the joke often disappears when the words change.

Each example in the case study is analyzed by answering the following questions:

- What type of humor is used in the original line?

- What translation strategy is used in the Arabic subtitle?
- Is the humor effect preserved, partially effective, or lost?

By classifying each instance of humor this way, we can see patterns in the translation choices and better understand the challenges that subtitlers face. We can also evaluate whether certain strategies (like adaptation or omission) are more common or more successful than others. This framework is flexible. It allows the researcher to work with both linguistic humor (like puns and sarcasm) and cultural humor (like local references or holiday jokes). It also supports qualitative insight, which is important in understanding the creative problem-solving involved in humor translation.

4. Case Study Analysis: Humor in Sitcoms

Humor in audiovisual content often creates the greatest challenge for translators. It is tied closely to language, culture, character behavior, and delivery. In sitcoms especially, humor is not just an extra feature—it defines the tone, structure, and identity of the show. The goal of this case study is to examine how humor in three popular American sitcoms—*Friends*, *The Office*, and *How I Met Your Mother*—was translated into Arabic subtitles. By comparing selected scenes from each show, it becomes clear how translators navigate the tension between preserving the joke and adapting it for a culturally different audience.

The analysis focuses on short scenes with high humorous content. These include puns, sarcasm, cultural references, and repeated catchphrases. Each example is reviewed by comparing the English dialogue and its Arabic subtitle. Then, the translation strategy is identified and evaluated: Was it literal, adapted, or omitted? Did the joke survive the translation, or did something get lost?

In *Friends*, sarcasm and exaggerated tone are common. In one well-known scene, Chandler mocks Joey by wearing all his clothes and saying, “Could I BE wearing any more clothes?” The joke depends on Chandler’s voice and sarcastic delivery. The Arabic subtitle is translated literally as هل يمكنني ارتداء المزيد؟. Although grammatically correct, the sarcastic stress is lost in text form. Without hearing the tone, the joke feels neutral. This is a good example of how literal translation can be technically accurate but still reduce the humor’s emotional effect. The result is partially effective—readable but not funny in the same way.

By contrast, *The Office* relies heavily on character-based recurring jokes. One of the most ironic lines is “That’s what she said!”, used by Michael Scott to turn innocent phrases into sexual jokes. In the Arabic version, the line is often completely omitted. This omission may reflect cultural norms or censorship guidelines, as sexual innuendo is more sensitive in Arabic-speaking countries. Still, the absence of this line removes one of the show’s signature jokes. The humor is not just reduced—it disappears. While the translator may have made a safe choice culturally, the comedic identity of the character is weakened.

On the other hand, *How I Met Your Mother* includes a running catchphrase: “Suit up!” used frequently by Barney to motivate his friends. It’s translated into Arabic as ارتدي ملابسك الرسمية! which literally means “Put on your formal clothes!” This translation keeps both the tone and character intention intact. Because the phrase is simple, direct, and not culture-bound, the humor effect remains strong even across languages. It is one of the few examples where literal translation works perfectly.

These examples are summarized in Table 2.

The comparison shows that translation strategy alone does not determine success. Context, timing, tone, and cultural relevance all play a role. Literal translation can work well when the joke is language-independent or straightforward. However, when sarcasm, tone, or cultural knowledge is involved, literal translation often falls short. In such cases, adaptation or rephrasing might preserve the humor more effectively.

Omission, while sometimes necessary, should be used with caution. As seen in *The Office*, cutting a key line can alter the audience’s understanding of the characters. It also creates inconsistency in the show’s humor style, especially if the omitted joke is repeated throughout the series. On the other hand, adaptation, though harder to execute, allows the translator to keep the function of the humor, even if the words change.

Table 2: Subtitle Comparison Table

Episode / Scene	Source Subtitle (EN)	Target Subtitle (AR)	Humor Type	Strategy Used	Outcome
Friends (S5E14)	"Could I BE wearing any more clothes?"	هل يمكنني ارتداء المزيد؟	Sarcasm	Literal Translation	Partially Effective
The Office (S3E02)	"That's what she said!"	(Omitted)	Innuendo / Pun	Omission	Humor Lost
HIMYM (S1E10)	"Suit up!"	ارتدي ملابسك الرسمية	Catchphrase	Literal Translation	Humor Preserved

Patterns across the three sitcoms show that sarcasm and sexual innuendo are the hardest types of humor to translate, especially in subtitled formats where tone of voice is lost and censorship is a concern. Cultural references, such as holidays or brand names, require careful consideration depending on how familiar they are to the target audience. Meanwhile, simple catchphrases or visual humor are often easier to translate successfully.

Ultimately, the translation of humor in sitcoms demands more than just language skills. It requires cultural awareness, creative problem-solving, and sometimes even compromise. Each decision the translator makes affects how the audience experiences the humor, and in a genre where laughter is central, these decisions carry significant weight.

5. Discussion

Translating humor in audiovisual content is not a straightforward task. It involves more than converting words from one language to another. Humor depends on tone, timing, cultural knowledge, and shared understanding between the speaker and the audience. The analysis of *Friends*, *The Office*, and *How I Met Your Mother* shows just how complex and fragile this process can be when translated through subtitles.

From the examples examined, it becomes clear that literal translation is the most frequently used strategy, but not always the most effective. In some cases, such as the phrase "Suit up!" in *How I Met Your Mother*, a literal translation worked well because the humor was simple and the phrase had a close match in Arabic. However, with jokes that rely on sarcasm, such as Chandler's exaggerated line in *Friends*, the tone does not come across clearly in written form. The result is that the humor becomes flat or confusing.

When literal translation fails, adaptation becomes the more successful choice, especially when the joke is based on culture-specific references or untranslatable puns. However, adaptation is not always easy to apply. It requires creativity and a deep understanding of both the source and target cultures. For translators working under tight deadlines or technical limitations, it may not always be possible to find an equivalent that carries the same effect. Still, adaptation has the benefit of preserving the function of the humor, even if the exact words are changed.

Omission appeared in some examples, particularly with jokes that involved sexual innuendo or sensitive topics. In *The Office*, the removal of Michael Scott's recurring "That's what she said!" line significantly changed the humor dynamic. This shows that omission may help avoid cultural discomfort, but it also removes part of the character's identity and comedic rhythm. Frequent omission of humorous lines may also lead to a less enjoyable viewing experience, especially for audiences who are familiar with the original content.

The choice of strategy is not made in isolation. Contextual factors such as the expected audience, cultural norms, and even the platform's censorship policies affect translation decisions. For Arabic-speaking audiences, translators often face added pressure to tone down or remove content that may be considered inappropriate. This sometimes leads to a loss of humor, especially in shows with edgy or adult jokes. Moreover, the technical constraints of subtitling—such as limited space, reading speed, and timing—make it even harder to maintain the humor's original impact.

What becomes clear is that translators are not simply language experts, they are cultural mediators. Their job is to create a similar emotional and humorous experience for viewers in the target culture. This requires a delicate balance between accuracy, creativity, and sensitivity. They must decide when to stay close to the original, when to take creative liberties, and when to let

something go altogether. These choices are influenced not only by the text but also by platform expectations, target audience reception, and even political or religious constraints.

For scholars and professionals in audiovisual translation, this analysis highlights the importance of training translators not only in language but also in humor theory, pragmatics, and cross-cultural awareness. Platforms and production companies should also allow more freedom for creative adaptation, especially when dealing with content that is heavily based on cultural humor.

In the end, humor translation is a balancing act. Some jokes survive intact, others are reshaped, and a few are lost along the way. But each decision made by the translator reflects a careful negotiation between language and laughter—between what was said and what can be understood.

6. Conclusion

Humor is one of the hardest elements to translate in audiovisual media because it involves more than just language—it reflects culture, social norms, timing, and character identity. Through the analysis of *Friends*, *The Office*, and *How I Met Your Mother*, this study shows that translators must carefully balance accuracy and effect. Literal translation works when the humor is simple or language-neutral, but often fails with sarcasm, innuendo, or cultural jokes. Adaptation allows for better delivery of meaning but requires creativity and deep cultural knowledge. Omission, although sometimes necessary due to taboos or platform restrictions, often results in lost humor and weaker character representation. These choices show that humor translation is not about finding exact matches, but about recreating the comic experience in a new language and culture. As global media continues to expand, subtitlers need more support, freedom, and training in both language and cultural sensitivity. A well-translated joke doesn't just survive the journey—it lands and connects.

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ORCID: Fatima A. Hamid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7432-6492>

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