CHALLENGES OF TRANSLATING HUMOUR (PUNS) FROM ENGLISH INTO RUSSIAN (BASED ON THE TV SERIES “THE SIMPSONS”)

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Humour is a powerful tool of communication, but one of the most challenging to translate. Its universal appeal, combined with strong local specificity, poses significant challenges in audiovisual translation (AVT), where constraints like time, space, and multimodality further complicate its transfer across cultures. This article presents a summary of the diploma paper, which has the primary aim of investigating the key challenges in translating humour, specifically puns, in AVT, and evaluating the effectiveness of translation strategies used to convey such humour from English into Russian within the context of the TV series “The Simpsons”.

The dramatic changes of the 21st century, along with the expansion of global streaming platforms, have accelerated the advancement of Translation Studies (TS), with Audiovisual Translation (AVT) becoming an increasingly central focus. In simple terms, as Frederick Chaume explains, AVT is the translation of multimodal texts that convey information through both acoustic and visual channels simultaneously [1, p. 23]. Within this field, humour is considered one of the most arduous challenges for translators, as it is deeply rooted in specific cultural and linguistic contexts [2, p. 11]. As demonstrated by research, the concept of humour is notoriously difficult to define; however, it can be broadly understood as that which causes amusement and laughter [6, p. 147].

The research focuses on a specific and prevalent form of verbal humour, a particular type of wordplay: **the pun**. Based on Dirk Delabastita’s studies, puns present a form of wordplay that exploits the multiplicity of meanings (polysemy) and phonetic similarities (homophony) in language to create a humorous effect. [3, p. 161]. Their translation is challenging because the linguistic mechanisms underpinning them - such as **homophony** (words that sound the same), **homography** (words spelled the same), **polysemy** (a word with multiple meanings), and **paronymy** (words similar in sound or spelling) - rarely have direct equivalents in another language [5, pp. 164-167]. In addition to these types, there is one more form of wordplay that appears in several instances in the analysed corpus: **portmanteau**, which refers to a single coined word that “packs two meanings into one” [4, p. 143].

"The Simpsons" is particularly challenging to translate not only because of its layered satire and constant wordplay, but also due to the extensive use of specific American **cultural references** that often lack a one-to-one equivalent in Russian, and allusions to popular songs, catchphrases, famous speeches (i.e. "the frame"), that form the basis for its **intertextual wordplay**.

The analysis of the corpus of a total of 102 examples reveals the various strategies employed by translators when faced with these two categories of humour – linguistic and cultural. In many cases, puns were sacrificed for clarity, resulting in their complete omission (**PUN → ZERO**), as in the example below, where the pun is omitted and replaced with a generic comment about Homer's poor spelling instead:

Table 1

"The Simpsons", S06E17, "Homer vs. Patty and Selma", 11:49

Original Pun	Russian Translation
Selma: "Come on, Homer. You can't spell *obsequious* without *I.O.U*"	Сельма: «Давай Гомер. *Твое правописание всегда хромало*»

Notably, the most common technique was to replace the original pun with a non-punning phrase that preserved only one of the intended meanings (**PUN → NON-PUN**):

Table 2

"The Simpsons", S05E14, "Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy", 12:57

Original Pun	Russian Translation
Montgomery Burns: [Shirtless, as Smithers's screen saver] "Hello, Smithers. You're quite good at *turning me on*."	Мистер Бернс: «…Ты *вовремя меня включил*.»

The Russian translation uses modulation, which shifts focus to the literal meaning of turning on the screen, omitting the sexual innuendo.

However, there are also plenty of examples of successful translations that demonstrate a high degree of creativity. Effective strategies included adaptation, where a pun was replaced with a different but functionally equivalent joke in the target language (**PUN → PUN)**:

Table 3

"The Simpsons", S05E09, "The Last Temptation of Homer", 09:43

Original Pun	Russian Translation
Homer: "I'll just push the button for the *stimulator*, I mean *elevator*."	Гомер: «Я нажму на кнопку *лифчика*... то есть *лифта*.»

Instead of a literal translation, the translator creates a new, equivalent pun using a Russian pair of similarly starting words (*лифчик*/*лифт*), preserving both the humorous effect and the structure of the original pun.

Compensation was also used, with the humour recreated through other devices like rhymes or the creation of neologisms (**PUN → RELATED RHETORICAL DEVICE)**:

Table 4

“The Simpsons”, S22E13, “The Blue and the Gray”, 15:30

Original Pun	Russian Translation
Patty and Selma: “Your hair committed *blueicide*.”	Сельма и Пэтти: «Твои волосы совершили *синеубийство*.»

The translation of cultural references was inconsistent; while some were retained or explained, many were generalized or omitted, leading to a loss of the show’s satirical depth.

Table 5

“The Simpsons”, S04E15, “I Love Lisa”, 19:00

Original Line	Russian Translation
Bart: “*Hasta la vista*, *Abey*.”	Барт: «*Аста ла виста!*»

In this example, the Russian translation preserves the “Terminator” catchphrase but omits the pun on “Abey,” Abraham Lincoln’s nickname, thus losing the layered humour that mixes pop culture with cultural-political reference.

Overall, the Russian version of “The Simpsons” reflects a flexible but inconsistent approach. Hereby, this analysis confirms that translating humour, especially the linguistically and culturally rich puns in “The Simpsons,” is one of the greatest challenges in AVT.

In the end, the results of the study successfully confirm the hypothesis that successfully rendering complex and multilayered humour requires not only deep linguistic and cultural knowledge of both the source and target languages but also a creative instinct and a well-developed sense of humour from the translator.

References:

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