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When Words and Images Play Together in a Multimodal Pun: From Creation to Translation

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to discuss the specifics of a multimodal pun functioning in the English source text of popular science discourse and its translation into Ukrainian. Multimodal pun is considered as a combination of two inhomogeneous elements – verbal and visual, – that is a variety of intersemiotic game/play intended for producing a humorous effect. While the leading role in a multimodal pun belongs to its verbal component, the visual one performs either a creative or an amplifying function. As a result of a case study, four strategies of reproducing multimodal pun in interlinguistic translation are outlined.

Keywords: intersemiotic game/play, language game/play, multimodal pun, popular science discourse, translation strategy

1. Introduction

Pun has always been considered an exemplary case of translation difficulties. We share this opinion following our own specification of translation difficulties as

linguistic or textual formations of different levels that stay as barriers on the way of successful interlinguistic and intercultural communication due to objective differences in the structures and rules of functioning of the source and target languages as well as due to the subjective perception of these differences by the translator who has to exert considerable creative effort to overcome them (Rebrii, 2012, p. 106).

Similar position as to the linguistic nature of difficulties underlying pun translation is, for instance, peculiar to Dirk Delabastita who claims that

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the translation of a playful text confronts the translator with the unique semantic structure not just of a text but of a language as well. Wordplay can therefore be seen as a kind of signature, epitomizing each language's unique individuality and therefore quite naturally resisting translation – but at the same time calling for the authenticating gesture of translation as a counter-signature in another language (Delabastita, 2014, p. 13).

Bistra Alexieva's (2014) analogous opinion is grounded on the suggestion that “one of the basic difficulties in pun translation lies in the fact that there exists interlingual asymmetry on top of the intralingual asymmetry” (p. 140). But what happens when pun gets beyond the limits of language and employs additional visual means (pictures) for its formation and effect? Does it make the translator's decision-making easier, or, on the contrary, more difficult? Does this kind of wordplay require some special strategy and if so, what could it be like? To answer these and possibly other adjacent questions, we accept the term “a multimodal pun” and set the aim to investigate the specifics of its creation in the source text and recreation in the target text. For a similar approach, see, for instance, Eline Zenner and Dirk Geeraerts (2018), who use the same term alongside “image macro” as a specific example of “online content consisting of text superimposed on an image” (p. 167). We give preference to “pun” over “macro”, because we see it predominantly as a variety of language game/play where an image plays a secondary role, while for macros, it is an image that serves as a starting point for creating a formation with a humorous effect.

2. Current linguistic approaches to the concept of language game/play

When Ludwig Wittgenstein introduced the concept of a language game in his fundamental *Philosophical Investigations*, he meant it in a very broad philosophical sense as basically any use of language, emphasizing that the term “‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” [quotes original] (Wittgenstein, 1953/1986, p. 127). The author characterized language games as “countless” and pointed out that their

multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten (p. 127).

Among multiple and (intentionally?) mismatching examples of language games, Wittgenstein mentions “translating from one language into another”, which gives modern researchers grounds to claim that his dichotomous (process-product) understanding of language games corresponds to that of translation.

Fifteen years (1938) prior to Wittgenstein, Johan Huizinga published his famous *Homo Ludens*, in which he described “playing” as the third function of the human being and “just as important as reasoning and making” (1838/1980, p. ix). He is believed to have given games a cultural dimension when he wrote that “play is to be understood not as a biological phenomenon but as a cultural phenome-

non” (Huizinga, 1838/1980, p. ix). Huizinga declared the play-concept to be also expressed in language as he stated that language allows man

to distinguish, to establish, to state things; in short, to name them and by naming them to raise them into the domain of the spirit. In the making of speech and language the spirit is continually ‘sparking’ between matter and mind, as it were, playing with this wondrous nominative faculty [quote original] (p. 5).

Another important element of his play-concept that serves as a link with language is rules, in respect to which Huizinga uses a number of categorical statements:

These rules in their turn are a very important factor in the play-concept. All play has its rules. [...] The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt. [...] Indeed, as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses. The game is over (p. 11).

Philosophical approaches to the concept of game/play bear striking resemblance to psychological ones as can be seen on the example of Sergei Rubinstein’s *Foundations of General Psychology* (1940) where he, similarly to Wittgenstein and Huizinga, accentuates both procedural and creative nature of a game:

Human game is procreation of activity with the help of which the human being transforms the reality and changes the world. The essence of a human game lies in its ability to reflect the reality and to transform it (1989, p. 65).

Then he adds:

The game realizes the actions whose aims are important for an individual according to their own internal meaning. This is the main trait of a gaming activity, and its charm, and its beauty as compared to other forms of creativeness (p. 67).

Though insightful, all these philosophical and psychological observations as to the nature and essence of game/play (the distinction between these two nominations is another and very interesting issue translation-wise, taking into account that it is not relevant for some languages, like Ukrainian or Russian) are of little help when it comes to conducting an applied kind of philological research implying the selection and analysis of some verbal material.

Leaving apart some slight variations, we can single out two major avenues of integrating the concept of language game/play into linguistic studies. The first one was mainly formed in the former Soviet Union and still cherishes its tradition on the post-Soviet territories. The proponents of this interpretation understand under language game(s) “all those phenomena when the speaker is ‘playing’ with linguistic forms, when his/her liberal attitudes to language receive an additional aesthetic task” (Zemskaya, Kitaigorodskaya, & Rozanova, 1983, p. 172). It should be noted

at this point that some researchers associate this understanding of language game(s) mainly with the author's "intention to produce a comic effect" (p. 173), "to evoke a smile, to cause laughter, to create a joyful atmosphere or ironic attitude" (p. 174). This function of language game(s) is associated with two types of speech behavior: buffoonery and wit. While the former "is rooted in the folk humor culture where funny is everything rude, low, unusual, inverted" (p. 175), the latter is "connected with a deeper expression of the speaker's thought and a more vivid and expressive form of rendering meaning" (p. 175). At the same time, language game(s) are associated with a number of other (and none less important) roles like "implementing emotive or expressive function of language that is aimed at conveying the speaker's attitude towards what's being said" (p. 174), or "serving as a means of 'softening' speech that reduces the seriousness of tonality and thus relieves the tension in the utterance" (p. 174), or "conveying the thought in a more precise manner and conveying the information in a more figurative and expressive manner" (p. 174–175), or "imitating the person or presenting the situation more vividly" (p. 175).

One of the most detailed definitions of language game(s) in this interpretation belongs to Aleksandr Skovorodnikov:

Language game is such an employment of rhetoric devices (devices of speech expressiveness) that is directed at the creation of witty, predominantly comic, utterances possessing the qualities of aptness, originality and unpredictability (2010, p. 62).

Though we do not quite agree with limiting language game(s) to producing comic/humorous effect, we absolutely share the opinion that different rhetoric or stylistic devices can be used as a medium for language game(s). This opinion seems contrary to the second major interpretation of language game(s) as reducible to a limited number of stylistic devices, namely those, whose main characteristic is semantic ambiguity. Not accidentally, the proponents of this approach give preference to the term "wordplay" over "language game". One of the most renowned of them, Dirk Delabastita (2014), claims that "wordplay may come in many kinds and uses" (p. 2), but at the same time admits that in most cases it is "based on either homonymy (i.e. different words have an identical form) or polysemy (i.e. one word has different but related senses)" (p. 5). This admission leads to identifying wordplay with pun and defining it in the following way:

Wordplay is the general name for the various textual phenomena in which structural features of the language(s) used are exploited in order to bring about a communicatively significant confrontation of two (or more) linguistic structures with more or less similar forms and more or less different meanings (p. 128).

Thus, both approaches to understanding language game/play may be viewed as overlapping with pun occupying the intersection area.

3. Multimodal pun as a variety of intersemiotic game/play

The comic effect of a multimodal pun results from “the combination of two inhomogeneous parts: verbal (language/speech) and non-verbal (belonging to other than language sign systems)” (Sorokin & Tarasov, 1990, pp. 180–181). The authors of this definition presuppose that “the correlation of inhomogeneous parts in the text structure is one of the ways of producing communicative tension” (p. 181), which, in its turn, allows: 1) to attract a potential recipient’s attention to both speaker and information; 2) to make a recipient interested in this information and to stir their cognitive need to obtain it in the accessible form; 3) to consider this information as truthful by creating the atmosphere of trust towards its source (p. 182). Needless to say that multimodal pun cannot be reduced to language games proper. As a formation involving the signs of different semiotic origin, multimodal pun should rather be labeled as a variety of intersemiotic game/play.

To some extent, multimodal pun can also be described in terms of Michail Bakhtin’s “heteroglossia” (a.k.a. “double-voicing”) initially conceived as

an alien speech in an alien language that serves for the refracted expression of the author’s intentions. The word in this speech is a special double-voicing word. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: direct intention of the speaking character and refracted one of the author (Bakhtin, 1975, pp. 137–138).

Riitta Oittinen (2000) was the first who offered to adapt this concept to the situation with illustrations as part of the creolized text when she wrote:

[...] on the one hand, there are the visual codes that are part of the reader’s entire situation; on the other hand, there is also the interaction of words and images as constructions of the reader’s mind (2000, p. 100).

This idea immediately brought to our mind Bakhtin’s (1975) another term – “a hybrid construction” (p. 118). This is how it is described by the author:

A hybrid construction is a formation which [...] in fact, is the mixture of two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two ‘languages’, two semantic and evaluative worldviews. There is no formal – compositional and syntactical – line of division between these utterances, styles, languages, worldviews; the division of voices and languages takes place within one syntactical unity, often – within one simple sentence, often the same word belongs simultaneously to two languages, two worldviews that intersect in one hybrid construction and as a result has two different meanings [quotes original] (p. 118).

If we complement this list of the mediums for hybrid constructions with semi-otic systems, Bakhtin’s concept and its definition can be successfully spread on a multimodal pun as well.

4. Multimodal pun in a popular science discourse

Pun is considered a prerogative of a literary discourse, but recently it has been more and more actively penetrating the sphere of scientific communication, or, to be more precise, popular science discourse.

Popular science is in fact a fusion of two different discourses – scientific and literary, the phenomenon described by Basil Hatim (2005) as “competing discourses” or “discourse within discourse”:

This is when a given discourse borrows from or effectively ‘hijacks’ another discourse (Bakhtin’s ‘double voicing’), relaying in the process all kinds of marked meanings [quotes and brackets original] (p. 68).

In case of scientific–literary interaction, “marked meanings” mentioned by Hatim should embrace expressive devices including language game(s), in particular, wordplay.

Thus, multimodal puns help attract the audience’s attention to scientific facts, which otherwise are at risk of remaining undervalued or even unnoticed, especially by younger readers. In this respect, the combination of verbal and visual material in a semantically challenging formation is even more pragmatically powerful, as young readers, whom popular science texts are often intended for, are used to consuming information in the visual format. This is the case, when images can still be “more preferable than linguistic signs for many reasons: they are more graphic, faster perceived and seldom require additional commentaries” (Maksimenko, 2012, p. 95).

In the process of this research, we got in touch with one of the authors of the book that was used as the source of illustrative material and received his comment that completely confirmed the above considerations:

The goal of using humor in the book is first, in the hopes that the reader enjoys it. Physics can be heavy stuff, and a little bit of humor lightens the tone. Secondly, we hope that it puts the reader at ease, gives them the sense that the topic is at their level and not intimidating, and something they are fully capable of understanding (D. Whiteson, personal communication, February 3, 2022).

5. Strategies of translating multimodal pun: a case study

When it comes to translating multimodal formations where language is combined with some other semiotic system, the translator should always keep in mind that two separate parts within them (in our case, the verbal and the visual ones) “nonetheless operate seamlessly to create the text’s overall meaning” (Ketola, 2016). According to Anne Ketola,

this gives us a reason to suspect that visually presented information might, in some cases, alter the way in which the words are translated in multimodal texts combining words and images. If the image, in one way or another, changes the meaning of a certain word with which it is presented, the translation of the word might no longer be what could be considered as its most obvious ‘word-for-word’ translation.

Following this statement, it would be correct to assume that in respect to our object of research *in principio erat Verbum*, or in other words that the formation of a multimodal pun in the author's mind begins with the word(s) which are supplemented and/or augmented with images at some later stage. Not accidentally, Nilce M. Pereira (2008) sees relations between the words and the pictures as those between an original and its translation proceeding from the fact that in the majority of cases the text is "usually the first work to be created, the pictures being derived from it" (p. 105). But what is the role of an image as an instrument in this game? Our analysis of numerous examples allows to conclude that images carry out two possible functions: 1) a *creative* one when a visual component is directly involved in the pun production by provoking in the reader's mind the second (clashing) meaning in addition to the first one provided by the verbal component; 2) an *amplifying* one when both meanings of a pun are deduced from its verbal component while its visual component serves as an illustration to make the humorous effect more salient.

Consequently, translating a multimodal pun with a creative visual component presents a more serious challenge for the translator due to the fact that asymmetric semantic relations between source and target languages often require the use of different compensatory transformations that will potentially lead to the collision between words and images in the target text. In the following example, the pun is based upon the separate meanings of the words *particle* and *collider*, as well as their joint meaning in *particle collider*. The recipient's first interpretation proceeds from the information contained in the compound *particle collider* (and presumably present in their mind) as a piece of machinery designed and constructed to carry out complex experiments in physics. The second interpretation proceeds from the picture of a woman with a club (*collider*) in her hand trying to break into pieces some small objects (*particles*). Thus *particle collider* acquires a new meaning: "a club for breaking objects into particles":

In translation, the pun is virtually lost, since the translator could not find necessary equivalents suitable for expressing both meanings, and instead recreated its first meaning that was only implied in the original:



Figure 1: The "Particle collider" pun in the original and translation

On the contrary, while translating a multimodal pun with an amplifying visual component, the translator feels relatively at ease because he does not need to take care of the correlation between words and pictures. In the following example, the pun is based on juxtaposing two meanings of *dark* as used in *dark matter/energy* and in *dark chocolate*. While in the former expression *dark* is used metaphorically, because *dark matter* does not absorb, reflect, or emit electromagnetic radiation (like light) and is, therefore, difficult to detect; in the latter expression *dark* literally means the color of the chocolate

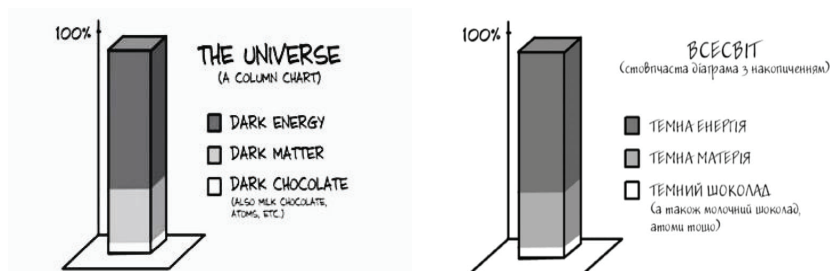


Figure 2: The “Dark energy/matter/chocolate” pun in the original and translation

In translation, the pun is not only preserved per se, but reproduced on the basis of direct equivalents of its verbal constituents. The graphics does not participate in pun production and remains unaltered as well:

Our next task was formulating possible strategies for dealing with multimodal puns in interlinguistic translation. Though of a hypothetical nature, these strategies as a whole are based on what may be called a general course of the translator’s decision-making aimed, on the one hand, at providing the highest level of similarity between source and target texts or their elements, and on the other hand, at providing for those subtle and elusive qualities of translation that dozens of researchers from Eugene Nida to Lawrence Venuti characterized as its “naturalness” and “fluency”. Of course, the decision in favor of a particular strategy in each case is taken not only on the basis of available linguistic possibilities but with regard to a plethora of other – subjective by nature – factors such as text typology, discourse type, translator’s individual preferences/skills/experience, influence of other agents (editors, clients), current translation norms, ideology, etc.

In order to reaffirm or to refute the formulated strategies, we conducted a case study on the material from *We have no idea. A guide to the unknown Universe* by Jorge Cham and Daniel Whiteson (2017) and its Ukrainian translation by Oleksandr Astashov *Гадки не маємо. Подорож невідомим Всесвітом* (Cham & Whiteson, 2019).

According to the first strategy (of “direct translation”), the verbal component of the source multimodal pun is translated and the visual one remains intact.

Transferring the verbal component with the help of direct equivalents does not automatically entail preserving the wordplay (as we could see in the above example). It is also important to preserve the original ambiguity rooted initially in verbal semantic asymmetry, but also in interaction between words and pictures. In the following example, the pun is constructed on the basis of two different meanings of *massive* – 1) relating to mass; 2) exceptionally large:



Figure 3: The “Mass” pun in the original and translation

In translation, direct equivalents ensure similar wordplay effect amplified by the puzzled expression on the face of the first interlocutor:

According to the second strategy (of “transformation/compensation”), either verbal or visual component of the source multimodal pun undergoes certain transformation(s), because methodologically

translators and illustrators share common translation procedures in their respective activities”, such as “addition, omission, explicitation, condensation and others that characterize verbal translation” [quotes original] (Pereira 2008, p. 107).

In the following example, the pun is based upon double meanings of expressions *big bang* and *black hole* referring simultaneously to the sphere of physics and sexual encounters:



Figure 4: The “Big bang/Black holes” pun in the original and translation

In translation, one of the expressions – *big bang* – was substituted with a different expression of both sexual and physical reference – *блакитні гіганти* (liter-

ally, “blue giants” where “blue” is a slang word for “gay”), which made it possible to preserve the wordplay.

According to the third strategy (of “zero translation”), the verbal component of the pun remains in its original form completely or partially, and the visual component remains intact as well. In the situation of English–Ukrainian translation when two involved languages employ different alphabets (Roman and Cyrillic, correspondingly) this strategy can yield any positive result only when the original verbal element of the pun is familiar to the target reader as well. In the following example, we deal with what may be called “an acronym pun”, that is the one in which the combination of the first letters of an expression/compound nomination reproduces the form of another word. In our case, acronym *LIGO* stands for *Laser Interferometer Gravitational–Wave Observatory*. The wordplay is based upon the formal resemblance between *LIGO* and *LEGO* (famous brand of children’s toys). While *LIGO* is present and properly explained in the verbal context, *LEGO* only appears as part of the multimodal pun:



Figure 5: The “LIGO/LEGO” pun in the original and translation

In translation, the key words of the pun *LIGO* and *LEGO* remain untranslated, but because the former is deciphered in the context

Вони розробили експеримент з назвою LIGO (лазерна інтерферометрична гравітаційно-хвильова обсерваторія)

and the latter is potentially known to the Ukrainian recipient, the implementation of the “zero translation” strategy allows to preserve the wordplay’s intended comic effect:

According to the fourth strategy (of “omission”), visual component of the source multimodal pun is omitted in translation. In pursuit of this strategy, the verbal component may be preserved in the verbal context or omitted either. In our case we have three acronym-based puns in one situation referring to three different types of physical objects two real and one fictitious. What makes these puns even funnier is the fact that acronyms imply some semantic bridge between the meaning of the “behind-the-acronym” word and characteristic features of the objects in question. In the first pun, acronym *W.I.M.P.* stands for *weakly interactive massive particle*, but at the same time coincides with the noun “wimp” that means

a weak and cowardly person. The ties between the two elements of the wordplay are obvious due to the presence of “weak” in their definitions. In the second pun, acronym *M.A.C.H.O.* stands for *Massive Astrophysical Compact Halo Objects*, but at the same time coincides with the noun “macho” meaning a man who is aggressively proud of his masculinity. The not-so-obvious ties between the two elements of the wordplay reveal themselves through the association of a macho (man) with a big tough guy. Both puns are present and explained in the context:

This candidate particle is known by the acronym WIMP, which stands for Weakly Interacting Massive Particle (i.e., something with mass that interacts weakly with regular matter). [...] For a while, people considered other ideas, such as really huge blobs of normal matter the size of Jupiter. To distinguish them from WIMPs, they were given the nickname MACHOs (Massive Astrophysical Compact Halo Objects) (Cham & Whiteson 2017, p. 28).

The main function of the image in this case is to introduce the third pun absent in the verbal context – *N.E.R.D.S.*, which stands for *neutral electric random decay spin*. The funny fact is that this definition was invented by the authors with the purpose to oppose “nerd” as a person who lacks social skills and is boringly studious to “wimps” and “machos”. The writers did it in a playful form by offering the reader to distinguish real physical objects from a fictitious one:

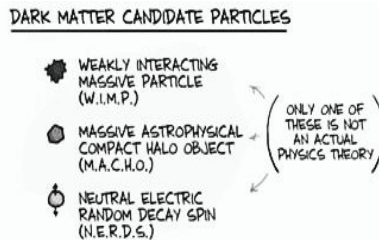


Figure 6: The “W.I.M.P./M.A.C.H.O./N.E.R.D.S.” pun in the original

In translation, the picture and the third pun are omitted whatsoever, thus signaling the translator’s defeat in the game of witticism. The decision to remove the visual component can be explained by the fact that the translator failed to reproduce the other two puns either and gave preference to their “zero translation”.

6. Conclusions

Intersemiotic aspects of language use and translation have been in the focus of researchers’ attention since Roman Jakobson (1971) proclaimed that

the study of communication must distinguish between homogeneous messages which use a single semiotic system and syncretic messages based on a combination or merger of different sign patterns (p. 705).

Since then, more and more different forms of verbal-visual collaboration have been distinguished and studied. Multimodal pun, which is considered a variety of intersemiotic game/play, is formed on the basis of verbal wordplay, in which the visual component performs either creative or amplifying function. The former implies a more active role of a picture in generating humorous effect as it helps provoke in the reader's mind one of the pun's clashing meanings. The latter implies that the picture serves as an illustration to already illuminating verbal component. A case study conducted on the illustrative material from *We have no idea. A guide to the unknown Universe* by Cham and Whiteson confirmed four anticipated strategies of reproducing popular science multimodal pun in English–Ukrainian translation, those of “direct translation”, “compensation/transformation”, “zero translation” and “omission”. The prospect of further research is determined by the necessity to expand current research in order to obtain enough information to make valid conclusions as to the productivity of the above strategies.

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