

## Strategies of Subtitling Humor in American Comedy

### Movies

By

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### الملخص باللغة العربية:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في مشكلات ترجمة الفكاهة في الفيلم الكوميدي الأمريكي "غباء في غباء". الفيلم "غباء في غباء"، الذي صدر في عام 1994، كُتب بواسطة بيتر فارلي، وبيني يلين، وبوبي فارلي. تحدد الدراسة أيضًا تقنيات الترجمة التي يستخدمها المترجمون العرب للتغلب على التحديات اللغوية والثقافية والفنية المرتبطة بترجمة الفكاهة في "غباء في غباء"، وتكشف عن المتغيرات التي قد تكون أثرت على اختيار المترجمين. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تستخدم الدراسة نموذج بيدرسن (2005) لترجمة المراجع الثقافية ونظرية الفكاهة اللفظية العامة (GTVH) التي طورها أتياردو وراسكين (1991) وتم توسيعها بواسطة أتياردو (1994، 2001، 2002). من خلال تطبيق نظرية الفكاهة اللفظية العامة ونموذج بيدرسن (2005) على ترجمة الفكاهة بين الإنجليزية والعربية، تهدف الدراسة إلى تقييم موثوقيتهما، من خلال تحليل البيانات لتقييم نقاط القوة والضعف في هذه النظريات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفكاهة، تقنيات الترجمة الفورية، أتياردو وراسكين، التحديات اللغوية، الترجمة

إلى العربية، الكوميديا الأمريكية.

### Abstract

This research examines issues associated with humor subtitling in the American comedy movie "Dumb and Dumber". The movie "Dumb and Dumber," released in 1994, was written by Peter Farrelly, Bennett Yellin, and Bobby Farrelly. The study also identifies the subtitling techniques used by Arabic translators to overcome the linguistic, cultural and technical challenges associated with translating humor from "Dumb and Dumber" and reveals the variables that may have influenced the choice of subtitlers. Additionally, the research

utilizes Pedersen's (2005) model for subtitling cultural references and the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) developed by Attardo and Raskin (1991) and further elaborated by Attardo (1994, 2001, 2002). By applying the GTVH and Pedersen (2005) model to the subtitling of humor between English and Arabic, the research aims to evaluate their reliability, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of these theories through data analysis.

**Keywords:** *Humor, subtitling Techniques, Attardo and Raskin, Linguistic Challenges, Arabic Translation, American Comedy*

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Overview of The Research

Humor is a common aspect of our daily lives, appearing in activities such as jokes telling, ironic responses to questions, playful teasing, and humorous reflection on different aspects of life. Moreover, we are always exposed to comedic elements in movies, talk shows, and television shows that evoke laughter. Despite of its prevalence, humor remains largely ambiguous, because of the complex cooperation of social, psychological, linguistic, philosophical, biological, historical, and indigenous factors that define it. The natural complexity of humor has obligated scholars to propose different theories aimed at defining its nature.

Defining humor is difficult because of the complexity arising from the difficulty in differentiating between several types of humor identified in categorization of humor such as those suggested by (Feigelson 1989 and Norrick 1993). Furthermore, there exists a significant cultural contrast, wherein different societies reveal preferences for certain types of humor in social interactions. For instance, certain societies use forms of humor over others; for instance, the avoidance of jokes with sexual connotations in Arabic films and television programs, but in contrast it is commonly used in western films and programs.

In addition to linguistic and cultural problems, dealing with humor in subtitling represents an additional burden, as technical, linguistic and textual limitations significantly limit the translator's solution options. According to this background, numerous theorists in the field of translation (e.g. Attardo 2002; Delabastita 2004;

Asimakoulas 2004; Zabalbeascoa 2005; Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007; Vandaele 2010) have examined the nature of these challenges implied in the translation and subtitling of humor. These studies addressed cultural aspects of humor, linguistic differences between the source and target languages, and the creation of similar humorous effects in the target text. The results, suggestions and solutions of these studies deal exclusively with the translation and subtitling of humor in European languages, where the cultural gap is smaller than between European languages and Arabic. Moreover, there is relatively little research on subtitling English-language television comedies, particularly in the Arab world, where there is a great lack of research in subtitling comedies.

The present study examines problems in subtitling humor in the American comedy movie *Dumb and Dumber*. The study also defines the subtitling strategies used by Arabic translators to solve the technical, linguistic and cultural problems in translating humor and reveals the factors that might influence subtitlers' decisions. However, the study is based on the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH; Attardo & Raskin 1991, Attardo 1994, Attardo 2001, Attardo 2002) and Schjoldager (2008), model of subtitling extralinguistic culture-bound references (ECR).

### 1.2. Problem of The Study

Translating humor is a major challenge due to the cultural, linguistic and contextual differences between source and target audiences. This study examines the intricacies and difficulties of translating humor from English to Arabic in the context of subtitling

selected American comedies. The main problem consists of the following aspects, the first aspect is Cultural nuances, as Humor is deeply rooted in cultural contexts that may not have direct equivalents in other cultures. For example, American humor often relies on specific cultural references, idiomatic expressions, and societal norms that may be unfamiliar or nonsensical to Arabic-speaking audiences. The challenge is to retain the essence and impact of humor while adapting it to a different cultural framework. The second one is Linguistic differences, as English and Arabic have significant structural and idiomatic differences that affect how humor can be conveyed. Puns, and linguistic jokes that work well in English may not translate directly into Arabic, potentially resulting in a loss of humor. The problem is finding creative linguistic solutions that preserve the meaning and comedic impact of the original joke. The third one is Contextual Interpretation, as Humor often depends on context, including visual cues, character dynamics, and situational irony, which may not translate well across languages and cultures.

### **1.3. Objectives of the research**

The main objective of this study is to identify and categorize the different forms of humor found in the American Comedy Movie “Dumb and Dumber” and to examine the essential problems these forms of humor pose when translating or subtitling from English to Arabic entail. It also examines the strategies that Arabic subtitlers use to address these problems. Furthermore, the study aims to reveal the factors that may influence translators' decisions. The objectives of this research are outlined as follows:

- 1- Presenting a classification of the types of humor in comedy movies, particularly Dumb and Dumber.

2- Identifying the linguistic and cultural problems of different types of humor when subtitling Bumb and Dumber into Arabic.

3- Examining the Arabic subtitles and exploring the techniques employed by Arabic translators to tackle the difficulties of subtitling humor.

#### **1.4. Methodology of the Research**

The study uses the analytical model of Pederson (2005), which includes twelve micro-strategies that translators can use when subtitling audiovisual content. Pedersen (2005, p.115) states that these micro-strategies serve to identify whether the translator's focus is on the source text or the target text.

Pedersen suggests 10 strategies, indicating a focus on the source text: direct transfer, calque, direct translation, and oblique translation. The remaining 8 strategies demonstrate the translator's tendency toward the target text, including explicitation, paraphrase, condensation, adaptation, addition, substitution, deletion, and permutation (Pedersen, 2005, P. 115).

The study also relies on Attardo's approach of humor, known as the General Theory of Verbal Humor (1984), which serves as a fundamental theory in linguistic humor analysis. According to this theory, a situation can be humorous when it involves opposed

scripts. This framework facilitates the examination of humorous situations within the chosen comedy movie.

## 2. Literature Review

The analysis of humor employed the well-known linguistic theory of Humor Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) by Raskin 1985 and later refined by Attardo in 1991 as the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH). According to

GTVH, humor arises from a fundamental mechanism called “Script Opposite,” where humor occurs from the incongruity of two compatible scripts in a single context. Furthermore, to create humor five additional factors called knowledge resources must be considered: logical mechanisms that explain the incongruence, the situation, the goal, and the narrative strategy. This hierarchical arrangement of knowledge resources enables a formalized approach to understanding humor. Moreover, GTVH is designed to interpret jokes, it also provides a comprehensive method for analyzing humor.

Humor, as mentioned above, is difficult to categorize and translate. It's subjective, so there are no categories. Humor is a vague term that is difficult to define. However, it can be defined as “a quality whose consequence is fun” (Diaz et al., 2007, p. 212). Regarding translation, Spanakaki (2007) explains the different ways to translate humor. One of them is word play. He also identified four types of puns: homophony (when two words have the exact spelling and pronunciation but have different meanings), homograph, when words are spelled the same but have different meanings, and parity (with a slight difference in spelling and sound). Verbal irony is a third tool for translating humor, a rhetorical technique, a discrepancy between what a person speaks and what he understands. According

to Leppihalme (1997), “allusion” is often used as a synonym for “reference,” and there is little agreement among researchers about the definition of this term. According to Leppihalme, allusion is “a variety of uses of preformed linguistic material in its original or modified form and of proper names to convey often implicit meanings” (p. 3). Leppihalme explains that innuendos can be humorous.

Irony occurs when the emphasis is placed melodramatically, thereby creating a sense of humor. However, the context of irony always influences the relationship between words and actions. It's important to determine whether something is entertaining to the viewer. Ross (1998) states that humor arises from a conflict between what is expected and what happens in the joke. This is the most outstanding feature of humor. It involves an ambiguity or double meaning that intentionally misleads the audience (Ross, 1998). Culture and time have a strong influence on humor and not just irony. A joke that may be funny to one person at one time may cause complete indifference in a different place-time context (Chiaro, 2018). Humor can often elicit different reactions from people of the same cultural background. Therefore, it is crucial to have a common denominator to understand and share the same humor (Chiaro, 2018). This is what happens when a film tells a joke about an Irishman. The Irishman has been the underdog in England's past. An Italian audience may need help understanding the joke. As mentioned above, an Irishman could become a carbine to make it easier for the Italian viewer to understand (Chiaro, 2018).



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### **3. Theoretical Framework**

#### **3.1. The Definitions of Humor**

Humor primarily involves jokes (spoken or written) and actions that induce laughter or provide amusement (these actions can also be described verbally) (Critchley, 2002; Ritchie, 2004). Humor has various definitions, with two notable ones being: Crawford (1994: 57) describes humor as any communication that elicits a 'positive cognitive or affective response from listeners.' Similarly, Romero and Cruthirds (2006: 59) define humor as 'amusing communications that generate positive emotions and thoughts in individuals, groups, or organizations. Additionally, some dictionaries offer simple definitions, serving as a useful starting point for analyzing the contemporary use of the term.

#### **3.2. Linguistic Theories of Humor**

Linguistic theories of humor aim to identify the fundamental nature of humor. However, many theories of humor focus primarily on its philosophical and psychological aspects. In contrast, the study of humor from a linguistic perspective provides insights into semantic phenomena and the cognitive processes that play a role in interpreting meaning (Abdalian, 2005, P.4). Until 1985, there was no comprehensive theory of humor that could account for humor at all linguistic levels (Attardo, 2003, P.1287), and most linguistic research was limited to analysis of puns and irony. Nevertheless, the most significant linguistic theories of humor are Raskin's (1985) Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH) and Attardo's (1994) General Theory OF Verbal Humor (GTVH), as detailed in Attardo's 2001 work.

#### **3.3. Semantic- Script Theory of Humor**

Semantic Script Theory of Humor proposed by Raskin (1985) and changed the prevailing perspectives on studying humor. It is obvious that Semantic Script Theory is related to Incongruity Theories, and it determines “the semantic/pragmatic foundation of humor” (Attrdo,2003, pp.1288-1289).

Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principles are considered a good notion of the modern sematic theories of humor. These principles involve a set of conversational rules which should be followed by the listener and the speaker. In any humorous situation, there is typically a speaker and a listener. The listener assumes that the speaker will stick to Grice's cooperative principles. What evokes laughter is that the speaker intentionally or unintentionally violates one or more of these conversational principles.

Raskin (1985) proposes that humor or laughter establishes a form of “bona fide speech”: type of speech where a violation of one of Grice's maxims occurs (p.150). If the listener avoids bona fide speech, incongruity is resolved; however, sticking to it results in unresolved incongruity and no laughter. Raskin suggests that the “ability to understand a joke relies on the ease with which one can switch between bona fide communication and non bona fide communication) Abdalian (2005, p.21). Therefore, Raskin emphasizes the importance of the pragmatic components in SSTH to understand humor. Raskin (1985, p.177).

Raskin (1985), proposes that a text can be described as a joke when it is fully or partly compatible with two distinct scripts” (p.99). Moreover, Ritchie (2004) describes the term scripts as “structured

configuration of knowledge about a situation or an activity” (p.20). This implies that the script gives information about an event or activity it also determines how this action happened and how it is organized.

According to Attardo (2001), the script mentions to some interrelated information which illustrates “how a given entity is structured, what are its parts and components or how an activity is done” (p.2). Raskin (1985) describes script as “a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it” (p.8). This illustrates that the script can afford the speaker with the needed information. Attardo (1994) assumes two types of scripts: macro scripts and complex scripts. The Macro scripts are “clusters of scripts organized chronologically (200) such as restaurant script which includes a set of events which are arranged chronologically like “drive up to the restaurant, “be seated”, order food etc... (p.200). Furthermore, complex scripts are “scripts made of other scripts and not organized chronologically such as war scripts which contains scripts like army script, weapon script, weapon script, victory, or defeat script.

As stated by Raskin (1985, pp.107-114) script opposition can differ on various levels, the most important level is the lexical one, so that he suggests three levels of abstractness to all script oppositions:

**3.3.1** The concrete level which is known as lexical level it is found inside the text.

**3.3.2** The intermediate level which is a general one.

**3.3.3** The abstract level which is the main category of opposition.

In the abstract level there are three essential categories of opposition: actual/nonactual, normal/abnormal, possible/impossible. All these categories are examples of a basic opposition between real situations and unreal situations Attardo (1994, p.204). The first category of opposition illustrates the contradiction between the actual situation categorized in the setup of the joke and the nonactual or the un existing situation from the second script. The second opposition is created between normal situations or circumstances. The third opposition is between possible or probable circumstances of the first script. From these three categories, Raskin (1985) proposes other subcategories of opposition: good/bad, high/low, life/death, sex/non sex, absence/non absence. Therefore, many scholars agree that SSTH is totally a “semantic theory of humor” Attardo (1994, p.222). It also seeks to examine the different aspects which make a text or a situation humorous.

### **3.4 General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH)**

Attardo (2001, 2002) developed the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), which is related and appropriate to various types of humorous texts. This theory can help translators evaluate the difference between the translated text and the original text. It proposes that verbal humor can be evaluated based on six parameters (knowledge resources).

#### **3.4.1 Language (LA)**

Language (LA) “contains all the oral information necessary to verbalize a text. It regulates the precise wording and the arrangement

of functional elements within the text” (Attardo 2002: 176). It is important to recognize that the same message or information can be expressed in different ways, such as using synonyms or different grammatical structures. Therefore, jokes or humorous texts can be phrased, and written differently while still transferring the same meaning and impact. Preferably, when translating humor, only the language level is changed, while other knowledge resources remain unchanged.

### **3.4.2. Narrative Strategy (NS)**

It involves the narrative organization of the text, for instance, dialogue, riddle, and questions and answer. Moreover, it is the style used to present the joke.

### **3.4.3. Target (TA)**

The target parameter is the only optional one among the six knowledge resources (Raskin 1991, PP. 301–302). Furthermore, it determines who the (Butt) of the joke is. However, it contains the people or the group to whom the joke is directed or those who are expected to be stupid.

### **3.4.4. Situation (SI)**

This parameter expresses only the situation of the joke. It categorizes the joke “supporting ideas”, involving the “objects, participants’ tools, activities, etc ...” (Attardo& Raskin, 1991, P.303).

According to Carrell (1993), “the situation includes what Lloyd Bitzer (1968) characterized as the complex of person, objects, events, and relations as well as everything that each member of that complex brings to the situation of the jokes telling”(P.122). Furthermore, Attardo emphasizes that “SI KR is not unique to jokes at all, in the

sense that this is a function shared by all humorous and non-humorous texts” (2001, P.21).

### **3.4.5 Logical Mechanism**

Logical Mechanism (LM) resource is the confused and funny logic that does not exist in the real world, but is only limited to the world of humor and jokes. It justifies how senses are combined in humor and correspond to the stage of resolving the incongruity/resolution model (Attardo & Raskin, 1991, p. 306). However, it was the only Knowledge Resource that did not behave exactly as predicted by the hypothesis tested in the study, namely, the speakers should assess the degree of difference between jokes according to the level of the Knowledge Resource hierarchy in which the difference occurs.

### **3.4.6 Script Opposition (SO)**

The Script Opposition (SO) represents the two opposite scripts that exist in the joke or represent the joke, since they can be: normal/abnormal, real/unreal, actual/un-actual, possible/impossible or good/bad. This script opposition parameter is considered the simplest of all parameters. The SSTH makes this hypothesis, which is the most prominent among the other five parameters. However, it can be argued that its processing of transforming the main elements of the text to obtain the funny ending (punchline) was close to the logical mechanism parameter.

SSTH deals with the script opposition presented in the Semantic-Script Theory of Humor (SSTH). Attardo defines the script in the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) as "an interpretation of the text of a joke". Script Opposition (SO) is carried over into GTVH from SSTH and is characterized as the most abstract Knowledge Resources (KRs) (1994, p. 226).

### **3.5. Strategies of Subtitling Humor**

The study uses the analytical model developed by Pedersen 2005, which includes ten strategies that translators can use to be able to transfer meaning from one language to another. However, Pedersen (2005) suggests that these strategies help determine whether the translator's focus is on the source text or the target text. These strategies involve:

#### **3.5.1 transfer**

This strategy includes translating the source text directly and accurately as possible into the target text. Furthermore, the aim is a literal translation while retaining the original meaning.

#### **3.5.2 Paraphrase**

It is used when direct translation is not possible due to linguistic or culture differences. The translator rephrases the source text to convey the same meaning in a way that is more natural and understandable in the target language.

#### **3.5.3 Condensation**

It involves shortening the original text while retaining its essential meaning due to time and space constraints in subtitling. In

addition, this strategy is often necessary to fit the dialogue into the available screen space and time.

#### **3.5.4 Decimation**

It is a more extreme form of condensation in which the length of the source code is significantly shortened, often by omitting less important information, to ensure that the most important parts are conveyed within limitations.

#### **3.5.5 Deletion**

This strategy involves omitting parts of the source text entirely, usually because they are redundant, unimportant, or impossible to translate within the given constraints.

#### **3.5.6 Expansion**

The opposite of condensation, expansion involves adding information to the target text that is implicit in the source text. This strategy is used to make the translation clearer or to provide necessary context for the target audience.

#### **3.5.7 Transcription**

It is used for translating proper nouns, names, or terms that do not have an equivalent in the target language. This strategy involves transcribing the source text into the target language alphabet or script.

#### **3.5.8 Dislocation**



This involves changing the location of the translated text within the subtitle to match the on-screen action or to make it easier for the audience to follow the dialogue.

### **3.5.9 Registration**

When a segment of the source text is too difficult to translate, the translator may resign to leaving it out or substituting it with something else entirely, while trying to preserve the overall meaning.

### **3.5.10 Cultural Adaptation**

This strategy involves modifying the source text to make it more culturally relevant or understandable to the target audience. This can include changing references, idioms, or expressions that do not have a direct equivalent in the target culture.

## **4. Sample Analysis**

ST	TT
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<b>Lloyd:</b> uh-oh.	ماذا؟ ما الخطب؟
<b>Harry:</b> what? What's the matter?	لقد سكبت الملح. هذا هو الخطب.
<b>Lloyd:</b> (blows)	سكب الملح يجلب النحس. نحن نقود إلى الجانب الآخر من البلاد.
<b>Lloyd:</b> you spill the salt, that's what's the matter.	آخر ما نريده هو النحس. بسرعة، ألق ببعض الملح من فوق كتفك.
Spilling the salt is very bad luck	ما هذا بحق الجحيم؟ فات الأوان يا "هاري"
We are driving across the country.	حسنًا، من الفقيد الذي رماني بملاحه؟
The last thing we need is bad luck.	حسنًا، ذلك... كانت غلطة شنيعة يا سيدي صدقني أرجوك. ما كنت لأقدم على أي تصرف يهين رجلا بمثل حجمك.
Quick. Toss some salt over your right shoulder.	هل ستأكل ذلك؟ ماذا؟ ذلك؟ كلا أجلز حسنًا، كلاًز لقد فكرت في ذلك. أجل.
<b>Harry:</b> (thumps)	مازلت تريدها؟
<b>Sea Bass:</b> what the hell	لا، تفضل.

**Lloyd:** uh- oh, too little  
too late, Harry.

**Sea Bass:** Who's the  
dead man that hit me with the  
salt shaker?

**Lloyd:** (crowd  
murmuring)

(humming)

**Harry:** well... uh...

**Harry:** it was a terrible  
mistake, sir.

Please, believe me

I would never do  
anything to offend a man of  
your size

**Sea bass:** you gonna eat  
that?

**Harry:** what? That?

No ... yes ....

no.

Well ... no, it  
crossed my mind.

Yeah.

<p><b>Sea Bass:</b> (snorts, hawks)</p> <p>Still want it?</p> <p><b>Harry:</b> Nah, you go ahead.</p>	
<p><b>Script opposition (SO)</b></p>	<p>Yes vs No</p>
<p><b>Logical Mechanism (LM)</b></p>	<p>Analogy/retort</p>
<p><b>Situation (SI)</b></p>	<p>context/friends/gestures/group of strangers/gestures</p>
<p><b>Target (TA)</b></p>	<p>Harry</p>
<p><b>Narrative strategy (Ns)</b></p>	<p>Dialogue/picture/ sound</p>

The humor in the previous example arises when Harry (Lloyd's friend) spilled some salt while they were eating in a restaurant and

Lloyd told him that spilling some salt brings bad luck as they moved from their country to another country called Aspin. However, Lloyd told him that they were not moved to another country to bring bad luck, so Lloyd asked his friend Harry to throw some salt over his right shoulder, but Harry was a stupid man and throw the salt shaker itself away and the salt shaker was thrown a huge man called Sea Bass, then this man came to Harry's table and shouted in a loud voice who's the man that hit me with the salt shaker?, Harry was very afraid when he saw that man and listened his voice. Moreover, Lloyd began to point to his friend Harry by a humorous action to tell the man that his friend Harry is the one who hit him with the saltshaker. The subtitler in this example used the official equivalent to the source text and he omitted the sounds and gestures like crowd murmuring, humming which transfer the effect of humor in the target text and he depended on the scene itself in some situations. Furthermore, the retort response of the huge man makes a sense of humor in the source text which is not found in the translation of the target text.

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