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# HUMOR TRANSLATION: A CASE STUDY ON THE LOSS OF HUMOROUS LOADS IN *SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS*

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**Abstract:** Audiovisual translation of humor has long been a challenge faced by translators. It is inevitable for translators to remove or reduce some of the humorous effect in the target language despite their endeavor to preserve the humor elements. This qualitative study aimed to investigate the reasons behind the loss of humor in translation of the humorous scenes from an American comedy cartoon, *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Sperber and Wilson (1986)'s Relevance theory and Chaume (2004)'s Constraints of Dubbing framework were adopted in this study. The analysis was carried out by comparing the Zabalbeascoa (1993; 1996)'s humorous loads in each identified scenes in English and the Chinese dubbed version. The findings indicated that community and institution, community sense of humor and linguistic elements are prone to be lost in this type of translation not merely due to the linguistic and cultural asymmetry but also because of the synchronization constraints of dubbing. It was found that the substitution strategy which preserved the humor effect became ineffective because the new humorous elements recreated by the translator may not be synchronized with the actor's lip movements, actions and length of utterance displayed on screen. Despite the unavoidable loss of the untranslatable elements, the maximum preservation of visual and non-marked elements which can be deciphered by the target audience without making unnecessary efforts compensates



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for the loss, contributing to the popularity and success of this comedy product in the target language and culture.

**Keywords:** humor; audiovisual translation; dubbing; Chinese; English

## Introduction

Audiovisual translation, defined by Chiaro (2010) as the interlingual transfer of verbal language when it is transmitted and accessed both visually and acoustically, is relatively novel and has commenced to grab translation researchers' attention (Cintas, 2009). There are a variety of interchangeable terms to refer to this field such as film translation, TV translation, media translation and screen translation used by the translators, which has led to a confusion (Cho, 2014; Fois, 2012). Furthermore, Cabrera and Bartolomé (2005) classified AVT into 17 modes such as dubbing, subtitling, voice over, narration, surtitling etc. However, in the present study, only one mode dubbing that is defined as the replacement of the original audio output with the translated audio output is investigated.

Translation of humor has long been a difficulty for translators mainly due to the specific cultural and linguistic features embedded in the source text (Asimakoulas, 2004; Tee et al., 2022). Martínez-Sierra (2006) claimed that it is inevitable for translators to change and drop humorous elements in the source text (ST) despite their endeavor to preserve them because of cultural and linguistic gaps between the source language (SL) and target language (TL). In other words, the extent of change and loss in most literary translations is fundamentally determined by the differences between the SL and TL as well as the ST and target culture (James, Tan & Amini, 2018; Wan et al., 2018). However, in the case of dubbing as a more complex communicative event than written texts and other audiovisual modes due to the synchronization constraints, humorous elements that are transmitted by various means such as images, actions and sounds are prone to suffer more shifts (Bartrina & Espasa, 2005).

Despite extensive studies dealing with methods and strategies for translating humor in various language pairs, arguments are still going on about the norms of translating humor. Low (2011) espoused the translational norms that humor can be translated with the scarification of fidelity to achieve efficacy. Tisgam (2009) stated that a translator can invent new jokes to supplant the original meaning based on the linguistic features of TL and TT culture if the target audience have no inkling of the TT culture and are not competent in TL. Therefore, translators are unable to understand the culture-specific or language-specific jokes created by the original author. On the other hand, Mustapić (2016) argued that such an approach should be called ‘rewriting’ instead of translating because they do not serve to bridge the linguistic and cultural gaps in jokes. Instead, the approach is used to substitute new jokes for the original untranslatable jokes, which ruins the fidelity.

It was added that a translator is required to remove the language barriers and introduce the ST’s cultural frame of reference to the target audience, and the usage of new TT cultural elements to replace the original ones fails to render the originality, spontaneity, and sparkle of the SL (Amini, Ibrahim-González & Ayob, 2013; Popa, 2009). Nevertheless, Zhang (2017) contradicted Mustapić (2016)’s notion and argued that creativity is required when translating humor and amusement because the translators are required to reproduce and reconstruct the comic effects in the original ST in a wide range of creative manners. Thus, it was sustained that the jokes translated by TL-oriented translation strategies fulfil ‘creative fidelity’. In other words, the comic effects are preserved yet not losing their creativity. Based on the prolonged dispute on the translation of humor, the substantial divergence of opinions on the translation of humor probably because these scholars generalized their conclusions from different language pairs, yet the expression and interpretation of humor mostly differ in various languages (Wan & Amini, 2020). Thus, there is a need to explore the transnational norms in humor in particular language pairs that translators can

adhere to by looking into successful translations which have won considerable popularity in the target culture.

Transnational norms in humor have been explored in several studies such as Jankowska (2009), Yetkin (2011) and Zolczer (2016) in English-Spanish, English-Polish, English-Hungarian and English-Turkish language pairs, respectively. Each study had contributed to a more in depth understanding about the translational norms of the respective language pair. However, there is a dearth of studies investigating the norms in the English-Chinese language pair, specifically in the aspect of humorous elements.

Many entertainment programs have been successfully translated the humorous elements on the screen (Chiaro, 2010). With the development of mass media technology, foreign films and TV programs, especially American programs have become popular in the Chinese marketplace. Despite the growing need for audiovisual translation in China, this newly arisen translation field is still in the early stages to the accompaniment of translation problems and errors (Ma, 2017; Ng & Amini, 2019).

Several studies regarding the audiovisual translation in different genres from English into Chinese or from Chinese into English such as TV series, documentaries and movies have been conducted (Chen & Wang, 2019; Liu, 2012; Lyu & Wang, 2018; Lv, Zhu & Ning, 2014; Ying, 2017; Zhou & Zhang, 2019). However, the significant role of dubbing has long been neglected and a lack of rigorous analysis of dubbed programs from English into Chinese in various respects, including humor can be identified (Kianbakht, 2015; Vandaele, 2002). Therefore, the following research objectives were pursued in the present study:

1. To identify the losses of humorous loads in the TT
2. To investigate the reasons behind the identified losses of humorous loads after translation based on Relevance theory
3. To explore the reasons behind the identified losses of humorous loads after translation based on the Constraints of Dubbing framework

4. To explore the translational norms in humor translation in audiovisual texts from English into Chinese

### **Literature review**

With the need for audiovisual translation increasing and the complexity of audiovisual translation of humor, many scholars have embarked upon studies aimed to unveil the mechanism and tendencies in the translation of humor in audiovisual texts. Martínez-Sierra (2006) proposed an approach to analyze audiovisual humor from not merely qualitative, but also quantitative perspectives. He identified and compared the humorous loads characterized in the ST (The Simpsons) and the TT (Dubbed Spanish version) based on Zabalbeascoa (1993; 1996)'s taxonomy of humor in which humor consists of eight humorous loads and then explored the loss and changes based on intercultural pragmatics. The findings indicated that although a majority of jokes in the ST are translatable, community and institution and community sense of humor elements, which are produced based on the ST sociocultural backgrounds, are more likely to have shifts because the target audience who even have an hint of the ST culture fail to realize the those humorous elements, let alone decipher them. The translator strived to minimize any loss and changes during the process of translation and act as mediators to fill the cultural gaps which determine the comprehension of humor.

Jankowska (2009) carried out a study dealing with the Spanish and Polish dubbed versions of Shrek within the same theoretical framework which was the taxonomy of humorous elements by Martínez-Sierra (2006) to explore the translation tendencies in terms of humor. The results indicated that linguistic and community and institution elements were the most dominant type of changes and loss in the process of translation.

The translators tend to maintain the quantity of the humorous loads by creating new types to replace the old ones (Chiaro, 2010).

Non-marked elements are normally substituted for linguistic and community and institution elements that are difficult for the target audience to comprehend due to language and cultural barriers. Apart from that, many linguistic and community and institution elements created based on the SL and ST cultural background are domesticated by means of changing the English wordplay and American cultural references to the Spanish and Polish ones. Lastly, a vast majority of the humorous loads in *Shrek* belongs to visual and non-marked elements. This phenomenon is regarded to be intentional instead of accidental because these two types are less challenging in transfer and are more likely to resonate with the audience from across the globe.

In line with the findings of Jankowska (2009)'s study, linguistic and community and institution elements are substantially lost in satirical and ironical humor in Turkish dubbed *The Simpsons* in comparison with the English version in Yetkin (2011). The loss is attributable to not only the constraints of dubbing but also the lack of command of cultural and linguistic differences. Nevertheless, the retainment and richness of paralinguistic and visual elements in the TT compensates for such loss.

Similarly, Zolczer (2016) extended the Martínez-Sierra's approach to exploring the shifts of humorous loads in two popular American situational comedies of *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory* in English-Hungarian language pair taking the conventions and constraints of dubbing into account. He discovered that the primary reason behind the loss and reduction of humorous loads in dubbed versions is the lip movement synchronization. In other words, even if the translator has a complete translation for a humorous scene, the constraints of dubbing hinder him or her from applying it. Furthermore, one of the effective strategies applied by the translators to overcome 'untranslatability' is compensating for the loss of humorous loads (Chiaro, 2010). The translators create new types of humorous loads to replace the original ones that are lost because of incomprehensible cultural references to the target audience. By this way, the quality of humor loads in the ST can be maintained.

Aside from the studies carried out using the Martínez-Sierra (2006)'s theoretical framework, several studies were carried out on the translation of verbal humor based on other different scientific approaches and theoretical models. Aleksandrova (2019) focused on the audiovisual translation of puns as one of the most popular forms of verbal humor, also one of the most problematic issues in translation in English-Russian and English-French language pairs. The study analysed 22 animations in English as the ST, as well as Russian dubbed and French dubbed versions. It was discovered that free translation which creates the puns characterized in the ST was completely not utilizing the original words. In contrast, the quasi-translation used by the translator employed a synonym, hyponym, hypernym or any other word in the same semantic field to reproduce the puns of the TL. It was found that the original words that were utilized to create the pun by the author are the strategies mostly applied by the translators. Aside from that, the present study also revealed that literal translation and omission which unable to preserve the comic effects gained widespread acceptance in the AVT of puns.

Apart from puns, Dore (2019) focused on the audiovisual translation of humor investigating strong accent, code-mixing and code-switching in the English-Italian language pair. It was discovered that the multilingual humor in the ST was preserved in the TT. Specifically, there was a character whose strong Spanish accent and language variation were exploited for humorous purposes in the ST. However, not merely the accent and linguistic phenomenon were managed to be transferred, more instances were added to compensate for the loss of humorous elements such as the addition of typical pronunciation errors that native Spanish speakers committed while speaking Italian as well as swear words. Furthermore, as for the wordplay, the translator managed to retain its perlocution by reformulating them in the TL, particularly to entertain the audience. Despite the slight sacrifice of the semantic contents, the new wordplay still corresponded with the visual scenes and serves the same function as the original.

Considering the deficiency in the literature, there is a need for rigorous analysis of the audiovisual Chinese-English translation of humor because of the increasing need for AVT in China (Ying, 2017) and that the problems and solutions related to the audiovisual translation of humor identified and generalized in the previous studies are likely to be different and infeasible in the English-Chinese AVT.

### **Zabalbeascoa's taxonomy of humor**

Raphaelson-West (1989) classified humor into three categories: universal humor, language-specific humor and culture-specific jokes. Universal humor which is widely viewed as easily translatable humor because the humor effect is normally created by the unexpected; thus, it can be directly translated without killing the jokes because there is no wordplay or/and cultural references rooted in universal humor (Schmitz, 2002).

Language-specific humor is widely called puns that refer to a humorous and playful use of words which have carry more than one meaning or have the identical sounds but different meanings to produce humorous, amusing, and satiric effect (Feng, 1996). Culture-specific jokes are created based on obscure cultural allusions and comprehended depending on prior knowledge possessed by the audience living in the SL culture (Chiaro, 2010).

Martínez-Sierra (2006) believed that humor in audiovisual texts should be analyzed from a broader perspective. Dissimilar to humor characterized in written discourse, humorous messages are transmitted by means of a diversity of codes in audiovisual texts (Chiaro, 2010). It means that visual and acoustic features should also be considered in terms of analyzing audiovisual translation of humor. Therefore, based on that, an ad hoc taxonomy of humor which is comprised of eight types of humorous loads was formulated and utilized specifically for the analysis of audiovisual jokes (Martínez-Sierra, 2006). Chaume (2012) and González (2017)'s

elaboration of the eight types of humorous loads is demonstrated in the Table 1:

**Table 1.** Zabalbeascoa (1993; 1996)'s taxonomy of humor

| No. | Type of Humorous Loads            | Elaboration                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Community and institution Element | Cultural or intertextual features tied to a particular culture such as politicians, celebrities, organizations, newspapers, or films                               |
| 2   | Community Sense of Humor Element  | Topics popular in certain communities                                                                                                                              |
| 3   | Linguistic Element                | Jokes based on linguistic features such as wordplay and puns                                                                                                       |
| 4   | Visual Element                    | Humor produced by what can be seen on screen instead of what can be read                                                                                           |
| 5   | Graphic Element                   | A humorous written text on screen                                                                                                                                  |
| 6   | Paralinguistic Element            | Non-verbal features such as voice, tones, pitches, accents and ways of speaking associated with recognizable expressions of emotions as well as narrative silences |
| 7   | Sound Element                     | Humorous soundtracks and audio effects                                                                                                                             |
| 8   | Non-Marked (Humorous) Element     | Miscellaneous instances that are not easily categorized but are, nevertheless humorous                                                                             |

**Source:** Zabalbeascoa (1993; 1996).

### **Sperber and Wilson's Relevance theory**

Relevance theory is the basis of cognitive pragmatics and its purpose is to identify the internal mechanisms that exist in human psychology, and thus to explain the way of human communication

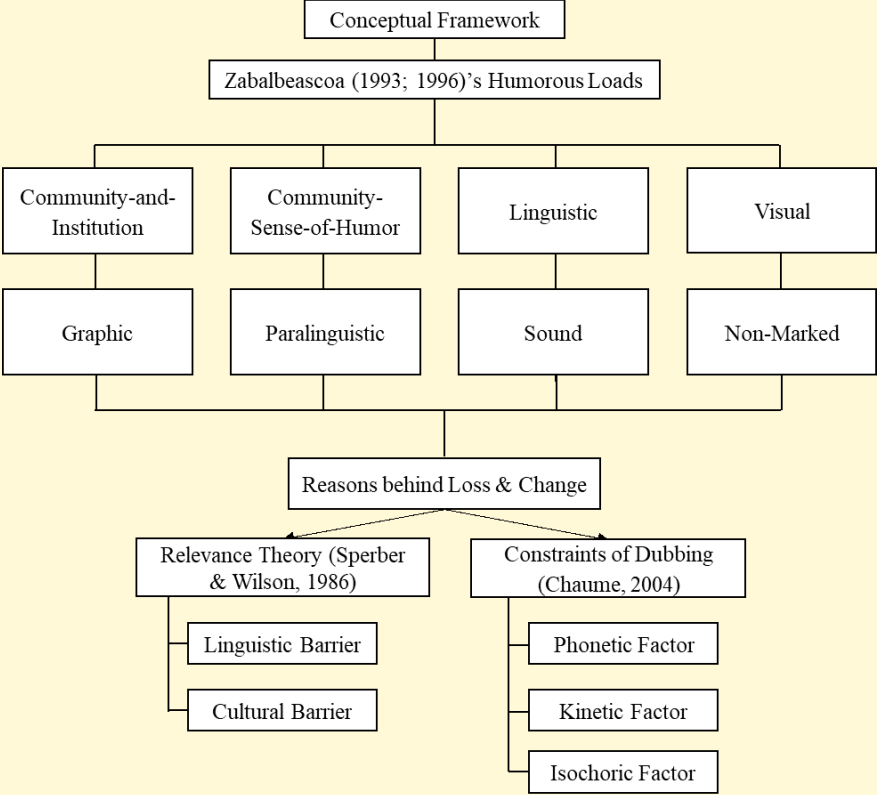
(Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Relevance theory is concerned with language communication and is widely applied in the field of translation. According to Gutt (1992), translation is a special form of communication consisting of the parties; original author, the translator, and the target audience, thus it should adhere to the general rule of communication. Relevance theory focuses on the audience's cognitive context and fluent communication. A translator should ensure that the effort of acquiring information from the target audience is minimized and the understanding is maximized. The audience should be able to process and interpret the intended messages in the same manner as the source audience despite the differences between ST and TT in terms of form, tenor, length, tone or meaning (Wong, Yew & Amini, 2019). However, it is not uncommon that the author and the audience have massive differences in implicatures and assumptions which could result in the recipients' difficulty in comprehending the information from the source culture due to distinct values, ways of thinking, religions, manners, and customs. Therefore, according to relevance theory, the translator should coordinate the original author's intention and the target reader's logical, linguistic, and encyclopedic knowledge. In terms of the translation of humor, the translated humorous elements are found unfunny by the target audience and even comprehension is missed due to cultural barriers. This arises because of reduction, changes and loss of humor elements characterized in the ST in the TT. Particularly, linguistic humor such as wordplay and puns demand a wide range of linguistic maneuver and are more difficult to be preserved semantically and pragmatically mainly due to of lingual asymmetry (Asimakoulas 2004; Sanderson, 2009; Wang & Amini, 2018). Hence, translators are required to decide whether semantic content of the joke should be retained with the loss of the humorous effects through literal translation, or humorous effects should be maintained with the sacrifice of the semantic content through recreation (Yus, 2013).

## **Constraints of dubbing**

Dubbing is defined as “the replacement of the original speech by a voice track which attempts to follow as closely as possible the timing, phrasing and lip-movements of the original dialogue” (Luyken & Herbst, 1991, p. 31). Technically, there are three factors that the translator is required to consider during the process of dubbing. All the three factors are related to synchronization, one of the most essential features of translation for dubbing, which involves synchronizing the TT with the actors’ articulatory and body movements on screen, and the start, pause and end of the actor’s utterances in the ST (Chaume, 2004). Besides the actors’ lips movement synchronization, kinetic factor, i.e., body movements such as the actors’ arm, head are indicative of their types of utterances such as surprise, assertion, negation. Therefore, the TT should correspond with body movements in the scenes. Furthermore, isochoric factor, i.e., the timing of the actors’ utterances needs to coincide as the time interval with the onset of the actor to open and close their mouth to utter a word/ words and ends with closing it.

The conceptual framework used in the present study was adapted from Martínez-Sierra (2006) to analyze the shifts in the humorous loads. The three theories were combined and implemented to identify the humorous loads in both the SL and TT based on Zabalbeascoa (1993; 1996)’s taxonomy of humor, investigate the loss and changes of humorous loads in the TT in comparison with the SL, and subsequently explore the reasons behind the loss and changes from the perspectives of Sperber and Wilson (1986)’s Relevance theory, and Chaume (2004)’s Constraints of Dubbing. The failure to translate the humor in the ST is attributable to linguistic and cultural barriers, and the constraints of Dubbing are regarded as another obstacle in successfully translating the humor. The three theories and the procedures of data analysis are displayed in Figure 1:

**Figure 1.** The conceptual framework adapted from Martínez-Sierra (2006)



**Source:** Adapted from Martínez-Sierra (2006).

**Method**

In this study, Martínez-Sierra (2006)’s framework for the analysis of the translation of humor in audiovisual texts was adopted. A qualitative design was chosen to conduct this study, and several frequencies were provided as additional information to the primarily qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The American television cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants* was selected. The focus was on the translation of excerpts from the Chinese-dubbed version to identify translational norms in humor in audiovisual texts in the English-Chinese translation.

Referring to Martínez-Sierra (2006)'s criteria of data selection, the selection of the series was determined by three factors. Firstly, *SpongeBob SquarePants* was chosen due to its global popularity. This series has been translated into at least 25 languages and telecasted in 170 countries, including China, where it is regarded as one of the highest rated animated programs (Holmes, 2012; Pillar, 2011). Secondly, this series features contains numerous humorous elements. Thirdly, the comical elements in this series are mostly created based on the American cultural context and the linguistic features of the SL (Pradita, 2010).

The data was collected using purposive sampling method. The data comprised of the seasons and episodes accessible to the researcher, even though the use of purposive sampling can limit the generalizability of the findings. However, only Season 2 Episode 4 Bossy Boots were chosen to analyze in the present study because of numerous humorous scenes available in this episode selected for the in-depth analysis of the content.

As for the procedures of data analysis, the humorous scenes, illustrated in Table 2, were extracted from the selected episode. After identifying 31 humorous scenes, the humorous loads rooted in each scene were classified. Then, the ST was compared with the TT in terms of their maintenance, changes, and loss of humorous loads. Subsequently, a descriptive and discursive analysis were employed based on Sperber and Wilson (1986)'s Relevance Theory as well as Chaume (2004)'s Constraints of Dubbing to investigate why the humorous loads had to go through some changes or loss. The exploration of the reasons behind the changes and losses was to uncover the possible techniques implemented by the translators during the process of translation as well as their failure to apply some possible strategies and solutions when attempting to render the humorous loads. Last,

based on the findings, the translational norms in humor in the English-Chinese language pair were analyzed.

**Table 2.** Procedures of data analysis

|        |                                                                                               |
|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Step 1 | Identify humorous scenes                                                                      |
| Step 2 | Identify and quantify humorous loads in each scene                                            |
| Step 3 | Compare the ST with the TT in terms of their maintenance, changes, and loss of humorous loads |
| Step 4 | Investigate the reasons behind the shifts in the humorous loads                               |
| Step 5 | Identify and describe the translational norm in humor in the Chinese-English language pair    |

Source: Author.

**Findings**

As shown in Table 3, the number of humorous elements is significantly less in the TT (27) compared to the ST (48). The loss of the humorous loads was 43.75% in dubbing. Community and institution, community sense of humor and linguistic elements had the biggest loss of humorous load. The translations indicated the weak performance in the rendition of the three humorous elements. None of the community and institution and community sense of humor elements characterized in the ST are rendered, and only 23.07% of linguistic elements are successfully preserved in the TT. On the other hand, all the visual and non-marked elements which are pervasive in the ST were rendered without any shifts:

**Table 3.** Humorous element

| Type of Humorous Loads    | Original Version | Chinese Dubbed Version |
|---------------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| Community and Institution | 3                | 0                      |

|                          |    |    |
|--------------------------|----|----|
| Community Sense of Humor | 4  | 0  |
| Linguistic               | 13 | 3  |
| Visual                   | 11 | 11 |
| Graphic                  | 3  | 1  |
| Paralinguistic           | 5  | 3  |
| Sound                    | 2  | 2  |
| Non-Marked               | 7  | 7  |
| Total                    | 48 | 27 |

**Source:** Author.

Table 4 illustrates the types of humorous loads for both ST and TT in 31 scenes. The humorous loads at different time intervals in the ST were rendered to multiple type changes in the TT. Two most dominant humorous loads were lost completely in the Chinese dubbed version, namely community and institution and community sense of humor. For example, the community and institution element disappeared in the scenes S2E4 [00:01:29 > > 00:01:33] and S2E4 [00:05:19 > > 00:05:22]. Meanwhile, the community sense of humor element was lost in the scenes S2E4 [00:00:55 > > 00:00:58] and S2E4 [00:01:29 > > 00:01:33]. Another humorous load that disappeared frequently in the TT was the linguistic element as can be observed in several scenes such as S2E4 [00:02:52 > > 00:02:55], S2E4 [00:05:47 > > 00:05:57] and S2E4 [00:06:18 > > 00:06:20]. Although there appeared noticeable loss of humorous loads of the elements in the dubbed version, the visual and non-marked elements were preserved entirely as displayed in some scenes S2E4 [00:01:38 > > 00:01:40] and S2E4 [00:07:25 > > 00:07:28], respectively. Table 4 illustrated the translation process from the ST to the TT which involved multiple type changes and loss of humorous loads at different time intervals of the scenes. These classifications demonstrated how the elements of humor were retained or disappeared from the ST to the TT:

**Table 4.** Identified humorous loads in the ST and TT

| Scene                        | Types of humorous loads in the ST                | Types of humorous loads in the TT |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| S2E4 [00:00:13 > > 00:00:14] | Graphic                                          | Ø                                 |
| S2E4 [00:00:35 > > 00:00:44] | Graphic + Community-Sense-Of-Humour + Linguistic | Graphic                           |
| S2E4 [00:00:55 > > 00:00:58] | Community-Sense-Of-Humour                        | Ø                                 |
| S2E4 [00:01:12 > > 00:01:15] | Linguistic                                       | Linguistic                        |
| S2E4 [00:01:22 > > 00:01:27] | Visual + Linguistic + Sound                      | Visual + Sound                    |
| S2E4 [00:01:29 > > 00:01:33] | Linguistic + Community-Sense-Of-Humour           | Ø                                 |
| S2E4 [00:01:38 > > 00:01:40] | Visual                                           | Visual                            |
| S2E4 [00:01:54 > > 00:02:10] | Visual + Non-Marked                              | Visual + Non-Marked               |
| S2E4 [00:02:31 > > 00:02:38] | Non-Marked + Community-Sense-Of-Humour           | Non-Marked                        |
| S2E4 [00:02:52 > > 00:02:55] | Linguistic                                       | Ø                                 |
| S2E4 [00:03:17 > > 00:03:20] | Paralinguistic + Linguistic                      | Linguistic                        |
| S2E4 [00:02:43 > > 00:02:47] | Visual                                           | Visual                            |
| S2E4 [00:03:28 > > 00:04:16] | Visual + Linguistic                              | Visual                            |
| S2E4 [00:04:19 > > 00:04:21] | Graphic + Visual                                 | Visual                            |
| S2E4 [00:04:25 > > 00:04:47] | Non-Marked + Visual                              | Non-Marked + Visual               |
| S2E4 [00:05:02 > > 00:05:07] | Linguistic                                       | Linguistic                        |

|                              |                                                                    |                                    |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| S2E4 [00:05:10 > > 00:05:15] | Linguistic +<br>Paralinguistic                                     | Paralinguistic                     |
| S2E4 [00:05:19 > > 00:05:22] | Community-And-<br>Institution                                      | Ø                                  |
| S2E4 [00:01:29 > > 00:01:33] | Community-And-<br>Institution + Linguistic                         | Ø                                  |
| S2E4 [00:05:47 > > 00:05:57] | Linguistic                                                         | Ø                                  |
| S2E4 [00:06:18 > > 00:06:20] | Linguistic                                                         | Ø                                  |
| S2E4 [00:06:35 > > 00:06:36] | Paralinguistic                                                     | Paralinguistic                     |
| S2E4 [00:06:40 > > 00:06:48] | Visual + Non-Marked                                                | Visual + Non-<br>Marked            |
| S2E4 [00:06:49 > > 00:07:08] | Paralinguistic + Sound<br>+ Visual + Community-<br>And-Institution | Paralinguistic +<br>Sound + Visual |
| S2E4 [00:07:19 > > 00:07:21] | Visual                                                             | Visual                             |
| S2E4 [00:07:25 > > 00:07:28] | Visual                                                             | Visual                             |
| S2E4 [00:07:49 > > 00:08:10] | Non-Marked                                                         | Non-Marked                         |
| S2E4 [00:08:48 > > 00:08:57] | Non-Marked                                                         | Non-Marked                         |
| S2E4 [00:09:03 > > 00:09:06] | Paralinguistic                                                     | Ø                                  |
| S2E4 [00:10:02 > > 00:10:03] | Non-Marked                                                         | Non-Marked                         |
| S2E4 [00:10:46 > > 00:10:48] | Linguistic                                                         | Ø                                  |

---

**Source:** Author.

As shown in Table 5, in a humorous scene both the linguistic barrier and the length of the actor’s utterance can lead to some constraints in conveying the humorous loads between the original and the dubbed version:

**Table 5.** Loss of humorous loads due to linguistic barrier and isochoric factor

---

|         |                                              |
|---------|----------------------------------------------|
| Example | Season 2, episode 04 [00:00:35 > > 00:00:44] |
|---------|----------------------------------------------|

---

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| English Audio Track | <i>Mr. Krabs - You men know me daughter Pearl. She is growing fast. It seems like it was just yesterday I was teaching ho to breach. Me mammalian angel.</i>                                             |
| Chinese Dubbing     | <i>Mr. Krabs - Ni men liang ge dou zhi dao wo de nu er Zhen Zhen ba. Ta zhe me kuai jiu zhang da le. Wo jiao ta xue hui hu xi de shi hao xiang jiu fa sheng zai zuo tian. Wo ke ai de xiao tian shi.</i> |
| Backtranslation     | <i>Mr. Krabs - You two may have known my daughter Pearl. She is growing so fast. It seems that it was just yesterday I was teaching her how to breath. My adorable little angel.</i>                     |
| Context             | Mr. Krabs is introducing his daughter Pearl who is a whale to SpongeBob and Squidward while showing the photo in which he was swimming with Pearl.                                                       |
| Humorous Loads      | ST:<br>(1) Graphic + (2) Linguistic + (3) Community-Sense-of-Humour<br>TT:<br>(1) Graphic                                                                                                                |

Source: Author.

This humorous situation in the ST is comprised of three humorous loads, namely graphic, linguistic and community sense of humor, but only graphic element is preserved in the translation. Specifically, the humorous effect generated by the graphic element is that Mr. Krabs is showing a photo which indicates his daughter is a whale, while Mr. Krabs is proudly telling SpongeBob and Squidward that her daughter is growing so fast. However, the linguistic element which exists in the humorous scene of the ST disappears in the translation. The verb “breach” meaning “to make a hole that something can go through” is employed in the ST to replace breath whose pronunciation is identical with breach to imply how Pearl breathes and reinforce the idea that Mr. Krabs’s daughter Pearl is a whale. The loss of this linguistic element in the

TT is because there is not an equivalent pair in which two verbs have similar pronunciation as well as perform the same functions in the TL. In another example, the community sense of humor generated by Mr. Krabs's utterance of "Me mammalian angel" to convey the ridiculous message that a crab, an Arthropod, has a whale daughter, a mammal, also suffers loss due to isochoric factor. Although this humorous effect can merely be appreciated by a community of people who have certain biological knowledge, it completely disappears in the TT. It is because the literal Chinese translation of this utterance *wo de bu ru tian shi* does not sound idiomatic. However, if it is geared towards the features of the TL such as *wo shu yu bu ru lei dong wu de tian shi*, it will be too long to coincide with the time interval which starts with Mr. Krabs's opening the mouth to utter and ends with closing it in the ST. The above scene is an example of how dubbing can further give rise to constraints in translating humor:

**Table 6.** Loss of humorous loads due to linguistic barrier and kinetic factor

| Example             | Season 2, episode 04 [00:03:52 > > 00:04:16]                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| English Audio Track | <i>SpongeBob – How about the Khaotic Krab?</i><br><i>Pearl – Hmm...how about the Kissy Krab?</i><br><i>SpongeBob – The King Krab?</i><br><i>Pearl – The Kandy Krab?</i><br><i>SpongeBob – The Kool Krab or the Kowboy Krab.</i><br><i>The Kurlly Krab. The Kreepy Krab. The Killer Krab.</i><br><i>Pearl – No.</i><br><i>SpongeBob – Right. Too scary.</i><br><i>SpongeBob &amp; Pearl – The Kuddly Krab.</i> |
| Chinese Dubbing     | <i>SpongeBob – Na me You Le Yuan Xie Bao?</i><br><i>Pearl – Hmm...Qin Wen Xie Bao?</i><br><i>SpongeBob – Guo Wang Xie Bao.</i><br><i>Pearl – Tang Guo Xie Bao?</i><br><i>SpongeBob – Ku Xie Bao. Hai shi Niu Zai Xie Bao.</i><br><i>Zu Zhou Xie Bao. Kong Bu Xie Bao. Sha Shou Xie Bao.</i>                                                                                                                   |

|                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                 | <i>Pearl – Bu.</i><br><i>SpongeBob – Ni shuo de dui. Tai ke pa le.</i><br><i>SpongeBob &amp; Pearl – Tao Xin Xie Bao.</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Backtranslation | <i>SpongeBob – How about the Amusement Park Krab?</i><br><i>Pearl – Hmm...the Kiss Krab?</i><br><i>SpongeBob – The King Krab.</i><br><i>Pearl – The Candy Krab?</i><br><i>SpongeBob – The Cool Crab. Or the Cowboy Krab.</i><br><i>The Curse Krab. The Creepy Krab. The Killer Crab.</i><br><i>Pearl – No.</i><br><i>SpongeBob – You’re right. Too scary.</i><br><i>SpongeBob &amp; Pearl – The Heart Krab.</i> |
| Context         | Pearl is deciding to change name of her father’s restaurant because the original name Krusty Krab sounds unattractive. As SpongeBob comes up with many new names, he disguised himself according to those names.                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Humorous Loads  | ST:<br>(1) Visual + (2) Linguistic<br>TT:<br>(1) Visual                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

Source: Author.

As shown in Table 6, SpongeBob keeps changing his costumes according to Mr. Krabs’ restaurant’s names which reveal various characters such as a king, cowboy, and a killer. The humorous effect generated by the visual elements is persevered because both the source audience and target audience can easily perceive these humorous elements in the same manner. However, the humorous load in this example is also created by a simple k-k-k rhyme scheme with the words Khaotic (chaotic), Kissy, King, Kandy (candy), Kool (cool), Kowboy (cowboy), Kurly (curly), Kreepy (creepy) and Killer. In the Chinese dubbing, the linguistic elements disappear due to the lack of those rhyming words. In this situation, the translator is constrained from creating a series of new rhyming words to retain

the Linguistic elements in the ST because the semantic meanings of those rhyming words in the ST correspond with SpongeBob’s actions of dressing up as different characters. Hence, the translator gives priority to preserving the semantic meanings through literal translation instead of retaining the jocular effects not merely because of linguistic barrier but also the constraints of dubbing, namely the kinetic factor. It means that even though the translator can recreate a series of new rhyming words to supplant the original, it is not applicable because their semantic meanings are not in line with the actor’s actions in the scene:

**Table 7.** Loss of humorous loads due to cultural barrier and phonetic factor

|                     |                                                                                                              |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Example             | Season 2, episode 04 [00:05:18 > > 00:05:22]                                                                 |
| English Audio Track | <i>SpongeBob – Sal-lads? Never heard of it.</i>                                                              |
| Chinese Dubbing     | <i>SpongeBob – Liang fen sha la? Cong lai mei ting shuo guo.</i>                                             |
| Backtranslation     | <i>SpongeBob – Two salads? Never heard of them.</i>                                                          |
| Context             | After receiving the customer’s order for two salads, SpongeBob realizes that he has no idea what salads are. |
| Humorous Loads      | ST:<br>(1) Community-and-Institution<br>TT:<br>Ø                                                             |

Source: Author.

As shown in Table 7, the humorous effect was created by community and institution elements. Specifically, the hilarious situation is caused by SpongeBob’s ignorance of salads as one of the most popular daily cuisines in the ST culture. However, the word is translated into Chinese as *sha la* through borrowing translation technique, and the word is not exactly a household name

in the TT culture. In other words, the target audience are not likely to find it silly and ridiculous when SpongeBob states that he has never heard of salads. One solution that appears to be feasible is rendering salads as *liang cai* which is a popular Chinese dish similar with western salads, However, the pronunciation of *liang cai* which starts with lateral sound do not coincide with that of salads which starts with fricatives followed by an open vowel. It means that the addresser needs to open a significantly wider mouth to pronounce salad than *liang cai*. Hence, because of the cultural barrier and phonetic factor, the community and institution element fail to be retained:

| Table 8. Loss of humorous loads due to linguistic barrier |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Example                                                   | Season 2, episode 04 [00:05:47 > > 00:05:57]                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| English Audio Track                                       | <i>SpongeBob – No buns. That’s hip. No patties. Happening! Oh, yeah...that’s definitely the coolest meal I ever saw.</i>                                                                                                              |
| Chinese Dubbing                                           | <i>SpongeBob – Mei you mian bao. Zhen guai. Mei you rou bing. Qi guai. Zhe di que shi wo jian guo zui ku de fan le.</i>                                                                                                               |
| Backtranslation                                           | <i>SpongeBob – No bread. So odd. No meets. It’s strange. This is definitely the most stylish meal I ever saw.</i>                                                                                                                     |
| Context                                                   | SpongeBob cooks and serves burgers to the customers who order salads because he has never seen salads before and has no idea how to cook. Pearl teaches SpongeBob that burgers can transform salads by removing the buns and patties. |
| Humorous Loads                                            | ST:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|                                                           | (1) Linguistic                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                                           | TT:<br>Ø                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

Source: Author.

As shown in Table 8, a humorous scene where the humorous effect is caused by the exploitation of the adjective *cool* which possesses two meanings. Specifically, this adjective is utilized by *SpongeBob* to describe the bizarre dish that he makes by adhering to *Pearl's* instructions. The first meaning is to describe that the dish which is merely comprised of raw tomatoes and lettuce is cold in terms of temperature, whereas the second meaning functions to express *SpongeBob's* astonishment at seeing the so-called stylish food. However, this linguistic element fails to be retained during the process of translation because the translator only succeeds in rendering the second semantic meaning of the adjective *cool* from English into Chinese by using adjective *ku*. However, the adjective *ku* does not carry the second semantic meaning of *fairly cold* temperature like *cool* in English. Apart from that, there is no such a word in Chinese language who can perform the same function as *cool* under this situation. Therefore, the linguistic element is lost due to the linguistic gap between English and Chinese:

**Table 9.** Loss of humorous loads due to cultural barrier

| Example             | Season 2, episode 04 [00:06:52 > > 00:07:08]                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| English Audio Track | <i>SpongeBob – I’m a fry cook, darn it! You can take away my spatula, but when you take away my dignity, that’s when I get mad! I’m going to march right into Mr. Krabs’ s office and tell him this is just too much.</i>                 |
| Chinese Dubbing     | <i>SpongeBob – Wo shi yi ge han bao chu shi. Ni men ke yi na zou wo de chan zi. Dan shi ni men ru guo jian ta wo de zi zun, wo jiu hui feng le. Wo xian zai jiu yao dao Xie Lao Ban de ban gong shi qu, gao su ta zhe tai guo fen le.</i> |
| Backtranslation     | <i>SpongeBob – I’m a burger chef. You can take away my spatula, but when you trample on my pride, I will go crazy! I’m going to Mr. Krabs’ s office and tell him this is too much.</i>                                                    |

|                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Context        | After being laughed by a passer-by because of his funny costume, SpongeBob’s discontent with Pearl’s management erupts and he decides to march to Mr. Krabs’s office to negotiate with a stirring and passionate background music. However, his puffy crab-shaped costume makes him fall to the ground with a groan. |
| Humorous Loads | ST:<br>(1) Paralinguistic + (2) Visual + (3) Sound + (4) Community-and-Institution<br>TT:<br>(1) Paralinguistic + (2) Visual + (3) Sound                                                                                                                                                                             |

Source: Author.

As shown in Table 9, the humorous effect in context is generated by the combination of four humorous loads, namely paralinguistic, visual, sound and community and institution comments. Visual element is reflected by SpongeBob’s difficulty in walking to Mr. Krab’s office because of his puffy and ridiculous costume as well as by the scene where SpongeBob falls to the ground upside down while his legs are still moving. Paralinguistic is generated by SpongeBob’s grunts, groans, whimpers, and cries when he falls over. Sound and community and institution elements are simultaneously revealed by a passionate music, namely American Patriotic Songs and Marches. Although the humorous effect caused by Sound element that SpongeBob is marching to the Mr. Krab’s office with determination but falls over immediately can be perceived by both the source target and target audience, the target audience are probably not aware of the existence of the community and institution element because they are not familiar with this TT culture-specific song.

Based on the findings, loss of humorous loads was identified, especially in terms of community and institution, community sense of humor, and linguistic elements in this successful comedy product. The addition and change of humorous loads do not exist in

the data, which means that the translator does not manage to create new cultural and linguistic humorous elements based on the TL and TT culture to replace the original to maintain the quantity and quality of humorous loads. Despite that, the considerable number of visual and non-marked elements ensure the amusement of the TT. Therefore, it can be conjectured that the translator manages to minimize the loss of visual and non-marked elements and gives priority to the coherence without persisting in rendering the thorny linguistic and cultural elements in an imperfect manner. By doing so, the target audience can comprehend the humor in the TT without making unnecessary efforts.

## **Discussion**

In line with the findings of Martínez-Sierra (2006)'s and Jankowska (2009)'s studies, community and institution and community sense of humor elements were identified as “lost” during the process of translation. This could be because the target audience may not have sufficient sociocultural background knowledge about the message to realize the existence of such humorous elements. For example, American Patriotic Songs and Marches is described as a quintessential example that reflected the cultural-specific song of the source culture not familiar by the target audience.

Furthermore, corresponding with Jankowska (2009)'s findings, the humor created based on linguistic elements was also found challenging to the translator. Therefore, the humor loss and change in humor seemed inevitable. However, the translation of *SpongeBob SquarePants* did not attempt to recreate new wordplay based on the features of the TL to retain the jocular functions, which contradicts the findings of Dore (2019), Jankowska (2009), Yetkin (2011) and Zolczer (2016). Nevertheless, according to Yetkin (2011), the omission of wordplay through literal translation is also a widely acceptable technique in terms of humor translation because the semantic scenario is perfectly preserved. Lastly, the

researchers' discovery is consistent with that of Zolczer (2016) that synchronization in dubbing further hampers the translator from succeeding in rendering language-specific and culture-specific humorous elements because some humorous elements are translatable in other modes of translation such as subtitling but become untranslatable in dubbing. It is due to fact that even if the proper translations of some difficult humorous elements are devised, the translator sometimes cannot apply them due to phonetic, kinetic, and isochoric constraints.

## Conclusion

Translation of humor has long been a problem for translators mainly due to the linguistic and cultural differences. In dubbing, the problem becomes even more challenging due to the characteristics of this type of translation. While rebuilding cultural and linguistic elements to preserve humor effect is a feasible strategy applied in most types of translation, this strategy is sometimes not workable in dubbing because the new humorous elements recreated by translator to replace the original may not synchronize or coincide with the actor's lip movements, actions and length of utterance displayed on screen. Therefore, the chances of losing of community and institution, community sense of humor and linguistic elements are likely to happen due to the synchronization constraints of dubbing.

Nonetheless, the presentations of visual and non-marked elements that are richly illustrated are perceived by the target audience in the same manner as the source audience. This could compensate for the loss and contribute to the successful translation. Hence, it can be concluded that although it is unavoidable for linguistic and cultural humor to suffer loss during the process of translation from Chinese into English due to the linguistic asymmetry and cultural differences, the abundance of visual and non-marked humor can also win the popularity among the target audience. Therefore, the

translator should minimize the loss of such types of humorous loads without persisting in rendering the untranslatable community and institution, community sense of humor and linguistic elements. With logical coherence the target audience can decipher the humor characterized in the TT without making unnecessary efforts.

The findings of the present study have some theoretical and practical implications. In terms of the theoretical implication, the framework adopted from Relevance theory and Chaume (2004)'s Constraints of Dubbing are effective in analyzing the dubbing translation of humor, particularly identifying the reason for the loss of humorous elements. It was found that the failure to render the humorous elements in the ST is probably caused not merely by linguistic and cultural barriers but also by the constraints of dubbing. Furthermore, in terms of the practical implication, the knowledge of the translational norms in humor can provide the audiovisual translators a guideline, especially in English into Chinese dubbing and translation. Last, the findings highlighted the significant role of visual and non-marked humorous elements for the comedy producers. The humorous visual and non-marked elements could account for a large proportion for the successful translation transferring humorous elements which eventually affect the series popularity in the global markets.

One limitation of the present study is the focus on the humorous elements in only one episode of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Thus, a mixed methods can be implemented in further studies to analyze a larger data to explore the norms based on the quantitative and qualitative results. Moreover, a comparative study can also be carried out to investigate the social aspect of dubbing and subtitling in terms of humor transfer from English into Chinese by analyzing the same audiovisual texts given the discernible cultural gap between the English and Chinese.

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