



“That’s Not Funny Anymore”: Translating Cultural Humor and Its Equivalence in *Murder Mystery*

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ABSTRACT: This research aims to examine the translation of cultural humor in *Murder Mystery* (2019) and *Murder Mystery 2* (2023), and to investigate how cultural equivalence is achieved in Indonesian subtitles by applying Raphaelson West’s Cultural Humor and Eugene Nida’s Cultural Equivalence Theory. This research employed a qualitative method. Documentation technique is used for data collection, where data was collected from the dialogue and subtitles of both films, focusing on subtitles that contain cultural humor. The findings show that most cultural humor in films undergoes a change in form or loses its comedic effect in Indonesian translation due to cultural differences between the original speakers and the target audience, as well as limitations in subtitle space and time. Furthermore, several translation strategies are used, including literal translation, transference, cultural equivalent, and adaptation. However, not all strategies are able to preserve the comedic effect to the fullest extent. As a result, this research highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity and creativity on the part of translators in producing translations that are accurate in meaning and convey humorous elements to the target audience.

Keywords: Culture, Humor, Equivalence, Translation, Subtitles.

1. Introduction

In this era of globalization and digitalization, the audiovisual industry, particularly the film sector, has experienced rapid growth, contributing to the increasing popularity of video streaming. As the world becomes increasingly connected, audiovisual products have become highly diverse, and cities such as London and Los Angeles are emerging as centers of the global film industry, making audiovisual translation (AVT) increasingly important (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007). Streaming services, such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+, have enabled wider accessibility to films and series from various parts of the world. International audiences can now enjoy films from different cultures, languages, and backgrounds, without geographical restrictions.

In recent years, many people have become more interested in watching films and TV shows in their original languages. Subtitling becomes one of the important elements to ensure that audiences from different countries can understand the content of the films they watch. Therefore, with an increasingly critical audience, translation errors and choices are often subject to criticism. Audiovisual translators must consider various factors and elements to convey the intended message accurately. Subtitling becomes crucial in maintaining the integrity of the message and atmosphere, including the element of humor, which gives this type of translation a special place in translation studies.

Today, the practice of audiovisual interpreting has evolved into a vast field encompassing numerous elements. This field is widely researched because one of the main challenges faced in audiovisual translation is how to handle humor, especially when it is related to cultural and language differences.

Humor is a central feature of popular culture and everyday life in virtually every society worldwide, past, present, and likely future (Raskin, 2008). However, humor is also one of the most difficult aspects to translate, especially in the context of cross-cultural films. Moreover, humor is one of the most complicated aspects to face in audiovisual translation, the possibility of bridging the linguistic gaps in the translation of humor, and the degree of change that must take place with respect to the original script to obtain the same reaction from the source and the target audience (Heydon & Kianbakht, 2020). Additionally, humor translation is qualitatively different from "other types" of translation and, thus, one could not write about humor translation in the same way one writes about other types of translation (Vandaele, 2002).

Supardi and Sayogie (2019) found that translators are more likely to maintain the foreignness of texts full of source culture references rather than domesticating them for the target culture. Translating dialogues, especially those containing humor, is often a big challenge, as humor is usually rooted in local cultures and contexts that are difficult to translate directly. Farkhan et al. (2020) also found, in the context of food-related terms translation, that the absence of food ingredients from the source culture in the target culture is one of the factors that can determine the translator's strategy. A common problem in intercultural translation is that certain cultural elements do not exist in the target culture, making it difficult to achieve equivalence. Considering these issues, the purpose of this research is to investigate whether professional translations from established streaming platforms can convey the humorous effect of ST cultural humor. Therefore, an in-depth understanding of culturally based humor and its translation strategies is crucial in the context of audiovisual translation. This is one of the reasons that makes cultural humor and equivalence interesting to analyze.

While there is considerable research on humor translation, specifically examining cultural humor and cultural equivalence from English to Indonesian, further exploration is still required. Therefore, research on cultural humor and cultural equivalence from English to Indonesian is still needed. In this case, the researcher chose the films *Murder Mystery* (2019) and *Murder Mystery 2* (2023) as the medium for analysis. Both films combine mystery elements with comedy based on absurd situations, cultural stereotypes, and dialogue full of wordplay.

As films set in various international locations and featuring characters from diverse cultural backgrounds, the humor in these films is often closely tied to cultural references and social contexts that may not be easily understood by audiences from other cultures. Humor relating to American or European stereotypes may not be immediately relevant to Indonesian audiences, requiring adaptations or adjustments in translation. The sequel expands the scope of humor by involving more characters from diverse cultural backgrounds, which further adds to the complexity of translating humor into the films. Humor relating to intercultural oddities and national differences is an important part of the film's comedic appeal.

Previous research has explored the concept of cultural humor. The first research was conducted by Chairina (2015), titled "Humor Translation in The Simpsons Movie from English into Indonesian," which focuses on humor translation in The Simpsons Movie. The findings of this research indicate that although some types of humor can be effectively translated, challenges persist, particularly in terms of cultural references and wordplay that may not always be comprehensible to the target audience.

Qin et al. (2019) explored the challenges of translating verbal humor, specifically cultural jokes, from the novel *Huo Zhe* into the Indonesian language. The results of the analysis indicate that translations of cultural humor frequently fail to achieve dynamic equivalence, despite the use of various translation methods, including literal translation and free translation. Previous

research on translation equivalence has shown the challenges of achieving equivalence in translating humorous texts, especially those related to cultural jokes. Julian's (2023) research on *Equivalence Relations of Cultural Jokes In Indonesian Subtitles of Four Lions* also shows that pragmatic equivalence is the most dominant, although it often changes the humor element.

While some researchers explore the difficulties of translating cultural humor and cultural equivalence in general, a gap could be identified in terms of the specific focus on cultural humor and its equivalence in translation. This research aims to examine the translation of cultural humor in *Murder Mystery* (2019) and *Murder Mystery 2* (2023) and to investigate how cultural equivalence is achieved in Indonesian subtitles.

2. Method

This research employs a qualitative method, which aims to describe a situation, phenomenon, problem, or event using a combination of interview data, observation data, document data, and audiovisual data (Ward & Creswell, 2018). This research aims to understand phenomena experienced by research subjects, such as actions, behavior, motivation, and perception, through discussion and verbal descriptions in a specific environment using a naturalistic approach.

3. Findings and Discussion

Humor often relies on cultural references and common knowledge in common (Raphaelson-West, 1989). For Nida, the success of a translation is not only determined by linguistic accuracy, but also by an understanding of the prevailing cultures, idioms, and social norms. Cultural equivalence aims to convey the same meaning and effect to the target audience as perceived by the source audience (Nida, 2003). According to Nida, the translator acts as a cultural mediator who must adapt the translation to the target audience's culture.

Building on this theoretical understanding, the following analysis will focus on the application of concepts related to cultural humor and cultural equivalence in the collected data. The researcher will analyze the cultural humor and cultural equivalence based on the data tabulated above and determine how the translator addresses meaning equivalence. The researcher attempts to illustrate the following examples to provide more detailed insight.

3.1. Formal equivalence

| English Transcript (ST) | Indonesian Transcript (TT) |
|---|--|
| Suzi: You're the one whose shoes still got a sticker from Marshalls on it. Nick: They have name brands now! | <i>Sepatumu masih ada stiker Marshalls. Nick: Mereka punya merk ternama sekarang!</i> |

The dialogue above illustrates Nick's defense of his wife, who is humiliated for wearing shoes from a brand considered classless. In ST culture, there is an old stereotype about 'Marshalls' selling less prestigious items. Therefore, Nick's statement, in which he defends himself by saying that 'Marshalls' now sells prestigious brands, may contain an element of humor for ST audiences. However, for TT audiences who have no understanding of this stereotype or are unfamiliar with 'Marshalls' altogether, Nick's defense may have no meaning or even sound strange. The absence of 'Marshalls' stores in Indonesia is a major barrier to the translation of humor that relies on a cultural understanding of 'Marshalls' as an off-price retailer in America. 'Marshalls' is a chain of discount department stores in America that sells clothing, home goods, and accessories from well-known brands at discounted prices.

The translation of formal equivalence results in an overall loss of humor as the Indonesian audience lacks this basic knowledge. The humor in the dialogue about ‘*Stiker Marshalls*’ depends on the audience's shared knowledge and experience with Marshalls as a particular type of store. According to Raphaelson-West, this type of humor can only be understood if we are familiar with the culture from which it originates (Raphaelson-West, 1989, p. 132). Therefore, this joke is considered cultural humor, as it relies on specific cultural knowledge that is not familiar to everyone. For TT audiences who have never heard of ‘*Marshalls*,’ The mention of ‘*Sticker Marshalls*’ would most likely not have any humorous connotations at all; it would just be stickers from an unknown foreign store. Furthermore, humor about the sticker would only be funny if the listener knew what ‘*Marshalls*’ was. The sticker implies that the item was purchased at a discount, which is an important element of its humor potential. This implication would also be lost if the audience did not know that ‘*Marshalls*’ was a discount store.

This translation achieves formal equivalence as it translates the ST of ‘*Marshalls*’ as ‘*Marshalls*’ in TT. The translator chose to use the transference procedure to maintain the lexical form of the TT, treating ‘*Marshalls*’ as a proper noun, which is generally not translated. While maintaining the brand name, this approach fails to convey any meaning or humor to an unfamiliar audience. The reference is likely to be perceived as irrelevant and confusing.

In terms of accuracy of meaning, this translation does not effectively convey the cultural humor. In terms of reasonableness of expression, the sentence also feels stiff and unclear in the local context. The translation would be more effective if the term ‘*Marshalls*’ were replaced with a more common equivalent, such as ‘*Toko diskon*’ or ‘discount store’, to make it easier for Indonesian audiences to understand. The translation of humor associated with ‘*Marshalls*’ into TT faces significant obstacles due to the lack of brand recognition in TT culture. This requires translators to consider dynamic equivalence strategies or a descriptive procedure to convey similar humor effects.

| English Transcript (ST) | Indonesian Transcript (TT) |
|--|---|
| Audrey: Baby, that's Allegra . You said you packed Claritin . Nick: That's the same thing. You know. Allegra in, uh, French means the same shit as Claritin . | Audrey: Sayang, itu Allegra . Kau bilang kau bawa Claritin . Nick: Sama saja. Kau tahu, Allegra dalam bahasa Prancis berarti, sama dengan Claritin . |

The dialogue above shows the conversation between Audrey and Nick about allergy medication, which are ‘*Allegra*’ and ‘*Claritin*.’ Audrey corrects Nick for bringing Allegra when he previously said he would bring ‘*Claritin*.’ The humor in the original dialogue started from Nick’s misconception that ‘*Allegra*’ and ‘*Claritin*’ are the same medicine, worsened by his incorrect linguistic justification of the meaning of ‘*Allegra*’ in French.

The humor relies on the audience’s familiarity with the two drug brands. If ‘*Allegra*’ and ‘*Claritin*’ are not widely known, this humor may not fully convey the intended humorous effect to TT audiences due to cultural differences. This is a kind of cultural humor because in TT culture, there is no familiarity with the drugs ‘*Claritin*’ and ‘*Allegra*.’ In America, where the film was produced and directed, Claritin and Allegra are second-generation antihistamines used to treat allergy symptoms (Engler & Malan, 2017). On the other hand, the drug brands ‘*Claritin*’ and ‘*Allegra*’ are less familiar to the Indonesian general public. This difference in familiarity may reduce or even eliminate the element of humor for most of the TT audience. The unfamiliarity with the differences between the two brands of medicine makes Nick’s response no longer humorous, as it is based on ignorance that the audience may also experience. Thus, the direct transfer of specific American cultural references into the Indonesian context has the potential

to sacrifice the comedic essence intended in the original text. Humor often relies on cultural references and common knowledge shared by many. This data qualifies as cultural humor because it contains references to two popular allergy medication brands in America, ‘*Claritin*’ and ‘*Allegra*,’ which would only be understood by audiences with the same cultural background. This aligns with Raphaelson West’s opinion that cultural humor is humor that can only be understood and appreciated by certain communities, as it relies on shared cultural knowledge (Raphaelson-West, 1989, p. 132).

This translation achieves formal equivalence because the translator preserved the original brands. The translator used the transference procedure by directly transferring the brand names from ST to TT, as seen in the terms ‘*Allegra*’ and ‘*Claritin*,’ which were retained in the target text. The aim is to maintain the original ST terms rather than replacing them with local equivalents or changing them, which has the advantage of maintaining the original text. However, from a cultural equivalence perspective, this strategy has significant drawbacks due to the potential unfamiliarity with ‘*Claritin*’ and ‘*Allegra*.’ Based on the aspect of accuracy of meaning (Machali, 2000), this translation fails to convey the humor. In terms of reasonableness of expression, the sentence also sounds too literal and does not match the character’s joking style in the film.

Additionally, to achieve better cultural equivalence, translators may need to consider other strategies. One alternative is adaptation, where the lesser-known brand of medicine is replaced with a more common and widely known brand of antihistamine in Indonesia, such as ‘*Decolgen*.’ However, this strategy may change the meaning and context of the dialogue. Another option is to add an explanation or footnote that provides brief information about the difference between ‘*Claritin*’ and ‘*Allegra*.’

| English Transcript (ST) | Indonesian Transcript (TT) |
|--|---|
| Inspector: Nick and Audrey Spitz, you are under arrest. Audrey: Listen, please. Nick: Ferme la bouche . Is that what it is? | <i>Inspektur: Nick dan Audrey Spitz, kalian ditahan.</i> <i>Audrey: Dengarkan, kumohon..</i> <i>Nick: Ferme la bouche. Benar, kan?</i> |

In the context of the dialogue of the film *Murder Mystery 2*, this phrase is uttered by the character Nick, after he and his wife are threatened with arrest for alleged murder. The phrase ‘*Ferme la bouche*’ itself, although literally meaning ‘*Tutup mulutmu*,’ can have different connotations depending on its intonation and context in French. However, like many phrases in any language, ‘*Ferme la bouche*’ can be used in various contexts and with different connotations. In everyday conversation, with a certain tone, this phrase can sound impolite or even funny. However, it is also often used as an impolite command to be quiet, which is equivalent to ‘*Shut up*’ in ST.

In the context of the film, Nick’s character uses French abruptly, which adds a sense of humor due to the incongruity in the situation. ‘*Ferme la bouche*’ is an expression (Bouche Fermée Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster, n.d.) usually used in situations of tension or frustration, and the sudden use of French in the situation provides a humorous effect due to the incongruity between the formal situation, such as arrestment, and the use of language that is considered elegant or cool. This data is classified as humor because it contains foreign language elements used for comedic purposes. The choice to use French instead of English or Indonesian adds a humorous dimension because it sounds unusual, especially if the character is not actually a French speaker.

This translation achieves formal equivalence because it attempts to maintain the original form of the source sentence in French, ‘*Ferme la bouche*,’ which translates to ‘*Tutup mulutmu*’ in TT. In formal equivalence, the focus is on keeping the existing structure and words

in the source language without making many changes. The translator used the procedure of borrowing, also known as transference, as seen in the phrase '*Ferme la bouche,*' which is translated directly into the target text without being translated.

In terms of accuracy, these subtitles do not fully convey the meaning. In terms of appropriateness, the expression is not explained or translated. Therefore, adjustments are necessary to ensure that the meaning and humor are conveyed effectively to Indonesian viewers. This cultural humor risks being lost as the use of a foreign language, such as French, does not always have the same impact in Indonesia. If translated directly into Indonesian without adjustment, the audience may not fully appreciate the humor. In Indonesian culture, expressions such '*Tutup mulut*' or '*Diam*' are enough to convey the same meaning.

3.2. Dynamic equivalence

| English Transcript (ST) | Indonesian Transcript (TT) |
|---|---|
| Nick: What did we give out at our wedding? Audrey: Oh, flip-flops ! Nick: Flip-flops , and we gave out Advil or some shit? | Nick: <i>apa souvenir pernikahan kita?</i> Audrey: Sandal . Nick: Sandal dan obat anti nyeri . Ya, kan? |

This dialogue arises when Nick and Audrey are amazed by their conglomerate friend's wedding souvenirs, which are an iPhone and Nike branded shoes. Then they compare it with their wedding souvenirs which are far different from what is in front of them. In this conversation, the humorous context arises from the mention of two unusual types of wedding favors, which are '*Flip-flops*', and an '*Advil*,' which is a painkiller that is very common in ST culture. While there may be socioeconomic or regional variations in the use and perception of '*flip-flops*' in ST culture, for this analysis, the primary association remains that of a cheap item. The translation of '*Flip-flops*' to '*Sandal*' is a direct and accurate denotative equivalence that aligns with Indonesian cultural norms. By using a generic term for painkillers, this translation preserves the referential meaning of the phrase, in line with the principle of formal equivalence. However, the cultural connotations associated with the original expression are not fully translated, which is consistent with Nida's observation that formal equivalence can neglect cultural equivalence when specific cultural references are generalized.

The cultural humor in this conversation is rooted in modern American culture, drawing on the tradition of wedding favors. Giving '*Flip-flops*' and '*Advil*' as souvenirs is an oddity, which creates a humorous effect due to the discrepancy between the expectations of the invited guests and the reality they receive. This data is classified as cultural humor because it refers to social practices that can only be understood in the context of the source culture. According to Raskin's (1985) SSTH, humor arises from the conflict between two scripts: the expected script and the unexpected script. In this context, the audience's expectations about wedding traditions, which include appropriate souvenirs, clash with the reality depicted in the dialogue, which only includes souvenirs in the form of '*Advil*' and '*Sandal*,' resulting in a humorous effect (Raskin, 2008, p. 281).

The translations of '*Sandal*' and '*Obat anti nyeri*' in the target text achieve dynamic equivalence. The translator used a descriptive equivalent procedure, as seen in the phrase '*Advil*,' which was translated as '*Obat anti nyeri*' in the Indonesian subtitles. Since '*Advil*' is a specific brand of pain reliever that is unfamiliar to many Indonesian viewers. This aligns with Newmark's definition of a descriptive equivalent, where meaning is explained rather than directly translated to maintain clarity and relevance for the target audience. Meanwhile, the word '*Flip-flops*' is translated as '*sandal*,' which indicates a cultural equivalent procedure. The translator replaces a culturally specific item with a term that is commonly understood in the

Indonesian context and evokes a similar image and function. This aligns with Newmark's concept of cultural equivalence, which involves using culturally familiar terms in the target language to achieve a similar effect on the audience.

This choice aims to enable the Indonesian audience to immediately understand the meaning without needing to be familiar with the brand 'Advil', which may not be well-known in Indonesia. This is in line with the principle of dynamic equivalence, which prioritizes meaning and communication effect over the original form of words. This translation is accurate in meaning and sounds natural in expression. Therefore, this translation can be categorized as effective and successful in conveying the humor contextually.

| English Transcript (ST) | Indonesian Transcript (TT) |
|--|---|
| Nick: What did we give out at our wedding? Audrey: Oh, flip-flops! Nick: Flip-flops, and we gave out Advil or some shit? | Nick: <i>apa souvenir pernikahan kita?</i> Audrey: <i>Sandal.</i> Nick: <i>Sandal dan obat anti nyeri. Ya, kan?</i> |

The humor in this scene lies in the absurd comparison between a kidnapping situation and the entertaining quiz show '*The Price Is Right*'. Nick vents his frustration at Francisco because he shouts out the ransom price that the kidnappers are asking for to redeem the hostage, just like the show '*The Price is Right*', which has the typical audience shouting *and screaming out numbers!* For Indonesian viewers, '*Acara Tebak Harga*' is a familiar and understandable concept, although there is a show called '*The Price is Right Indonesia*' on Indonesian television with a similar format where participants guess the price of items. However, it is not certain whether the TT audience is familiar with the television show. The TT audience, who are unfamiliar with the show, might not catch the intent of Nick's humor. '*The Price Is Right*' is a staple show of American television. The show is deeply embedded in American popular culture. '*The Price is Right*' show also comes in an Indonesian version with the show title '*The Price is Right Indonesia*', which has been airing on the television station GTV since 2020 (The Price Is Right Indonesia - YouTube, n.d.).

This data is classified as cultural humor because the reference to '*Acara tebak harga*' in the source text refers to popular American game shows such as '*The Price is Right*,' which are only widely known to people from the source culture. This aligns with Raphaelson West's assertion that cultural humor will only emerge if the audience possesses specific cultural knowledge (Raphaelson-West, 1989, p. 132).

By using culturally relevant equivalents, the translator effectively bridges cultural differences and ensures that the humor remains intact. This translation achieves dynamic equivalence, where the primary focus is to convey the same meaning and effect to the target audience, even if it means sacrificing literal similarity to the original text. As such, this translation allows the humor to remain conveyed and relevant to the TT audience.

Instead of literally translating the title of the American television show, the translator employed a cultural equivalent approach, which is familiar to the Indonesian audience. The choice of translation of '*Acara Tebak Harga*' also avoids potential confusion or lack of understanding if the original title of '*The Price is Right*' is translated literally. '*Acara Tebak Harga*' generally refers to a quiz or game show format on television where participants guess the price of an item. This aligns with Newmark's (1988) definition of a cultural equivalent, in which cultural elements in the source language are replaced with those in the target language that have a similar impact on the audience. This translation is accurate in meaning and also sounds natural and communicative. Therefore, it can be said that this translation effectively conveys the desired humor.

4. Conclusion

Translating cultural humor is a particular challenge for translators. This is because humor often depends on cultural context, wordplay, or specific social references that may not be familiar to the target audience. One characteristic of humor, as observed in the data, is that it often arises from responses or information that are irrelevant and unrelated to the main topic of conversation. It is this element of surprise and incongruity that makes the audience laugh, and this is not easily transferred into another language with the same effect. Achieving equivalence in this context, whether formal or dynamic, requires cultural sensitivity and a deep understanding of the target audience.

From the analysis results, the researcher indicates that most cultural humor in subtitles is translated by maintaining the structure and literal meaning of the source language. Furthermore, based on analysis, formal equivalence, as defined by Nida, is often reflected in the use of literal translations and transfer procedures. Meanwhile, dynamic equivalence is typically found in translations that employ cultural equivalents, descriptive equivalents, or adaptation strategies to account for the cultural context and audience understanding.

Based on these findings, differences in cultural references and social backgrounds are the primary obstacles to the transfer of cross-cultural humor. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the source culture is essential in the translation process. If TT audiences can understand the cultural context of ST more comprehensively, they will be more likely to experience the same feelings as ST audiences when watching the same film. It shows that translation is not just about language conversion, but also about bridging experiences between cultures.

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