



THE UNTRANSLATABILITY OF JOKES IN TREVOR NOAH'S *SON OF PATRICIA*

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Abstract

This study investigates cases of untranslatability and the translation strategies applied in Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy special *Son of Patricia*. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study analyzes jokes that are considered difficult to translate directly from English into Indonesian. The classification of untranslatability is based on Peter Newmark's theory, while the translation strategies are examined using Vinay and Darbelnet's framework. The analysis focuses on identifying lexical and cultural untranslatability present in the selected data. The findings reveal that untranslatability should not be viewed as a constraint in translation but rather as an opportunity for translators to exercise creativity and problem-solving skills. Many jokes that pose translation challenges can be effectively rendered by selecting the most appropriate equivalents in the target language through the use of suitable translation strategies. The strategies most frequently employed include modulation, equivalence, adaptation, and borrowing. All of these play a crucial role in preserving the humorous effect and the intended meaning of the source text. This study emphasizes the importance of cultural awareness and strategic competence in translating humor, particularly in entertainment texts rich in linguistic and cultural nuances. The research contributes to the field of applied linguistics and translation studies by demonstrating that appropriate translation strategies can bridge language and cultural gaps while maintaining the quality and impact of the original content.

Keywords: stand-up comedy, translation strategies, untranslatability

INTRODUCTION

Comedy plays a significant role in human communication, serving not only as a source of entertainment but also as a medium for expressing opinions, social criticism, and cultural identity. It is frequently used to convey ideas in a light-hearted manner and to create social bonds in various contexts, such as public speaking, seminars, talk shows, and everyday interactions. Hokenson (2006) notes that Plato perceived comedy as a means of allowing audiences to experience moral superiority by ridiculing a particular subject. However, comedy has evolved into diverse forms, among which stand-up comedy has gained popularity in contemporary society.

Stand-up comedy is characterized by a solo performer delivering humorous monologues directly to an audience, usually without elaborate costumes or props. Mintz, as cited in Sjöbohm (2008), defines stand-up comedy as an encounter between a single performer who behaves comically and presents humorous ideas directly to an audience. A defining feature of stand-up comedy is its close relationship with cultural, social, and political contexts. Comedians often rely on language-specific expressions, cultural references, and shared social knowledge to produce humor. This cultural embeddedness, however, becomes problematic when stand-up comedy is translated into another language (Kuswoyo & Audina, 2020), as differences in linguistic structures and cultural frameworks may hinder direct translation.

This difficulty is commonly referred to as untranslatability, a concept introduced by Peter Newmark (1988). Untranslatability occurs when certain linguistic elements, cultural concepts, or expressions in the source language lack direct equivalents in the target language. Previous studies have examined untranslatability from various perspectives. Palmieri (2017a, 2017b) focuses on self-translation in stand-up comedy, highlighting how bilingual comedians navigate untranslatability through oral and mental text restructuring. Darmawan (2019) emphasizes the influence of translators' cultural backgrounds on translation outcomes, particularly in resolving lexical and cultural gaps. Similarly, Fatima and Azeez (2019) explore humor translation by distinguishing between universal and culture-bound humor, while Alwazna (2018) investigates untranslatability in legal translation due to differing legal systems and cultural concepts.

Although these studies address untranslatability, their focuses differ from the present research. Palmieri's studies center on self-translation performed by bilingual comedians, while Darmawan (2019), Fatima and Azeez (2019), and Alwazna (2018) examine untranslatability in non-stand-up or non-entertainment contexts. Therefore, there remains a research gap concerning how untranslatability is addressed in translated stand-up comedy texts, particularly using established translation strategies.

This study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing the types of untranslatability found in Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy special *Son of Patricia*, and by examining the translation strategies employed to resolve them based on Vinay and Darbelnet's framework. By doing so, this research contributes to translation studies and applied linguistics, especially in understanding how humor-rich and culturally embedded entertainment texts can be effectively translated without losing their communicative impact.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate cases of untranslatability and the translation strategies used in a stand-up comedy context. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because it allows for in-depth analysis of linguistic, cultural, and contextual phenomena embedded in texts (Creswell, 2014). The research focuses on identifying types of untranslatability and examining how such cases are addressed through translation strategies rather than measuring frequency or statistical significance.

The data consist of selected jokes from Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy special *Son of Patricia*, available on Netflix. The jokes were selected based on their comedic effect and their potential difficulty in being translated directly from English as the source language (SL) into Indonesian as the target language (TL). In line with Attardo and Chabanne's (1992) definition, jokes are treated as structured humorous texts that rely on incongruity, cultural knowledge, and interaction between the performer and the audience. The performance discusses Noah's experiences as a South African-born comedian adapting to cultural and social differences in the United States, making it rich in culture-specific references and language-bound humor. The source language data were obtained from the official English subtitles provided by Netflix, while the target language data were taken from the corresponding Indonesian subtitles. These subtitles were used as parallel texts for comparative analysis.

Data were collected through a transcription-based procedure. Although the Netflix platform provides machine-generated subtitles in both English and Indonesian, the subtitles were reviewed to ensure clarity and consistency. The performance was segmented into discrete joke units based on thematic continuity and audience reactions, such as laughter and applause. From these segments, jokes that displayed linguistic or cultural translation challenges were identified and compiled. Only jokes that demonstrated potential cases of untranslatability between the SL and TL were selected for further analysis to ensure that the data were relevant to the research objectives.

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis adapted from Creswell's (2014) framework. The analysis involved five main stages. First, the data were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity and contextual understanding. Second, the data were categorized according to Newmark's (1988) classification of untranslatability, namely lexical and cultural untranslatability. Third, initial coding was conducted to identify recurring patterns and dominant types of untranslatability within the data. Fourth, the translation strategies applied in the Indonesian subtitles were analyzed using Vinay and Darbelnet's (1995) taxonomy, focusing on strategies such as modulation, equivalence, adaptation, borrowing, and other relevant procedures. Finally, interpretations were made by examining how effectively these strategies preserved the humorous effect and intended meaning of the original jokes. The findings were then synthesized and discussed to highlight the implications of untranslatability and translation strategies in the translation of stand-up comedy.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigates the phenomenon of untranslatability in Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy special *Son of Patricia*. It focuses on how lexical and cultural elements challenge the translation of humor from English (Source Language/SL) into Indonesian (Target Language/TL). The findings demonstrate that untranslatability is a recurrent and inevitable feature of stand-up comedy due to the genre's reliance on language-specific wordplay, cultural references, and shared social experiences. In line with Newmark's (1988) theory, the analysis confirms that untranslatability does not represent a failure of translation but rather necessitates the strategic and creative application of translation techniques.

Lexical Untranslatability in Stand-Up Comedy

Lexical untranslatability occurs when a word or expression in the source language lacks a direct lexical equivalent in the target language. In *Son of Patricia*, this type of untranslatability frequently appears in jokes involving slang, taboo expressions, racial terminology, and phonological wordplay. These lexical items are embedded in the sociolinguistic context of American English and often carry meanings shaped by historical and social factors.

One prominent example involves the use of racial terms such as **nigger** and **nigga**. Although these terms may be superficially understood by Indonesian audiences through exposure to global media, their emotional weight, pragmatic function, and sociopolitical history cannot be fully conveyed through literal translation. In many cases, the Indonesian subtitles keep the original term through borrowing. This strategy preserves referential meaning but fails to transfer the full pragmatic force of the joke, particularly its ironic or critical intent. As Newmark (1988) suggests, such cases illustrate lexical untranslatability arising from culture-bound meaning rather than linguistic deficiency.

Another form of lexical untranslatability is observed in jokes based on wordplay and homophony. Trevor Noah uses the words **aides** and **AIDS**. This type of humor relies on phonetic similarity, which cannot be replicated in Indonesian due to differences in phonological systems. The translated version often resorts to modulation or explanation, altering the original structure to convey meaning rather than sound-based humor. While these strategies ensure comprehension, they weaken the immediate comedic effect, as humor in stand-up comedy depends on rapid cognitive processing and surprise.

Additionally, slang expressions and culturally specific terms such as **trap music**, **Taco Tuesday**, and **hood** demonstrate lexical gaps between English and Indonesian. These expressions are tied to specific social practices and subcultures that do not have direct counterparts in Indonesian society. Translators often apply adaptation or equivalence by using broader or more neutral expressions. However, this approach reduces the specificity and authenticity of the original joke. This supports Palmieri's (2017) argument that humor translation often requires sacrificing certain stylistic elements for clarity.

Cultural Untranslatability and Contextual Dependency

Cultural untranslatability is the most dominant type identified in this study. It occurs when jokes rely on shared cultural knowledge, social norms, or collective experiences that are not equally accessible to target-language audiences. Stand-up comedy, by nature, draws heavily on cultural context, making it particularly vulnerable to this type of untranslatability.

A recurring theme in *Son of Patricia* is the contrast between Trevor Noah's upbringing in South Africa and his experiences in the United States. For example, **jokes about camping** rely on Western cultural assumptions that associate camping with leisure, recreation, and privilege. Trevor Noah subverts this expectation by associating camping with survival and hardship, creating humor through irony. While the translated version conveys the narrative meaning, Indonesian audiences may not fully perceive the irony due to different cultural associations with camping. This illustrates cultural untranslatability rooted in divergent lived experiences.

Political and racial jokes further exemplify cultural untranslatability. References to **Donald Trump**, **crack cocaine**, or **racial profiling** presuppose familiarity with American political discourse and racial history. Although these topics may be globally recognized, their local implications and emotional resonance differ across cultures. The Indonesian translation often employs neutralization or generalization to avoid cultural misunderstanding or offense. While this strategy enhances acceptability, it decreases the satirical aspect of the original joke. This supports Azeez and Azeez's (2019) findings that translating culture-bound humor often results in partial loss of humor.

Moreover, some jokes depend on illocutionary force rather than explicit content. Trevor Noah frequently uses **exaggeration**, **mockery**, and **self-deprecating** humor to critique social norms. These rhetorical devices are closely tied to performance, intonation, and audience expectation. Even when the semantic content is translated accurately, shifts in tone or emphasis may weaken the humorous effect. This supports the argument that humor translation is not merely a linguistic process but also a pragmatic and performative one.

Translation Strategies and Their Effectiveness

The study finds that translators employ both direct and oblique translation strategies as proposed by Vinay and Darbelnet (1995). Direct strategies such as borrowing and literal translation are mainly used for proper nouns and globally recognized terms. However, oblique strategies like particularly modulation, equivalence, and adaptation are more frequently applied to address untranslatability in humor.

Modulation allows translators to change perspective while preserving meaning, which is effective in dealing with idiomatic expressions and culturally sensitive content. **Equivalence** is applied when a similar expression exists in Indonesian, although such cases are relatively rare for stand-up comedy. **Adaptation** proves most useful in handling cultural untranslatability, as it enables translators to reshape the joke to fit the cultural framework of the target audience. However, **adaptation** often requires creative rewriting, which risks altering the comedian's original voice.

The findings align with Newmark's view that untranslatability encourages creative problem-solving rather than indicating translation failure. However, they also confirm that no strategy can fully replicate the original comedic impact when humor is deeply culture-bound.

Implications for Translation Studies

This study contributes to translation studies by demonstrating that stand-up comedy represents a complex and underexplored domain of untranslatability. Unlike written texts, stand-up comedy relies on immediacy, audience interaction, and cultural intimacy. Translators must therefore function not only as linguistic mediators but also as cultural negotiators.

The findings also extend previous research by focusing on a monolingual translation of a stand-up comedy special rather than self-translation by a bilingual comedian. This distinction highlights the unique challenges faced by translators who lack the performer's intuitive control over cultural and comedic timing. The analysis confirms that untranslatability in stand-up comedy is both unavoidable but meaningful. While translation strategies can preserve comprehension and communicative intent, the full humorous effect often remains culturally bounded. Recognizing untranslatability as an inherent characteristic of humor allows translators and scholars to adopt more flexible and creative approaches. This ultimately enriches cross-cultural communication rather than limiting it.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Trevor Noah's *Son of Patricia* reveals that translating stand-up comedy presents substantial challenges related to lexical and cultural untranslatability. Lexical untranslatability arises when culture-bound terms such as nigger, nigga, and trap music carry socio-historical and emotional meanings that lack direct equivalents in Indonesian. Although strategies such as borrowing and modulation help maintain referential meaning, they often fail to fully convey the original connotations and humorous impact. Cultural untranslatability poses the greatest difficulty because many jokes rely on shared cultural knowledge related to politics, race, and social practices that are not equally accessible to Indonesian audiences. Even with adaptation or equivalence strategies, the humorous effect is frequently reduced.

The findings confirm that untranslatability in humor translation is primarily cultural rather than purely linguistic. Translation strategies can mitigate, but not eliminate, these challenges. Therefore, translating jokes requires not only linguistic competence but also cultural sensitivity and creative decision-making. Untranslatability should thus be viewed not as a limitation, but as an inherent feature of cross-cultural translation that highlights the complex relationship between language, culture, and humor.

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