

Sylvia Jaki

***Sie haben feuchte Nüsse* – The Translation of Verbal Humour in German Subtitles of US American Sitcoms**

Abstract: This paper explores the German subtitles of three US American situation comedies, *The Big Bang Theory*, *New Girl* and *Grace and Frankie*, focusing on language play, with two major aims: Firstly, these television series serve to discuss problems of humour translation in general, showing which types of verbal humour are used in the three series and by which strategies they have been translated. Secondly, the specificities of subtitling are addressed and the question to what extent its medial and technical preconditions influence the translation of language play.

Keywords: interlingual subtitling, language play, multimodality, translatology, verbal humour, wordplay

1 Introduction

The threat of untranslatability sometimes looms over the translator's work like the sword of Damocles. When people present examples of untranslatability, they frequently mention wordplay, which is often so intensely embedded in a specific language that it is hard to find a target language equivalent. That there are many successful ways of translating wordplay, however, is demonstrated by the international success of US American situation comedies. Some of these are specifically known for their ample use of language play, such as the *The Big Bang Theory*.

In analysing the audiovisual translation of verbal humour, this contribution focuses on the German subtitles rather than on the dubbed versions, because the specific challenges subtitlers face, which are primarily due to the change of mode between the source and the target text, render the enterprise of translating verbal humour in subtitles particularly intriguing. Hence, in order to show what challenges the process of subtitling entails for the translation of verbal humour, this article will also deal with problems specific to subtitling, since these problems have only rarely been addressed in the literature on the audiovisual translation of humour (with the exception of Belz 2008, for example).

This paper will begin with a presentation of the different types of verbal humour before it provides a very brief introduction to the preconditions of subtitling. In a second step, the challenges of translating verbal humour will be addressed in general and in relation to subtitling. The empirical analysis of the German subtitles of three US American sitcoms, *The Big Bang Theory*, *New Girl* and *Grace and Frankie*, will serve as a basis for the argument. I will examine what kinds of language play occur in the database and which translation strategies have been used.

2 Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling

In Western European countries like Germany and France, foreign-language films or television series are usually made accessible to domestic audiences via dubbing. Nevertheless, subtitling is also highly relevant for audiovisual translation, as those who are relatively proficient in a foreign language often prefer to watch the original film with the translation in subtitles.

Subtitling can be defined as “a translation practice that consists of presenting a written text, generally on the lower part of the screen, that endeavours to recount the original dialogue of the speakers, as well as the discursive elements that appear in the image ..., and the information that is contained on the soundtrack” (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 8). Subtitles can be distinguished according to whether they have been produced in the same language as the audio, or in a different language. In the first case, we are dealing with intralingual subtitles, which are primarily intended for the hard of hearing; in the second case, we are dealing with interlingual subtitles – the subject of the analysis at hand (cf. Schröpf 2008: 27).

Requirements for effective interlingual subtitles are (1) a semantically adequate rendering of the original dialogue, (2) synchronous appearance with the dialogue, (3) sufficient reading time for the recipient (cf. Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 9), (4) unobtrusiveness “because they make you feel you are understanding the original as you hear it” (Morgan 2001: 164), and (5) adherence to the author’s intentions “in a style as close as possible to the original” (Morgan 2001: 164).

However, the criteria for good subtitles are not always easy to fulfil, which is mainly due to the technical constraints influencing the subtitler’s work, notably space and time restrictions. As a subtitle usually consists of one or two lines with a maximum of 41 characters each (cf. Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 9), subtitling often necessitates a considerable amount of shortening. Bearing in

mind that subtitling entails a change from the spoken to the written mode, some of these abridgements only pertain to features of orality (cf. Schröpf 2008: 54), such as discourse particles, repetition and swear words. When technical factors like dialogue speed or cuts (cf. below) require omissions, these are often more substantial. Nevertheless, “an ellipsis or gap in the (subtitled) dialogue may be filled with information the viewer obtains from the images on screen” (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 50–51).

In order to meet criterion (3), subtitles have to respect the average reading speed of the audience, which may vary, depending on factors like the target audience’s age or their previous exposure to subtitles (cf. Schröpf 2008: 23). Accordingly, a subtitle of maximum length should remain visible on the screen for six seconds, commonly referred to as the “6-second rule” (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 96), whereas very short subtitles consisting of only a word or two may fade out after one second.

This requirement can be challenged by two competing factors, namely synchrony (2) and shot changes. Synchrony means that the dialogue in the audio and the subtitle should appear more or less at the same time, and that the subtitle should also fade out when the audio stops, or no longer than one or two seconds after (cf. Belz 2008: 95). While a dialogue partner is speaking, however, a shot change, or *cut*, may take place. As cuts punctuate the action, “the general rule is never to carry a subtitle over a cut unless there is no alternative” (Morgan 2001: 162, quoting one of the freelance subtitlers working for *Channel 4*), i.e. the subtitle is supposed to fade out before a cut, and a new subtitle should appear shortly after the cut. Of course, this is not always possible, especially in action films where one cut usually follows another, but also in dialogue where the camera frequently shifts from one dialogue partner to the next.

Although this very brief introduction to the criteria for good subtitles as well as the technical constraints they are influenced by is not meant to be exhaustive, it certainly provides a summary of the main challenges in subtitling. It also illustrates why subtitling has often been considered a case of adaptation rather than translation proper: “For some, the activity falls short of being a case of translation proper because of all the spatial and temporal limitations imposed by the medium itself” (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 9).

Given the inevitable omissions in comparison to the audio (cf. Belz 2008: 101), and the foreign language proficiency of those who consume the films with interlingual subtitles, the audience is likely to notice that the subtitles often do not entirely correspond to the audio. This discrepancy is sometimes perceived to be a lack of translation quality, which explains why interlingual subtitles have a relatively poor reputation in many dubbing countries (cf. Díaz Cintas and

Remael 2007: 55–56). Apart from omissions, a reason why the audience may be dissatisfied with the subtitles are alterations, i.e. passages where the lexical material does not constitute a semantically-equivalent translation of the audio. One linguistic phenomenon closely associated with such alterations is verbal humour.

3 Verbal Humour in Translation

The most central category of verbal or language-based humour is the pun, which is described by Schröter (2010: 139) as follows: “Puns rely on the fact that some distinct meanings may be expressed through formally similar or even identical elements in a language. If one or more of such elements, and their context, are intentionally arranged in such a way that two or more of these distinct meanings are evoked almost simultaneously, we have a pun.” If the form of the elements concerned is identical, we speak of a pun based on homonymy or polysemy, like in (1), or a *perfect pun*. If the two elements are formally similar, as in (2), we are dealing with a paronymous or *imperfect pun* (cf. Zwicky and Zwicky 1986: 494).

- (1) I did a theatrical performance about puns. Really it was just a play on words.
- (2) I told my friend about the creative writing class I took, and she said that she had a simile experience.

The first pun exploits the polysemy of *play* with meaning₁ ‘the act of doing something in a jocular manner’ and meaning₂ ‘stage representation’, while the second one is based on the formal similarity between *simile* and *similar*. Like most jokes, puns rely on a moment of incongruity, more specifically “[t]he unforeseen linking of different words, meanings or ideas creates the comic surprise characteristic of puns” (Litovkina et al. 2008: 250). The recipient usually interprets the pun in terms of one reading first (e.g. ‘stage representation’), which is most coherent in the given context, before they become aware of the second reading (‘the act of doing something in a jocular manner’), which, due to its surprise effect, creates a conceptual clash. This explanation constitutes a highly-simplified summary of the view that humour typically relies on incon-

gruity – an idea postulated by the *Semantic Script Theory of Humour* (Raskin 1985).¹

Even though wordplay is not always used with humorous intent,² it is “inseparably linked to humour which in turn is linked to laughter” (Chiaro 1992: 4).³ In order to make their audiences laugh, sitcoms rely heavily on the use of verbal humour – not only puns, but various types of language play, such as modified phraseological units, creative lexical blends and rhyming.⁴ Some authors insist on the distinction between puns as the purest form of verbal humour and less central categories that do not rely on a script opposition, by speaking of wordplay in the former case and language play in the latter (for instance Hempelmann 2008). As the aspect of script opposition will not be relevant for the analysis, and language play in the three sitcoms is typically employed to create humour, I will use *language play* for all types, synonymously with *verbal humour*.

That verbal humour is often pointed out as a potential case of untranslatability is due to the fact that “puns rely so much on the formal idiosyncrasies of one language that a direct translation would have to lead to a loss of playful ambiguity” (Schröter 2010: 142). In the discussion about how to translate verbal humour, translation scholars usually refer to Delabastita’s nine translation methods for puns (which can also be resorted to for other types of language play): (1) rendering the source-text pun by a target-language pun, which can be relatively similar, but also semantically deviant; (2) translating the pun by a non-punning phrase; (3) translating the pun by a related device, for example, language play in a broader sense; (4) omitting the passage with the pun altogether; (5) recreating the pun in the target language without translating it; (6) translating a non-punning passage by a pun, for instance to compensate for previous omissions of puns; (7) inserting completely new textual material containing a pun, for the same reason as in (6); (8) using “editorial techniques”, such as explanatory footnotes; (9) a combination of the eight methods described (Delabastita 1996: 134).

1 Even though incongruity is “the most widely supported candidate for the role of ‘essential ingredient’ in humour” (Ritchie 2004: 46), the seeming universality of incongruity has been repeatedly contested in recent years (cf., for instance, Ritchie 2004: 80; Veale 2004: 424).

2 Cf. Schröter (2005: 88–95) for a discussion of the functions of language play.

3 Cf. Veiga (2009: 160), however, on the fact that “humour and laughter are not always correlated.”

4 Cf., for instance, Schröter (2004: 159) for an overview of language play strategies.

As far as the audiovisual translation of verbal humour is concerned, “the screen translator faces additional problems that are due to the special nature of the texts (s)he has to produce” (Schröter 2004: 157). Furthermore, film is a poly-semiotic medium, and language play may thus not only be based on language, but also be integrated into the visual code, which increases the likelihood of untranslatability (cf. Pisek 1997: 50). Nevertheless, the translation methods in Delabastita (1996) are generally applicable (and, in fact, applied) to audiovisual translation, with the exception of some methods irrelevant for this type of translation. As far as subtitling is concerned, this goes especially for editorial techniques (8), and it is also unlikely that new textual material is added (7), given the space restrictions. To my knowledge, making up for lost puns by translating non-punning passages by a pun (6) is theoretically possible, but rarely applied, as discrepancies between the audio and the subtitle are avoided. The analysis at hand will recur to the remaining translation methods, in combination with a classification specifically designed for subtitles by Belz (2008: 163–164), who focuses on the aspect of literal vs. non-literal translation.⁵ That this is an important aspect will become obvious in the following summary of results from publications on subtitling language play.

Some publications examine the types of verbal humour appearing in their data and the question whether the humour has been maintained in the interlingual subtitles. Some of the most interesting results have been presented by Schröter (2004, 2005, 2010), based on an English film corpus, and Williamson and de Pedro Ricoy (2014) in their analysis of *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis*. Both note a reduction of language play in the interlingual subtitles: Williamson and de Pedro Ricoy (2014: 174) speak of 24%, Schröter of roughly a third (2004: 167). According to Schröter (2004: 167), “[t]he more complex or language-specific a wordplay is, the more likely it is to be simplified, replaced or omitted in the translation.” With regard to the types of language play appearing in their corpus, both Williamson and de Pedro Ricoy (2014: 174) and Schröter (2005: 227) state that homography was absent in the corpus; while the former emphasise the importance of homonymy and paronymy in their data, the latter points out the high number of polysemous and paronymous puns. The most striking difference between their results, however, is that homophony ranks second in frequency in Williamson and de Pedro Ricoy’s analysis (2014: 174), while it is virtually non-existent in Schröter’s corpus (2005: 227). This can possibly be ex-

⁵ Various other, but all relatively similar, classifications have been suggested, for instance in Gottlieb (1997: 210), Schröter (2005: 234) or Williamson and de Pedro Ricoy (2014: 176).

plained by the language difference of their corpora – whereas the French language seems to have a disposition for homophony, this is less true for English.

Other authors deal with the quality of subtitling, for instance Belz (2008), who analyses the German subtitles for *The Office*. Her main finding is that humour tends to be lost in literal translations (2008: 158). This is also why Pisek (1997: 50), who has studied the subtitling of *Fawlty Towers*, claims that the semantic meaning of the original cannot always be preserved. Asimakoulas (2004: 831) draws a similar conclusion for the Greek subtitled version of *Airplane!* and *Naked Gun*, stating the following: “Generally speaking, wordplay was adequately rendered when the subtitler changed the norm scheme, coming up with creative recontextualisations of the humorous sequence The majority of wordplay instances did not fare well though; there was considerable loss of linguistic humour when the subtitler tried to retain the original structure.” Likewise, Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 223) claim that “half-translations and semi-substitutions also occur, unfortunately not always with good results”, but they also admit that substitution and compensation strategies, often considered the best solution, are not always applicable.

4 An Analysis of *The Big Bang Theory*, *New Girl* and *Grace and Frankie*

4.1 Material and Method

Three US American sitcoms, *The Big Bang Theory*, *New Girl* and *Grace and Frankie*, or, more specifically, the first season of each, constitute the minicorpus for this analysis. I will introduce these series very briefly in the following and from now on refer to them as BBT, NG and GF. The most successful of the three and at the same time the least recent one is BBT, which deals with two nerdy physicists, Sheldon Cooper and Leonard Hofstadter, who share an apartment, and their equally nerdy friends Rajesh Koothrappali and Howard Wolowitz. The series depicts their daily life and their ups and downs with the female world, above all their attractive, but not-too-bright, neighbour Penny. The series will comprise at least ten seasons and premiered in 2007. NG, first broadcast in 2012, has also met with tremendous international success and is currently in its fifth season. The main protagonist is Jess, a young teacher who, after a painful break-up with her boyfriend, has to find a new place to live and moves into a flat with three young men, Nick, Schmidt and Winston, each with their own

peculiarities. The most recent one is GF, which is exclusive to users of the online platform *Netflix*. So far, only the first two seasons have been broadcast, but the producers have already agreed on a third season. The sitcom is about two women in their seventies who have to invent a new future for themselves after their husbands declare at a dinner together that they want to get divorced and marry each other after twenty years of a secret homosexual affair.

As the first seasons of BBT, NG and GF comprise 17, 24 and 13 episodes, a total of 54 episodes have been browsed for instances of verbal humour. They display a large inventory of different language play devices, such as creative blends, alliterations and misunderstandings. For practical reasons, I have restricted the types of language play to be analysed to the ones most commonly occurring, namely:

- (1) Homonymy
- (2) Near-homophony / paronymy
- (3) Polysemy
- (4) Creative lexical blends / neologisms
- (5) Literalisation of figurative language
- (6) Phraseological modifications
- (7) Rhyme / alliteration
- (8) Misunderstandings / slips of the tongue

The first step consisted in finding out which types of language play the three sitcoms rely on.⁶ After that, the analysis focused on the translation methods employed in the German subtitles. For the analysis, I have established the following categorisation, which is an adaptation and combination of Delabastita (1996: 134) and Belz (2008: 163–164) (cf. Section 3):

- (1) Literal translation with the intention of creating verbal humour in the target language
- (2) Equivalent translation to create verbal humour in the target language
 - a. Translation by language play of the same category
 - b. Translation by language play of a different category
- (3) Using the unadapted language play of the source language in the target language subtitle (zero-translation)

⁶ It is important to note that the inventory at hand is not exhaustive – firstly because some types of language play as well as borderline cases between language play and non-play have been excluded, and secondly because the author is a native speaker of German and has certainly missed out on several instances of language play in English.

- (4) Translation by a passage deprived of language play (neutralisation)
- (5) Deletion

An important distinction is the one between (1) literal translation and (2) an adaptation for the target language audience. This adaptation may be realised through an equivalent in the same language play category (2a), for instance replacing an alliteration with a different one, or through a different type of language play (2b), such as a substitution of phraseological modification by rhyme. Occasionally, subtitlers for languages in which the audience is likely to be proficient, above all English, use an instance of language play as it is in the original (3), hoping that the audience will be able to make sense of it. Another method employed where no adequate TL language play can be found is a neutral translation without any form of verbal humour (4) or a deletion of the passage containing language play altogether (5).

4.2 Types of Verbal Humour Used in the Three Sitcoms

This section will begin with a brief overview of the types of language play appearing in the data set⁷ before describing the characteristics of the verbal humour in each of the series.

What occurs most frequently in the data (22 times) is humorous lexical blends / creative neologisms, as in episode 7 of GF, where Grace describes a man who she has met on an online dating platform:

- (3) <Grace> He's a yacht owner, slash architect, and his screen-name is Yachtchitect.

Typical cases of puns based on homonymy and polysemy are also relatively frequent. Puns relying on homonymy appear 12 times in the data, which can be illustrated by example (4) from episode 15 of BBT. In this scene, Rajesh, Howard and Leonard pass by Sheldon's office and see a beautiful lady talking to Sheldon, wondering who she might be.

⁷ The categories are not all mutually exclusive – to mention only one example, there is an overlap between paronymy and phraseological modification, as some modifications are paronymous.

- (4) <Leonard> Maybe she's his lawyer.
 <Howard> Well, she's free to examine my briefs.
 <Leonard> Howard...
 <Howard> I know, I'm disgusting.

This example plays on the homonymy between *briefs*₁ 'court case documents' and *briefs*₂ 'underwear', while example (5) exploits the polysemy of *rich*, namely 'fatty' and 'wealthy':

- (5) <Grace> The trouble with your socialist dessert is it's very rich. <she grins; no reaction> It's a joke.

In this example from GF-episode 10, Grace refers to a dessert prepared by the left-wing Frankie. Overall, language play based on polysemy occurs 15 times in the data. Another type is the relatively heterogeneous category of paronymy (13 times), including proper puns based on paronymy or near-homophony, as in example (6) from NG, but also other types of language play involving formal similarity.

- (6) <Jess> How many ears does Daniel Boone have? He's got a right ear, a left ear and a front-ear <Jess is touching her nose at the same time as saying front-ear>. Frontier. Get it?

This example in episode 15 is based on the near-homophony between *front ear* and *frontier*. The high degree of paronymy is due to the fact that the two elements only differ in their intonational pattern.⁸

Two types of language play also relevant for the translation of wordplay are the two partly overlapping categories of literalisation of figurative language (15 times) and phraseological modification (13 times). Phraseological modification implies any manipulation of a fixed sequence of words, usually also including cases without formal alteration, i.e. idiomatic phraseological units where the literal level of meaning is activated.⁹ So, strictly speaking, some instances of literalised figurative language can be considered to be phraseological modifications, too. As formal alteration and the literalisation of phraseological units

⁸ Admittedly, *frontier* and *front ear* constitute a borderline case between near-homophony and homophony, as one could argue that they are true homophones in connected speech.

⁹ Cf. Jaki (2014: 28–30) for a more detailed account of the role of literalisation in phraseological modification.

create different problems in translation, phraseological modification only includes cases with formal manipulations in this analysis, while literalisation includes single-word expressions as well as multi-word expressions without formal alterations. The two strategies can be exemplified by example (7) from NG-episode 17, and (8) from GF-episode 5:

- (7) <Jess> And then he gives me his car, just hands me the keys. It's, like, so, ugh... Rich people, they're always giving you their cars. It's like "let them eat cars."
- (8) <Grace> Well, you're an idiot. You want to know why your son has drug problems? Look in the mirror.
<Frankie> Go fuck yourself.
<Grace> I can't, Frankie. I broke my hip.

While (7) is a contextual adaptation of the famous quotation *Let them eat cake*, attributed to Marie Antoinette, (8) uses the literal meaning of *to fuck oneself*, which, in a non-jocular usage, does not involve any sexual activity, but merely constitutes an abuse.

One type of language play that differs from the others is another relatively heterogeneous class: misunderstandings / slips of the tongue. In authentic discourse, they do not classify as language play, as they are usually not used on purpose; in scripted dialogue, however, the screenwriters often recur to such phenomena to create humour. Misunderstandings appear 12 times in the data and are mostly due to ambiguous reference, but also to problems with sight, hearing, foreign language skills, etc. A hearing problem is the cause for example (9), which appears in GF-episode 12, where the two protagonists go out to a night club. Given the loud music and Frankie's generally deteriorating hearing capacities, she misunderstands the word *noisy*:

- (9) <Grace> I know! It's a little noisy, though.
<Frankie> Who's from Boise?

The last category used for the analysis at hand is rhyme or alliteration, which occurs 8 times in the dataset, for instance in BBT-episode 2, where Sheldon invites Leonard, who is leaning against the wall, to help him clean Penny's apartment (10):

- (10) <Sheldon> If you have time to lean, you have time to clean.

That the three programmes make use of verbal humour devices in a slightly different way is demonstrated in Fig. 1, which shows the types of language play employed in the first season (1: homonymy; 2: paronymy / near-homophony; 3: polysemy; 4: creative blends / neologisms; 5: literalisation; 6: phraseological modification, 7: rhyme / alliteration; 8: misunderstandings / slips of the tongue).

BBT uses a vast array of language play techniques, more precisely all eight types analysed in this paper. What the screenwriters rely on most, however, seems to be homonymy, creative blends / neologisms, rhyme / alliteration and misunderstandings / slips of the tongue. The picture is different with GF, where rhyme/ alliteration does not appear at all. In contrast, polysemy and misunderstandings are used most here, with the latter resulting from Frankie's hearing problem. Even though NG, like BBT, resorts to all possible techniques, it hardly makes use of misunderstandings and displays a clear preference for creative blends / neologisms, as well as for paronymy / near-homophony and, to some extent, also modified phraseological units.

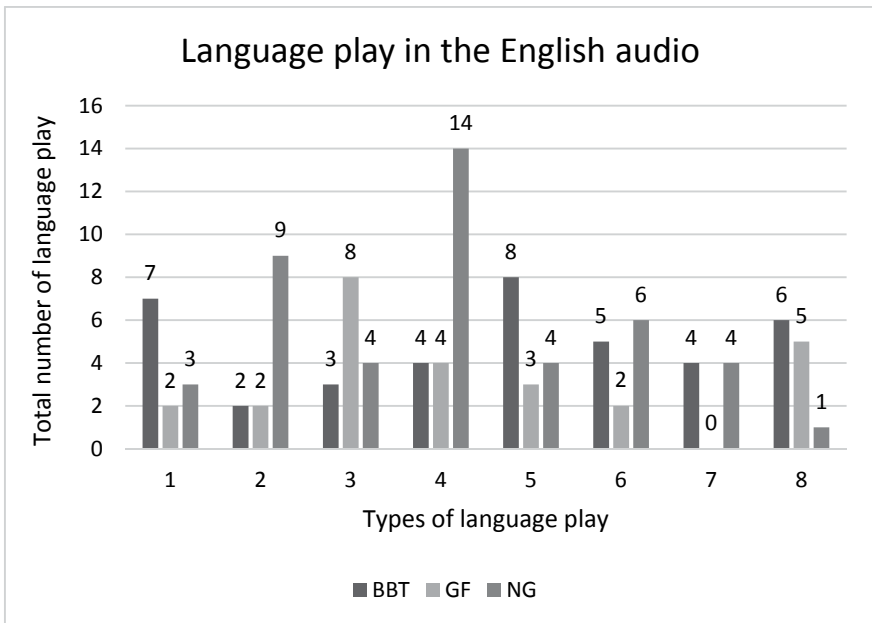


Fig. 1: Instances of language play classified according to the eight categories

4.3 An Analysis of the German Subtitles

As regards the translation strategies used in BBT, NG and GF, the analysis shows that language play was neutralised, i.e. rendered in a passage without verbal humour, in 33 instances out of 138.¹⁰ This can be illustrated by example (11) from GF-episode 12:

- (11) *Original:*
 <After a night out at a club, Grace and Frankie are looking for their parked car and address a homeless man>
 <Frankie> Excuse me. Have you seen a Leaf?
 <Homeless man> I see lots of leafs. I also saw your car get towed.
Subtitles:
 Verzeihen Sie, bitte.
 Wir suchen einen Leaf.¹¹
 Hier stehen viele Autos rum. Ich sah auch,
 wie Ihr Wagen abgeschleppt wurde.

The passage in the original is based on the homonymy of *Leaf* as a car brand and *leaf* as the parts of a plant, a homonymy without an equivalent in the German language, which is certainly why it is neutralised by simply using *Autos* 'cars'. The number of neutralisations is not as high as in Schröter (2005) and Williamson and de Pedro Ricoy (2014) (cf. Section 3). But if we add those instances that were intended to create a TL-wordplay by literal translation, but where the language play was in fact lost, the results are comparable. Not even once in the corpus was there a passage containing verbal humour that was entirely deleted.

The most striking result is the high number of literal translations with the obvious intention of retaining the humour in the target language – 55 instances, the absolute majority in the data (as in example 12); by contrast, an adapted translation involving a target language equivalent was only attempted 16 times (as in example 13).

10 The number of translations counted here exceeds the total number of language plays in the audio. This is due to the fact that we sometimes have an instance of language play consisting of several components, for example four literalisations of plant metaphors in a row. This was only counted as one instance of language play, but each of these elements in the row may have been translated by a different strategy.

11 The | indicates the end of a subtitle.

- (12) *Original:*
 <Jess, after she played the bells with the kids> That was off the hammer!
 <Irritated faces>
 <Jess> The hammer in the bell.
 <Irritated faces>
 <Jess> Tough crowd.
Subtitles:
 Das war total der Klöppel.|
 Der Klöppel in der Glocke.|
 Schwieriges Publikum.
- (13) *Original:*
 <Penny practices mixing cocktails>
 <Walowitz> I'd like to try a Slippery Nipple.
 <Disgusted look from Penny>
Subtitle:
 Ich hätte gern
 Sex On The Beach.

In example (12) from NG-episode 7, Jess creates a new idiomatic phraseological unit, with an imagery suitable for the context of bell playing. The example was translated directly, (correctly) assuming that a literal translation would recreate the verbal humour in German in this case.

(13), which is taken from episode 8 of BBT, is a literalisation since it focuses on the imagery behind the designation of a specific cocktail, *Slippery Nipple*. At first sight, the German version does not appear to be an equivalent for the target language audience since the name of the cocktail is English. Nevertheless, it constitutes an adaptation because cocktails usually have international designations, and *Sex On the Beach* is far more widespread in Germany than the virtually unknown *Slippery Nipple*. The adaptation is highly effective, as the components of *Sex on the Beach* can be literalised to achieve a similar effect. This is important as the visual code (in addition to Howard's tendency to hit on Penny), clearly showing Penny's disgust, implies that Howard may have made a remark with a crude double entendre.

That literalisation is more frequent than adaptation is surprising insofar as it contradicts in part the following finding in Williamson and de Pedro Rico (2014: 175–176): “Equivalent translation with retention was the most frequently used strategy Literal translation with retention and literal translation with omission were also often used, while the other strategies were used more spar-

ingly, but with similar frequency.” Given the high amount of literal translations on the one side, and the criticism concerning their effectiveness on the other (cf. Section 3), the literal translations will be studied more closely below in order to understand why the subtitlers of the three programmes have resorted to this translation strategy so frequently.

In some cases, the subtitlers did not translate the verbal humour at all, as in example (14), where Nick and Schmidt present their new app to Jess’s new boyfriend Russel (NG, episode 20):

- (14) *Original:*
 <Nick> We now present to you... Real Apps.
 <Schmidt and Nick at the same time> Real Apps.
 <Nick> The prototype.
 <Russel> Relapse?
Subtitles:
 Denn jetzt gibt es...|
 Real Apps.
 Real Apps. |
 Der Prototyp. |
 Relapse?

Here the near-homophony of *Real Apps* and *relapse* (with the only difference lying in the intonational pattern, as in example 6) is exploited to create verbal humour. There is no direct equivalent in the German language, and the subtitler was clearly hoping that the audience might be able to understand *relapse*.

An interesting question to address in the context of how wordplay is subtitled is which types of wordplay are translated by which strategies. The data seem to suggest that some types indeed lend themselves more to a specific translation strategy than others (Fig. 2):

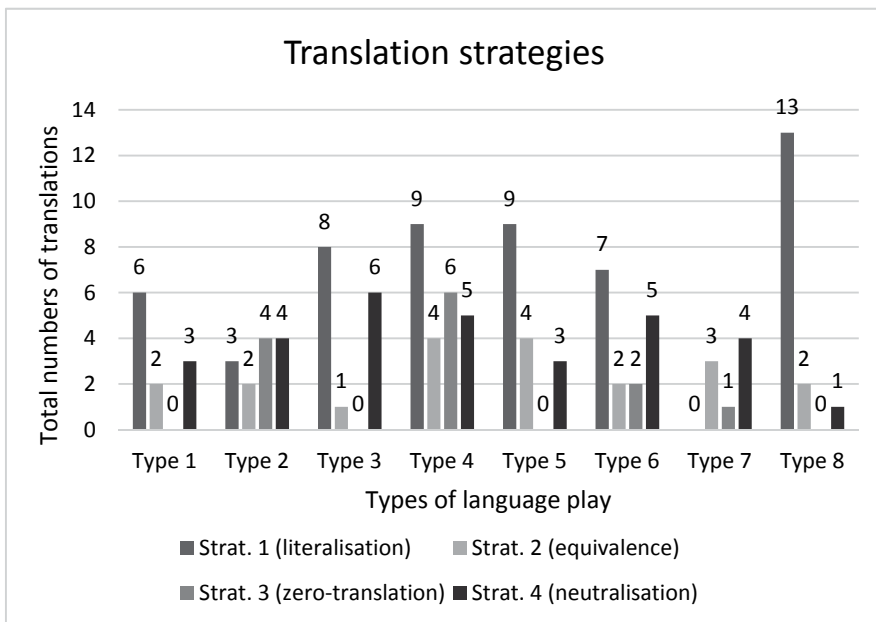


Fig. 2: Distribution of translation strategies over language play types; strat. 5 (deletion) does not occur in the data

An unexpected result is that the most common translation strategy with type 1, homonymy, is literal translation, bearing in mind that homonymy is said to be highly language-specific. A closer look at the data, however, reveals that the literal translations are less typical instances of homonymy (for instance the homonymy between the name *Penny* and the coin *penny*)¹² that travel relatively well from English to German. By contrast, typical homonymies, as in example (11), were exclusively translated by neutralisation (strat. 4). The high number of literal translations is also striking for type 8 (misunderstandings) and type 3 (polysemy). For the former, the tendency can be explained by the fact that a considerable number of type 8-instances was marked by ambiguous reference, which is often not language-specific. As regards the latter, a remark by Schröter (2010: 143) provides a convincing explanation: “I also think that the similarity of polysemous relationships across different languages, and possibly even

¹² This example might even be considered a borderline case between homonymy and polysemy.

across language families, is greater than has usually been recognized in the discussions on pun translation.” As literalisations display an overlap with polysemy, the tendency of type 5 for literal translation is also comprehensible. However, it is unclear why the subtitlers have relied so much on literal translation with phraseological modifications (type 6), and it is especially with this type that the literal translations have proved to be ineffective. The only type where literal translation has not been used is rhyme / alliteration.

Another noteworthy tendency is that creative blends / neologisms (type 4) are most likely to remain untranslated (apart from an otherwise high inclination for literal translation). Supposedly, the audience can nevertheless understand these even if they are not very proficient in English, especially creative names like *Wolowizard* (BBT, episode 9), *Nerdvana* (BBT, episode 14) or *Hanksgiving* (NG, episode 6), thanks to the relative internationality of some of the elements. This finding confirms the results from Schröter (2005: 235).

The last result that needs commenting is that most neutralisations appear with type 3- and type 6-humour. A possible interpretation of the latter could be the general difficulty in translating phraseological modifications (cf. Leppihalme 1996). Polysemous language play, however, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, seems to allow for literal translation more than many other types of language play. The data actually show that most neutralisations for type-3 instances could alternatively have been rendered as language play in the target language.

A hypothesis for explaining the high number of literal translations and neutralisations, which is unexpected from a purely linguistic perspective on the data, is that the characteristics of subtitling often determine the choice of a specific strategy. This would be due to the fact that translating wordplay in subtitles raises additional problems to those inherent in the translation of wordplay in general, especially space and time restrictions. As Belz (2008: 158) emphasises, an exact assessment of alternative solutions would require the use of subtitling software, which is, however, not possible in the present context, so the conclusions will have to remain tentative. A more serious problem is that “in many cases the German subtitles seem to build on the dubbing rather than on the SL [source language] text” (Schröter 2004: 165). A look at the subtitles in BBT, NG and GF shows that this is partly true for the three programmes at hand: The subtitles in BBT are more or less a direct transcription of the dubbed dialogue, which is why only examples from GF and NG will be closely studied in the following. The subtitles for GF are also largely based on the dubbed version but sometimes also differ from it considerably, which implies that the dialogue has at least been checked concerning its suitability for subtitles. However, this

has not always been done successfully, as the following paragraph will demonstrate. Only in NG have the subtitles been entirely based on the original version.

Even though this paper does not focus on translation quality, it is noteworthy that the number of little effective translations is considerable, especially among literal translations. In addition, it is striking that a high number of instances of language play have been neutralised, whereas, from a purely linguistic point of view, there seem to be equivalents in German that would retain the verbal humour. Let us consider an example from GF (episode 5):

(15) *Original:*

<Grace's daughter Brianna, who buys frozen yogurt in a specialised frozen yogurt shop after having smoked marihuana, is talking to one of the shop assistants> Brian, you have wet nuts.

Subtitle:

Brian, Sie haben feuchte Nüsse.

Here the translation problem is based on the polysemy of *nuts*, i.e. the nuts you can eat and male testicles, a polysemy that also exists in German. This suggests a direct translatability at first sight, which is true for the testicle interpretation. However, this approach is not very felicitous, which also shows that general recommendations about how to translate a specific type of language play are to be avoided. *Wet nuts* (or *wet walnuts*) is a dessert topping made of walnuts and maple syrup, but there is no dessert topping called *feuchte Nüsse* in German. As a check via Google suggests, *feuchte Nüsse* is something rather negative in the German context, nuts that have not been stored appropriately and risk rotting. In combination with the visual components – Brianna's obvious enthusiasm for the toppings – the interpretation makes little sense. This shows again how important it is to take into account the multimodality of the medium for assessing the quality of subtitles rather than just the transcribed dialogue (cf. Schröpf 2008: 40). In this case, it might have made sense to choose a solution like *Brian, Sie haben ja tolle Nüsse*, given that nuts as a topping is also widespread in German. The suggestion only has one additional character and should hence not cause a problem as regards space and time restrictions. However, the German dubbing reveals that the reason why *wet nuts* has been translated as *feuchte Nüsse* is a simple adoption from the dubbed version. So the reason for particular translation decisions in subtitles are sometimes not due to the technical restrictions imposed by subtitles but to those initially imposed by dubbing. Similarly, a study of other problematic literal translations in the corpus also shows

that, in the majority of examples, the translation decision cannot be explained in terms of the characteristics of subtitling as such.

In a few instances it seems to be the multimodality of the medium, however, that makes the solution at hand nearly unavoidable. This can be seen in example (6) from NG-episode 15, which will be repeated here and completed by the German subtitles:

(6) *Original:*

<Jess> How many ears does Daniel Boone have? He's got a right ear, a left ear and a front-ear. <she points to her nose while saying it> Frontier. Get it?

Subtitles:

Wie viele Ohren hat Daniel Boone?|

Er hat ein rechtes Ohr,

ein linkes Ohr und eins davor.|

Davor. Kapiert?

The problem does not only arise from the fact that Daniel Boone is not as well known in Germany as in the USA, but also that there is no adequate near-homophony in German that would account for the visual component, Jess pointing to her nose. An alternative would be to come up with a completely different language play, maybe dealing with a person who is more known in Germany (as it was in fact done in the dubbed version). However, this makes more sense in dubbing, where the recipient cannot be irritated by the strong discrepancy between the audio and the translation for it: “[T]he subtitler might prefer not to distract the viewers from the original joke, which most can understand anyway. Instead of attempting a difficult transfer, the result of which would be liable to criticism, the subtitler might then consider an unpretentious translation of the hard-core meaning of the troublesome sequence to be the best solution” (Schröter 2004: 168). So, in this case, the translation seems to be a feasible solution, imposed by the nature of the type of translation, although the translation in the subtitle cannot be considered as highly felicitous.

The last problem I would like to address is the considerable proportion of neutralisations. In an important number of instances, the neutralisations concern passages that are very language-specific, such as (11). Given that an adaptation may have required the creation of a completely different language play, which may have again irritated the audience, the neutralisations seem to be a necessary evil here. In such cases, the neutralisation can thus be considered as influenced by the medial conditions of subtitling.

In other examples, rhymes and alliterations have been neutralised. This seems to be an acceptable solution, bearing in mind that, even if they constitute language play, they are certainly less likely to cause laughter than many other types of language play. This can be illustrated by (16) from NG-episode 10, where Schmidt's friend tries to hit on Jess:

(16) *Original:*

So why don't you ditch that zero and get with the hero.

Subtitle:

Schieß die Null ab

und entscheide dich für den Helden.

5 Conclusion

This paper has explored how verbal humour is used in the US American sitcoms *Grace and Frankie*, *The Big Bang Theory* and *New Girl*, and, in particular, how it has been translated for the German subtitles. All three series resort to a vast array of language play strategies but with different preferences. A close inspection of the subtitles has revealed that language play has either been translated literally, adapted for the target language audience, neutralised by non-play or provided in an untranslated form. The number of literal translations – a technique often rightly criticised for its lack of quality – was strikingly high in the data set, and the number of neutralisations was also relatively substantial. With regard to the translatability of language play, previous research has suggested that some types of humour might lend themselves better to specific translation techniques, for instance polysemy seems to travel better than phraseological modifications. Some of the results, for example the frequent literal translation of homonymy and phraseological modification, contradict this hypothesis. At least in the latter case, this finding points to areas where the translations in the corpus have often not been very effective. It also demonstrates that there are numerous instances of homonymy that can be translated directly since the category as such is relatively heterogeneous. Last but not least, this paper has also investigated potentially problematic translations, especially literal translations but also the frequent neutralisations. It would have seemed logical that such translations are due to the technical restrictions influencing subtitling, especially space restrictions, which indeed occasionally constitute a problem in the subtitling of humour. The data at hand, however, do not entirely confirm this assumption and suggest three major reasons for the high number of literal trans-

lations and neutralisations: (1) The subtitles were often a simple transcription of the dubbed version, notably in BBT, and to a lesser extent in GF, which is why the technical constraints of dubbing are also relevant for the translation process. (2) Some non-felicitous translations are simply mistranslations as a result of the general challenge of translating highly language-specific verbal humour. (3) More than technical restrictions, the polysemiotic character of film narrows down the translation options. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that some instances of language play are closely intertwined with the visual components. On the other, the fact that the audio is always co-present sometimes prevents the subtitlers from choosing a new, different language play. The result is a neutralisation or a literal translation, hoping that the audience is proficient enough to make sense of the subtitles with the help of the audio.

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