THE FAILURE IN TRANSLATING HUMOR:  
A CASE STUDY IN THE INDONESIAN TRANSLATION OF HUMOR GRAPHIC NOVEL THE DIARY OF A WIMPY KID

Rizky Lutviana and Arif Subiyanto  
State University of Malang  
E-mail: me.kikiku@gmail.com; arif@language.proz.com

ABSTRACT: this research attempts to investigate the failure in translating humor. This is a qualitative descriptive research in which the researcher becomes instrument. The researcher judges the failure in translating humor by recognizing whether or not the characteristic humor in the three categorization of humor (linguistic humor, cultural humor, universal humor) as well as its humorous effect is presented in the target text. The researcher discovers the following findings: (1) the translator fails to deliver the three types of humor, linguistic humor, cultural humor, and universal humor, and (2) in translating the humorous cartoon, the translator does not preserve its nuances and atmosphere that make the humor live up.

Keywords: humor, humor translation, failure in translating humor

One of popular humor graphic novels is The Diary of a Wimpy Kid. The original version of this novel gains success as well as its translated version. It becomes the number 1New York Times Best Seller and has been translated in 30 languages, including in Bahasa Indonesia, with the title Diary Si Bocah Tengil. However, despite its success, Diary Si Bocah Tengil, some readers have complained about the presumably humor translation failure, the readers, including the bloggers and book reviewers, e.g Madya. 2011; Mataloro. 2012; Aurora. 2012; Gunarya. 2011, argue that the intended funny effect is well presented. The translated novel is not as hilarious as the original novel. In other words, many are dissatisfied with the translated version.

Regarding this issue, this study aims at pointing at the failure in the translation of humor novel as well as suggesting strategy for better translation. This research is worth conducting because of three reasons. Firstly, translating humor, technically presents big challenge for translators. Unlike translating other genres of text, Vandaele (2002:150) states that "humor translation is qualitatively different from 'other types' of translation and, consequently, one cannot write about humor translation in the same way one writes about other types of translation"(ibid.). Other scholar, Spanakaki (2007) also has the same view as Vandaele (2002:150), she explains that “When it comes to translating humor, the translator has to deal with the intended effect of humor and its possible unsuccessful reproduction”. Secondly, despite the fact that humor appears in all media, for instance, novel, television, and magazine, in translation studies, humor novel and cartoon seem to draw less attention, less research has been done in investigating its translation problems and strategies. Thirdly, the novel which takes the form of combination of cartoon and novel presents big challenge for some translators. In this case, one may have opinion that the function of cartoon in the novel is basically to illustrate and simplify the story. Due to this fact, the translation on the cartoon should perfectly match the
picture. Besides, in cartoon, basically the expressions are written in balloons. As a consequence, the size of the balloons limits the number of words. Because of this, the translators have to find words that fit the balloon. Moreover, in cartoon usually there are many onomatopoeic words which are generally cultural, and, therefore, in some cases are untranslatable.

The researcher takes the first series of the novel *The Diary of A Wimpy Kid* as the object of the study since the translation failures in this edition represent and typify the sorts of failures in the series. Jeroan Vandaele on his essay (Re-)(Constructing) *Humor: Meanings and means* states that;

“following ‘functional’, ‘dynamic’ or ‘pragmatic’ theories, translational equivalence can be conceived in cognitive, mental, ‘intentional’ terms, as a relationship between two texts (source and target) capable of producing ‘the same or a similar effect’, as a result of the translator’s reconstructing the ST’s intention and recoding it in the TT for the same intended effect. For our purposes, it would seem that humor can indeed be readily recast as a humorous effect and, hence, translating humor would come down to achieving the ‘same humorous effect’” (Vandaele, 2002:151).

From this we can infer that the essence in translating humor is how the translator can bring the intended funny effect in target text. Thus, the failure in translating humor can be defined as the unsuccessful reproduction of humorous effect in the target text.

To ease the job of analyzing humor we need to recognize the classification of humor. Raphaelson-West (1989:130) divides humor into three broad categorization, linguistic humor, cultural humor, and universal humor. Firstly, linguistic humor is a language-based humor. Jabbari & Ravisi (2012:265) define linguistic humor as humor that is mostly related to sounds and spellings of the words. In this case, we may infer that linguistic humor is the humor that is created by manipulating the components of language such as spelling, sound, and meaning. Warren (1994) classifies linguistic humor into six general categories, namely pun, morphology, lexical ambiguity, idioms, structural and scope ambiguity, and pragmatics. However, Raphaelson-West (1989:131) divides linguistic humor into two, wordplay and pun. "Wordplay is the general name for the various textual phenomena in which structural features of the language(s) are 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" (Delabastita, 1996:128). Pun, on the other hands, is created by “contrasting linguistic structures, with different meanings on the basis of their formal similarity” (Delabastita, 1996:128). Further, According to the type and degree of similarity, puns can be further divided into the following categories (Delabastita, 1996:128):

1. homonymy (identical sounds and spelling);
2. homophone (identical sounds but different spellings);
3. homography (different sounds but identical spelling); and
4. paronymy (there are slight differences in both spelling and sound).
Secondly, cultural humor is also bound to cultural elements such as reference to some customs or the name of some special places, works or people and application of proverbs, idioms or catchphrases (Jabbari & Ravis, 2012:265). In addition, Newmark (1988:95) proposes 5 cultural categories of the translation of 'foreign' cultural words, as follows:
1. Ecology, including flora and fauna
2. Material culture (artefacts), including food, clothes, houses and town.
3. Social culture: work and leisure
4. Organisations, customs, activities, procedures, concepts: including political and administrative, religious, artistic
5. Gestures and habits

Thirdly, universal joke is a bicultural joke (Raphaelson-West, 1989:130). In this case we may conclude that, universal joke is the joke that is considered as funny for most people in general. In universal humor the expression is not related to linguistic features or cultural elements, but it is humorous by itself (Jabbari & Ravis, 2012:265).

METHOD

The design of this research is descriptive qualitative research, since it is conducted to interpret and to devise the findings. Merriam (1988) and Creswell (1994) states that qualitative research is descriptive because the researcher is interested in processing, meaning, and understanding gained through words or pictures. The research is conducted to describe the failure in translating humor in the novel The Diary of a Wimpy Kid. To find the failure in translating humor, the researcher used two versions of this novel, the original version, which was written in English by its author, Jeff Kinney, and the Indonesian translation version, which was translated by the translator, Ferry Halim.

Since this study is descriptive qualitative, the main instrument of this study is the researcher herself as the key human-instrument. Latief cited in Sukerti (2009) asserts that there are two reasons why qualitative researchers have to function as human instruments. Firstly, the researcher is the one who have insights of what is being analyzed, what kinds of data are needed, and the number of data necessary to be collected. Secondly, the researchers are “instruments” capable of digesting and also understanding the implicit and hidden meanings.

The researcher judges whether or not the humor in the source text is successfully delivered by recognizing the characteristics of each categories of humor, whether it is also delivered or not in the target text. In the linguistic humor, the researcher judged that the translator fails to transfer it if she thinks that the elements of language that make humor is not presented in the translation. While for cultural humor, the researcher may infer that the translator fails to deliver the intended funny effect if she discovers the translator does not provide the adequate cultural background information that makes the readers understand the humor. Furthermore, for the universal humor, the researcher may judge that the translator fails to deliver the funny effect if she finds the inappropriateness or error in translation.
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The translator fails to deliver the intended funny effect that appears in the three general categorization of humor: the linguistic humor, cultural humor, and the universal humor. The number of failures would be presented in detail in the Table 1.

Table 1 The Distribution of Failure Discovered in The Three Types of Humor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of humor</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>44.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>48.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Failure in Translating Linguistic Humor

1.

Figure 1. The Original and Translated Cartoon of Wordplay

In this cartoon, the type of humor is what we call as mockery. Mockery is “When someone laughs at someone or something or shows that they think they are stupid” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English -International Edition, 2004). The mockery that is considered wordplay is the phrase ‘Slap-happy grandpappy’ and ‘your big fanny granny’. In both phrases the wordplay is created by manipulating its last sound and spelling. Since the sounds and spellings are identical, it may be considered homonymy. In the phrase ‘Slap-happy grandpappy’ the homonymy is the last syllable of the word “happy” and “pappy”. There is an identical sound and spelling of “appy” /æp.i/ in the word “happy” (/ˈhæp.i/) and “grandpappy” (/grændˈpæp.i/). Besides there is alliteration, according to Simon and Schuster (1996:20) alliteration happens when “the same sound starts several words”. In this phrase there is repetition of “p” sound. While in phrase ‘fanny granny’, there is an identical last
sound of /æn.i/ in the word “fanny” (/ˈfæn.i/) and “granny” (/ˈgræn.i/). In the translated version, these wordplay are missing, therefore the joke is flat.

Suggested correction for the failure:

1. Translated version : Nenekmu berpantat besar
   Suggested correction : Nenekmu berbokong besar
   Strategy : Newmark’s semantic translation

   In the suggestion correction the researcher replaces the word “pantat” with other word which has the same meaning and contains the ‘b’ sound, “bokong” so that it has rhyme ‘b’ sound. Thus, the aesthetical value as well as the humor is preserved. It can be seen in this following phonetic transcription.

   \textit{Betbokong besar} \quad /bər bəkɒŋ bəsɑr/

2. Translated version : Kakekmu linglung!
   Suggested correction : Nenekmu Kikuk!
   Strategy : Newmark’s semantic translation

   In the suggested correction, the researcher replaces the word “linglung” with other word which has the same meaning and contain the ‘k’ sound, “kikuk” so that it has ‘k’ rhyme. Thus, the aesthetical value as well as the humor is reserved. It can be seen in this following phonetic transcription:

   \textit{Kakekmu kikuk} \quad /kəkəmʊ /kɪkʊk/

During rehearsal, Mrs. Norton whispers everyone’s lines to them from the side of the stage.

Figure 2 The Original and Translated Cartoon of Wordplay

In the wordplay above, the thing that makes it funny is that the way the character repeats the script of the play improperly. The same words (get, you, pretty)
are repeated in different order in the new sentence. It has totally different meaning with its original sentence. This explains that the rehearsal is chaotic. However, when it translates literally in Bahasa Indonesia, the wordplay is missing. Therefore the joke is not well transferred in target text.

Suggested correction

X: Aku akan memilikimu cantik!

Y: Aku Milikmu cantik!

In this case, the researcher reproduces the new wordplay without leaving the trick of the joke. The words “aku”, “milikmu”, “cantik” are repeated in the two sentences in which all of them have opposite meaning. In this case the aesthetical value of the joke is present in the target text.

The Failure in Translating Cultural Humor

Regarding to the cultural elements that is proposed by Jabbari & Ravisi (2012:265) and cultural categories by Newmark (1988:95), based on the data, in the Diary Of a Wimpy Kid, the cultural humor contained three topics, including idiom, social cultural habit, and gesture. Each topic would be given an example, as follows:

1. Original text:

Rodrick’s in some hot water with Mom right now, too. Manny got a hold of one of Rodrick’s heavy metal magazine, and one of the pages had a picture of woman in a bikini lying across the hood of a car. And then many brought it into day care for show-and-tell. (p.41)

Indonesian translation:

Sekarang, Rodrick juga sedang direbus oleh Mom. Many menemukan salah satu majalah heavy metal Rodrick, dan pada salah satu halamanya terdapat foto wanita berbalut bikini yang sedang berbaring di atas kap mobil. Kemudian, Manny membawa majalah itu ke tempat penitipan anak untuk acara tunjukkan-dan-ceritakan. (p.41)

The idiom “Rodrick’s in some hot water with Mom” explains that Rodrick did a big mistake that made her mother really angry with him. However, in the translated version, this idiom translates faithfully as “direbus”. The translation is not appropriate; it does not explain the situation and atmosphere of the story.

Suggested correction

In Bahasa Indonesia, it is quite hard to find the equivalent idiom of English idiom “Rodrick’s in some hot water”. In the suggested correction, the researcher chooses the word “dimarahi” and the phrases “habis-habisan”. This phrase emphasizes that the Rodrick’s Mother really got angry with him. By adding this phrase the readers would discover the mood of the story.

2. Original text:

The football unit is coming in the spring, and they split the teams up into shirt and skins. And I always get put on skins. I think they do that to make all of the out-of-shape kids feel ashamed of themselves. (p.86)

Indonesian Translation:

Tim bola kaki akan diadakan musim semi, dan mereka membagi tim menjadi kelompok berkaus dan kelompok pamer kulit. Dan aku SELALU masuk ke kelompok pamer kulit. Kurasa mereka sengaja melakukan agar kami, anak-anak yang tidak memiliki bentuk badan indah, merasa malu pada dirinya sendiri. (p.86)

In American Schools, it is a common practice to divide the group of football teams into two, namely the shirts and the skins. In some schools in Indonesia, the same thing happens; the teacher often divides the football teams into two. To differentiate these two groups, the teacher often asks one group to take off their shirts so that the group’s costume would be different, one group wear shirt while other group does not. However, the translation of the word “skins” is not appropriate as it translated literally from the word “skins” as “pamer kulit”. Based on its purpose, we may infer that the intention of a group to take off the shirt is not to show-off their skin. “Skins” here is the term used to explain the costume of football team.


The Indonesian culturally-bound word for “football” is “Sepak Bola”. While for the translation of the word “shirts” the researcher suggests the term “Lepas Kaus” since this term is used in most schools in Indonesia. Besides, the phrase “the out-of-shape kids” translates as “anak-anak yang tidak memiliki tubuh kekar” to show the readers that the kids whose body is out-of-shape were boys. In other words it conveys the masculinity.
Figure 3. The Original and Translated Cartoon of Cheese Touch

This cartoon contains gestures. The gestures are the movement of the characters’ face, hand, mouth that shows that each of them expresses their feeling about something, in this case the fear of ‘cheese touch’. The word “scream” is a word that explains the expression of fear of ‘cheese touch’. The three boys screamed because they were afraid of the boy (in front) who had the ‘cheese touch’. In the translated version, this expression translates literally as “teriak”. It would be better if the translator translates the sound of “teriak”, the sound when people scream, so that the readers would get the emotion of the story.

Suggested correction : aaaa!

In the suggested correction the researcher translates the sound when people screamed instead of translates its literal meaning. The onomatopoeic word “aaaa” helps the readers to feel the atmosphere of the story.
The Failure in Translating Universal Humor

1.

Figure 4 The Original and Translated Cartoon of Unexpected Response

In the cartoon above, it is surprising that a lazy and untidy boy can impress his father by his simple action. In the translated version, this situation is not well delivered since the word “off” is translated faithfully, as “hilang”.

Suggested correction: Rodrick, aku mau kau menyingkirkan pakaian dalamu yang bau itu dari mejadapur dan sebelum aku pulang dari kantor itu sudah harus bersih.

It is hard to find a word that precisely explains the word “off” in Bahasa Indonesia. In suggested correction, the researcher describes the meaning of the word “off” with a longer sentence so that the translation is appropriate, although it is longer than the original translation, it carries the intended meaning.

2. Original text:

All I need is for some jerk to catch me carrying this book around and get the wrong idea. (p.1)

Indonesian Translation:

Bagaimana kalau ada seorang bajingan memergokiku mambawa buku ini kemana-mana dan salah sangka? (p.1)

The word jerk means a contemptibly foolish person (Concise Oxford Dictionary-10th edition) or a stupid person, usually a man (Cambridge Advanced...
Learner’s Dictionary). However, in Indonesian translation, the word “jerk” is not translated appropriately. It is translated as “Bajingan”. In Bahasa Indonesia, the word “Bajingan” has negative connotation.

Suggested correction: Bagaimana kalau ada si bully yang memegokiku mambawa buku ini kemana-mana dan salah sangka?

The most appropriate equivalent translation of the word “jerk”, based on the Indonesian context is “Si bully”. In Bahasa Indonesian, “si” is a kind of epithet to address someone. Usually “si” is used before an adjective, or noun, especially the name of a person. Based on the context, the adjective to describe the character that is jerk is “bully”. In English “bully” is “a person who is stupid and rascal”.

3. Original text:

But the worst change is that Mrs. Norton actually wrote a song that us TREES have to sing. So, today we spend an hour learning the worst song that’s ever been written. (p.104)

Indonesian Translation:

Tapi, perubahan yang paling parah adalah saat Mrs. Norton menuliskan sebuah lagu untuk kami nyanyikan, Para Pohon. Jadi, hari ini kami menghabiskan waktu satu jam untuk mempelajari lagu terburuk yang pernah ditulis. (p.104)

In the translated version, we may infer that the translator is not successful translating the original idea of the original text. In the sentence “Mrs. Norton actually wrote a song that us TREES have to sing”, syntactically, the word “trees” has the function to modify the word “us”. It emphasizes the object us who is known to be the agent of the action. In the translated version, the translator seems confused with the structure of the sentence, particularly the object of the story since there are two indirect objects that is ‘us’ and ‘trees’. When reading the translated version, Indonesian readers may assume that the “trees” is the title of the song instead of the agent.

Suggested correction: Tapi, perubahan yang paling parah adalah saat Mrs. Norton menuliskan sebuah lagu untuk kami, para pohon, harus nyanyikan. Jadi, hari ini kami menghabiskan waktu satu jam untuk mempelajari lagu terburuk yang pernah ditulis.

Give the original idea of the original text, so, the phrase “para pohon” is placed after the word “kami”. Therefore, the phrase “para pohon” modifies the word “kami”.
CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Two points can be concluded from the discussion of the research findings. Firstly, the translator fails to deliver the three types of humor, linguistic humor, cultural humor, and universal humor. On the linguistic humor, there is a tendency that the translator fails to transfer its aesthetical aspects that make the linguistic humor interesting. Besides, in the cultural humor, the translator does not provide the adequate cultural background information so that the readers will understand the humor and does not reveal the atmosphere and the nuances of the story in the translation. Furthermore, in universal humor, there are two factors that cause the translator fails to deliver its funny effect, (1) errors and inappropriateness and, (2) the application of inappropriate translation strategy.

Secondly, in translating the humorous cartoon, the translator does not consider the special aspects of it, such as space and visual. Some words are too long to fit the balloons. Besides, the translator does not translate the onomatopoeic word appropriately.

The researcher wishes to provide some recommendation for the students and teachers of translation courses, the translators, and, the future researchers. Firstly, for the students and teachers, they can use the method of this study to analyze the translated text, particularly humor and they can use this as their teaching reference, especially when they study translation strategy. Secondly, for the translators, in order to translate the humor appropriately, they have to consider the intention of the text, the emotion of the story and the target readers. Thirdly, for the future researchers, since there are many other translated humor cartoon and novel in Indonesia which have not been studied in the field of translation studies, they can pick them as the topic of their future research.

REFERENCES
Aurora, F. July 2nd, 2011. *Diary Si Bocah Tengil*. (online),
Gunarya, A. March 4th, 2011. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid Syndrome*. (online),


