

The Semiotic Structure of Humorous Discourse And Its Impact on Translation

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1. Introduction

Modern linguistics during the last hundred years has taken as its starting point in any discussion of meaning the conventional acceptance of the need for the relationship between word and object to be an indirect one mediated by a concept. Building on this assumption, de Saussure (1938) provides a rather more explicit model of the relationship in which the link is shown to be between the linguistic sign and the object. De Saussure's model consists in seeing the linguistic sign itself as being composed of two indivisible elements, a signifier and its signified or the concept and the acoustic image which realizes it. An example of this may be the relationship between the word 'tree' and the actual tree perceived by the sense which is referred to by using the word.

De Saussure has stressed that the study of linguistic meaning is a part of the general study of the use of sign systems, and this general study is called semiotics. According to semiotic theory, the world in which human beings live is a material reality which is shaped into systems of significant forms by the process of communication and the intersubjective cultural conventions which generate communication (Fowler, 1981:55).

The question the present study tries to answer is whether there is a semiotic structure particular to a humorous discourse represented by jokes or riddles and how this structure can contribute to a better rendition of the humorous effect from English humour into Arabic. Hence the present study aims to find a semiotic structure particular to a humorous discourse and to arrive at the best means for translating an English humorous discourse into Arabic through resorting to its semiotic structure. To achieve these aims, the study hypothesizes that there is a semiotic structure particular to a

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humorous discourse and that identifying the semiotic structure of a humorous discourse is the best means for arriving at a better rendition of humour from English into Arabic.

2. Signs

The structured nature of the physical word gives rise to patterns. A collection of data elements contains a pattern if the data has non-random structure. Patterns may be interpreted as signs by agents. For example, a pattern of photons caused by a fly can serve as a sign of the fly, if appropriately sensed and interpreted by an agent. We take Peirce's definition of a sign as a starting point: "A sign ... is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (*Peirce. 1940: 49*). Peirce's definition can be interpreted in the following way. A sign is a physical pattern (first instance of 'something' in Peirce's definition) which only exists as a sign relative to an interpreter ('somebody'). A sign signifies an object, some entity in the world (second instance of 'something'). Signs may take other signs as their objects, leading to nesting of signs. For example, a shadow might be a sign of a cloud. If the shadow leads to a cooler patch of ground, the temperature of the ground serves as a sign for both the shadow, and chains through to serve as a sign of the cloud. This does not necessarily mean that an interpreter can make the connection from a sign to its object, only that the physical causal link exists. Signs signify (stand for) only limited aspects of their objects ('some respect or capacity') and thus can serve to abstract and reduce information.

For Barthes, the sign is not an entity, but a correlation (*Hawkes. 1977: 130*). That is, the sign, as the 'associative' total of signifier and signified, is potentially greater than merely the sum of its parts (*Ibid.: 131*). A sign can thus comprise an expression (the bunch of roses), and a signified (a kind of flower); in such a case, the associative total may in some contexts be taken as the sign 'passion' (*Ibid.*).

Robins (1971: 21), on the other hand, remarks that signs are events or things that in some way direct attention to, or are indicative of, other events or things. In his view, signs may be related naturally or causally, as when shivering is taken as a sign of fever, or they may be related conventionally

and so used, and they are then called symbols as, for, example, the conventional signs for churches, railways, etc. on maps, roadsigns, and the colours of traffic lights (Ibid.).

Roman Jakobson advances an approach to the sign-systems which begins by considering some general principles:

Every message is made of signs; correspondingly, the science of signs termed semiotics deals with those general principles which underlie the structure of all signs whatever, and with the character of their utilization within messages, as well as with the specifics of the various sign systems, and of the diverse messages using different kinds of signs.

(Cited in Hawkes, 1977: 125-26)

Eco (1973: 1150) explains signs in the following terms:

Independently of the ways in which they are used to designate objects or states, signs refer to the system of units in which the various cultures organize their perception of the world ... cultural structure (the way in which a given society organizes the world which it perceives, analyzes and transforms) are semiotic structures and therefore system of units each of which can stand for another.

As far as De Beaugrand (1980: 2) is concerned, the verbal domain of semiotics deals with the entire range from one-word texts to texts. On the other hand, Halliday and Hasan (1985:4) modify the definition of semiotics as "the general study of signs" considering it as "the study of signs systems- in other words, as the study of meaning in its most general sense."

Hatim and Mason (1990:101) state that in order to recognize the full communicative thrust of an utterance, one is required to appreciate a semiotic dimension which regulates the interaction of the various discorsal elements as 'signs'. The interaction takes place between various signs within texts and between the producer of these signs and the intended receivers. Through this interactive semiotic dimension language users can start to do things with words, and values such as those of the field, mode and tenor begin to play a real role in communicative translation (Ibid.).

In this study the elements of the discorsal structure of humour represented by jokes or humorous riddles are considered signs or semiotic constructs

which embody the assumptions, presuppositions and conventions that reflect the ways a given culture constructs and partitions reality.

3. Classes of Signs

Pierce (1940) distinguished three kinds of signs: symbols, icons and indices. An icon is where there is a similarity between a sign and what it represents, as for example between a portrait and its real life subject, or a diagram of an engine and the real engine. An index is where the sign is closely associated with its signified, often in a causal relationship; an example is smoke which is an index of fire. Finally, a symbol is where there is only a conventional link between the sign and its signified, as in the use of insignia to denote military ranks, or the way that mourning is symbolized by the wearing of black clothes in some cultures, and white clothes in others. According to Pierce's classification, words would seem to be examples of verbal symbols, and language represents man's most sophisticated use of signs.

Roy (2005: 13) classified signs into natural, indexical, and intentional. This classification scheme is not mutually exclusive in that a physical pattern may be interpreted as both a natural and an indexical sign. Natural signs are formed by nomic physical laws (natural flow of photons, full of gravity, etc.) whereas intentional signs are produced by volitional agents for some purpose (Ibid.). Indexical signs, on the other hand, situate beliefs related to a spatiotemporal frame of reference. For instance, the location of a certain object within an agent's field of view may result in an indexical sign of its spatial position relative to the viewer's frame of reference

4. *Semiotics and Translation*

The scope of translation as a term widened and the methodology of translation for these studies started to change due to the differentiation between three kinds of translation activities. Jakobson (1971_a) distinguished intra-lingual translation or interpretation of verbal signs by verbal signs of the same language. The translation within a system of signs is related to paraphrasing, changing of genres and discourses. As a second type of translation Jakobson mentioned inter-lingual translation that means interpretation of verbal signs with the verbal signs of another language and is thus translation proper. As a third type of translation Jakobson suggested

intersemiotic translation or transmutation that means interpretation of the signs of a sign system with the signs of another sign system, e.g., the translation of word into picture and vice versa.

To the three main types of translation Jakobson adds the understanding of translation process as two processes taking place simultaneously, recoding and transposing. But the distinction between the changing and the retaining processes forms only the individual psychological aspect of translation, although it is certainly impossible to create a model of translational activity without this aspect. However, the general cultural or cultural psychological aspect is worth distinguishing. Jakobson stresses the semiotic value of all five senses in the human society. All five external senses carry semiotic functions in human society (Jakobson, 1971b: 701), bringing thereby communication and autocommunication closer together. With respect to the study of communication processes, Jakobson stresses the importance of distinguishing between homogeneous messages, i.e. those based on a single sign system, and syncretic messages, i.e. those based on the combination of several sign systems. "The study of communication must distinguish between homogeneous messages which use a single semiotic system and syncretic messages based on a combination or merger of different sign patterns" (Ibid.: 705). Thus the differentiation of three translation types proceeds from Jakobson's general understanding of the communication process and the types of messages.

The transformation of Jakobson's classification is also important. This was first done by Toury who restructured Jakobson's schema for the Encyclopedia Dictionary of Semiotics. First and foremost, Toury differentiates between two types of translation-intrasemiotic translating and intersemiotic translating. Intersemiotic translating involves translating from language to non-language. Intrasemiotic translation can be divided into two subtypes-intrasystemic translating and intersystemic translating. Intrasystemic translation corresponds to Jakobson's intralinguistic translation and intresystemic translation in its turn answers to intrelinguistic translation (Toury, 1986).

The latest contribution to the development of Jakobson's classification has been made by Eco (2001). Eco starts from Peirce's influence on Jakobson. On the other hand, Eco emphasizes Peirce's statement "that meaning, in its primary sense, is a translation of a sign into another system of signs" (Eco, 2001: 69). On the other hand, he shows that the closeness of

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the concepts of translation and interpretation in Jakobson's case derives from the impressionistic quality of Pierce's meta-language. Pierce "uses translation in a figurative sense: not like a metaphor, but pars pro toto (in the sense that he assumes 'translation' as a synecdoche for 'interpretation')" (Ibid.: 69). Eco's own summary follows this logic- "translation is a species of genus interpretation, governed by certain principles proper to translation" (p. 80).

Eco's classification is tripartite just like that of Jakobson's. Firstly, there is interpretation by transcription. This involves simple substitution of codes as, for example, in case of Morse alphabet. Secondly, there is intrasystemic interpretation. This, in its turn, can be divided into three subcategories: intrasystemic interpretation within the same natural language (as, for instance, synonymy, definition, paraphrase, inference, comment, etc.); intrasystemic interpretation within other semiotic systems (for instance, changing a piece of music from major to minor); and performance (for example, the performance of a musical score or the staging of a battle). Thirdly, Eco introduces intersystemic interpretation that includes two types, one with marked variation in the substance, and the other with mutation of continuum. Intersystemic interpretation with marked variation in the substance includes three subtypes: interlinguistic interpretation or translation between natural languages; rewriting (e.g., reworked versions of the same piece by the same composer, parody); translation between other semiotic systems or intersystemic interpretation with very marked differences in substance among non-linguistic systems (for instance, transforming a colourful oil painting into a black and white reproduction). Mutation of continuum includes parasynonymy and adaptation or transmutation. Parasynonymy can be illustrated by amplifying the phrase "that one over there" by pointing at the object with a finger. Adopting literature to film or to theatre belongs to adaptation or transmutation (Eco. 2001: 100-123).

Culture has its own sign systems on the basis of which the members of the culture communicate. Thus, one possibility to understand a culture is to learn the languages of the culture, the sign systems operating with the culture. The languages of cultures are apt to change and their signs are ambiguous. Thus, another possibility remains to approach the culture via events and texts that bind different sign systems, yet have a general

meaning or theme that can be described. Lotman et al. (1975: 57) define culture as "the functional correlation of different sign systems". These different sign systems work both within and between cultures, and semiotics handles the processing and exchange of information both within and across cultural boundaries (Hatim and Mason, 1990: 105). Translation can be seen as the process which transforms one semiotic entity into another, "under certain equivalence conditions to do with semiotic codes, pragmatic action and general communicative requirements" (Ibid.)

According to Hatim and Mason (Ibid: 102-6), semiotic translation involves the translation in a number of important procedures:

1. Identification: The translator identifies a semiotic entity in the source language.

2. Information: The translator identifies an information core.

3. Explication: If the information equivalent is not self-sufficient, the translator will try to find explanation by means of synonymy, expansion, paraphrase, etc.

4. Transformation: After the translator retrieved the information core and made the necessary modification, the translator then considers what is missing in terms of intentionality and status as a sign

5. Semiotic Text Analysis

Semiotics focuses on the structure of meaning-producing events, with the sign (verbal or nonverbal) being the fundamental unit (Mick, 1986). Signs combine to form messages and texts. Both the production of message or text and the subsequent decoding by readers are governed by rules that are generally known to individuals who are from the interpretive community or culturally constituted code environment in which the message or text is exchanged. These rules establish the manner in which signs combine into acceptable and unacceptable messages or texts and the correlation that signs (as expression) can have with their potential meanings (as content) in specific contexts. Theoretical semioticians have concentrated on describing and classifying both signs and sign functions to explicate the

complex nature of communication (see Mick. 1986). As a result, a specialized vocabulary has developed (i.e., its own sign system).

Semiotics deals with syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties of the sign. This means that the semantic description of a given sign must include one or more than one of the following types of relation:

1. *Syntactic relations:* These obtain between one sign and other signs belonging to the same syntactic set. Linguistic expression provides clear examples of this kind of relation.

2. *Semiotic relations:* These obtain between the sign and those entities to which it refers in the real world.

3. *Pragmatic relations:* These obtain between the sign and its users (senders or receivers) (Hatim and Mason. 1990: 116).

A semiotic text analysis scrutinizes the various signs in a text in an attempt to characterize their structure and identify potential meanings. Hence, semiotic text analysis readily overlaps with an interpretive-hermeneutic approach to consumer research, which involves the "critical analysis of a text for the purpose of determining its single or multiple meaning(s)" (Holbrook and O'shaughnessy, 1988: 400). The distinctive feature of semiotics relative to other approaches to analysing texts is that semiotics places due weight on the constraints imposed by the structure of signs within a text, on the freedom of the reader to interpret the text in a variety of ways, and on the sociocultural context that jointly shapes the text and its potential readings.

6. *Data Analysis*

To start with, a sign is taken here to be anything that can stand for something (its object), to somebody, in some context. The humorous texts to be analysed semiotically below are combinations of signs that form a larger whole⁽¹⁾. They can be analysed in terms of both their component signs and the structure that unites these signs. In other words, the humorous texts are believed to have a semiotic structure and its structure, in turn, is composed of signs.

The humorous texts to be analysed are as follows:

1. Did you hear about the little moron who cut off his arms so he could wear sleeveless shirt?
2. Did you hear about the driver who buried his battery because the mechanic told him that it was dead?
3. Have you heard of the Scotsman who counted his money in front of the mirror so he wouldn't cheat himself?
4. Did you know that if you swallowed Uranium you would certainly get atomic ache?
5. Why do people go to bed?
Because the bed wouldn't come to them.
6. How many Poles does it take to drive a car?
500. One to drive and 499 to pull the road.
7. Customer: There's only one piece of meat on my plate!
Waiter: wait a minute, sir, and I'll cut it in two.
8. Patient: Doctor, Doctor, I feel like a pair of curtains.
Doctor: Well, pull yourself together then.
9. There was this Englishman, this Irishman and this Scotsman who while out for a walk one day came across a wishing-well. Above the wishing-well was a sign "Drop In A Penny For Good Luck." So the Englishman dropped in a penny, made a wish, and walked on, the Irishman also dropped in a penny, made a wish, and walked on. The Scotsman dropped a fivence piece... and waited for his change!
10. Two men are walking along a river. After a while, they are approached by a cart driver who asks them if he can safely ford the river at this site. One of the two men answers:
'Oh, yes. Certainly you can'

The driver directs his horse towards the river, drives in, and is drowned with his horse and cart. The man turns to his companion and says:

'But look! The ducks are only half immersed!'

There are two approaches to deal with the semiotic structure of humorous discourse. The first approach is literary in nature taking poetics to be the point of departure for it, whereas the second approach is linguistic based on discourse analysis⁽²⁾. In what follows the two approaches will be discussed in some detail.

The literary approach

The literary approach focuses on the aesthetic properties of humorous discourse. In order to demonstrate this approach, let's examine the humorous text represented by joke (10) from the data collected for this study.

The first sentence creates four signs of higher order which appear as names of semantic fields to be filled with meanings of subsequent utterances about and by them. These four signs are: the narrator, in the third person, detached and neutral; two characters whose only specific property is their sex, since the activity of walking is quite vague and has no significance; their walk may be considered a rudimentary element of action, that is, the third sign in the structure of the joke; and finally there is one element of the setting, the riverside. The sentence is neutral emotionally and aesthetically. The second sentence is also neutral like the first one but generates further elements. It introduces a third character who is provided with one more attribute, namely, his profession contrary to the former two. The question raised by the third character implies another feature, that is, his ignorance of the surroundings. The question opens a dialogue, that is, a structural element of action, and poses a problem. If after the first sentence the reader's expectation could be expressed simply as 'what next?', the second sentence shifts his attention to the expected answer, in turn, is to reveal an attribute of the setting, i.e., the depth of the river. The question imposes the role of an informant on one of the walking men and implicitly suggests the latter's acquaintance with the place. The validity of the affirmative answer in the third sentence must therefore be taken for granted as there is no alternative for the reader, for he has no data to verify it.

Significantly, the man's answer is quoted in direct speech and there may be three reasons to explain that⁽³⁾. The first reason may be for an economy of expression, the second may be to signal a greater importance of the character speaking, and the third may be simply to confirm the type of narrator created already by the first sentence.

The fourth sentence comprises a brief report by the narrator about an event. It is with this sentence that the whole structure starts acquiring its typical shape. The full significance of the sentence lies in three points: first, the event is no longer neutral aesthetically and the narrator's attitude may be

considered a generic index; secondly, it reveals an attribute of the setting, i.e., the depth of the river; finally the event logically serves the function of a statement to negate the man's affirmative answer to the question of the late driver. Consequently, the discrepancy between the narrator's detached attitude and the nature in the accident on the one hand, and the logical surprise coming from the negation of his former assumption about the man's acquaintance with the surrounding on the other hand may succeed in baffling the reader. Finally, this fourth sentence produces a shift in the semantic hierarchy of the humorous discourse in which the motivation of the man's answer becomes now the predominant 'puzzle', which is strengthened by the fifth sentence containing the man's answer in reported speech. Obviously, it expresses his surprise and offers a kind of an excuse. It is significant that his brief and highly conventional exclamation cannot be shared by the reader already experienced his 'surprise' after the fourth sentence. Its functions seem much more important than a customary phrase in that it confirms the earlier reaction of bafflement and thus suggests a kind of identification of the reader with the character.

The man's explanation uncovers another element of the setting, i.e., the ducks on the river. The way on which their presence is revealed and the context of the man's earlier affirmative answer betray the relation between the ducks and the man's reasoning. The significance of his reasoning lies in revealing the motivation of his affirmative answer. The discovery of the man's mistake makes it possible to identify the 'unsuspected code' (Kavanagh, 1972:248) in the joke, the code of the man who could so ingeniously interpret the sign of floating ducks and take it for an index of the river's depth. This being so, the reader may now achieve the 'act of integration', since he has been given sufficient information for a logical explanation of the originally baffling accident and for the perception of the final significance of individual elements in the semantic hierarchy of the joke, thus 'getting its point' (Ibid.: 244).

There are three factors operating within this humorous text. First, the selection of information the criterion of which is revealed in a kind of incongruity taking place between certain signs and their attributes, e.g., the man's affirmative answer and the accident, or the man's foolishness and his role as an informant (Kolek, 1985: 152). Secondly, a specific way of ordering the bits of information in order for new data to modify the semantic hierarchy generated so far by revealing new significance,

function, or meanings of some earlier signs or attributes, e.g., the man's surprise. Thirdly, the implicit manner of producing the most crucial signs and attributes, e.g., the depth of the river or the role of the ducks in the man's reasoning (Ibid.).

Generally speaking, discrepancy or incongruity hinges on three interrelated factors, namely, an adequate sign competence of the recipient, the degree of the apparent incompatibility of the incongruous elements, and logically sufficient clues to solve the contradiction.

The three factors mentioned above may be employed to perceive the point of the joke and thus solve the incongruity. To do that, it would suffice to know that, contrary to ducks, carts do not usually float and the man could break this law of nature in his otherwise correct, logically reasoned answer.

The linguistic approach

As mentioned earlier, the linguistic approach takes discourse analysis as its point of departure. According to this approach, any humorous text consists of opening, body of the text, and closing. These three elements in turn are regarded as universal signs within which there are still conventional signs interacting together to bring about the humorous text. In order to perceive the communicative thrust of the text, one needs to appreciate the semiotic dimension which regulates the interaction of the various discursal elements as signs. The interaction occurs between various signs within the text and between the producer of these signs and the intended receiver.

- Text (1-4) : Did / Have you hear(d) about/ of**
- Text (5) : Why do...?**
- Text (6) : How many poles ...?**
- Text (7) : Customer Waiter**
- Text (8) : Patient Doctor**

Text (9) : There was this Englishman, this Irishman and this Scotsman...

Text (10) : Two men are walking along...

The opening content of the humorous texts represented by the jokes (1-10) starts with a sign which often tips the listener that a joke is forthcoming. The opening signs of the joke texts are as follows:

These openings signal a joke's imminent appearance, that is, they provide the reader/ listener with a warning of an approaching joke or humorous riddle⁽⁴⁾.

The second sign in the structure of these humorous texts is the target or the orientation of the humorous text. Sometimes this sign is conflated with the preceding sign and thus they become one and the same thing. The signs that stand for the targets of the humorous texts are thus:

Text (1) : the little moron

Text (2) : the river

Text (3) : the Scotsman

Text (4) : You

Text (5) : People

Text (6) : Poles

Text (7) : Customer Waiter

**Text (8) : Patient
Doctor**

Text (9) : This Englishman, this Irishman and this Scotsman

Text (10) : Two men

It is to be noted that the targets of ridicule vary from culture to another. Certain stereotypes such as the traditional figures of the mother-in-law, the miser...etc. have been objects of ridicule in Arabic humorous texts. Generally, ethnic minorities in every culture are nominated to be the subject matter of a humorous text.

The third sign in the structure of humorous text is the context, that is, the element in which the humorous text works. It provides the necessary background for the punchline to take effect. Nash (1985: 35) distinguishes between two kinds of context, namely, defined context and implied context.

Jokes define a context in case of being exhaustively formulated, and do not define in case of leaving something to conjecture. Following are the contexts of the humorous texts:

- Text (1) : who cut off his arms**
- Text (2) : who buried his battery**
- Text (3) : who counted his money in front of the mirror**
- Text (4) : if you swallowed Uranium**
- Text (5) : go to bed**
- Text (6) : does it take to drive a car**
- Text (7) : There's only one piece of meat on my plate!**
- Text (8) : Doctor, Doctor, I feel like a pair of curtains.**
- Text (9) : who while out for a walk ... and walked on.**
- Text (10) : are walking along a river... to his companion and says**

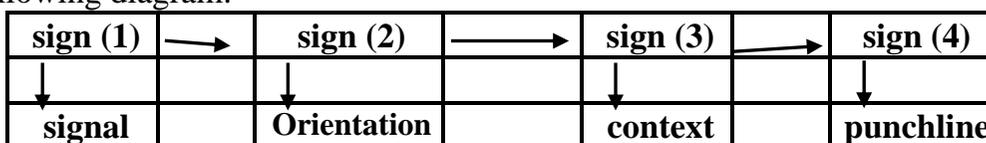
As a major sign in the structure of humorous text the context encapsulates other interrelated signs which interact with other signs both within the text and outside it. The principle which regulates this activity is intertextuality through which textual occurrences are seen in terms of their dependence on other prior, relevant occurrences.

The fourth and last sign is the punchline. It comprises the most fundamental element in the joke text, viz., the incongruity. So it is regarded as an incongruous element in the humorous text. Indeed, it is the presence of the punchline which differentiates a joke from other humorous texts. Oring (1992: 85) calls narrative endings that do not create an incongruity or resolution but resemble punchlines (in that they occur finally and are stylistically similar to them) "pseudo-punchlines."⁽⁵⁾ Below are the punchlines of the data collected:

- Text (1) : he could wear sleeveless shirt.**
- Text (2) : the mechanic told him that it was dead.**
- Text (3) : he wouldn't cheat himself.**
- Text (4) : you would certainly get atomic ache.**

- Text (5) : Because the bed won't come to them.
- Text (6) : 500. One to drive and 455 to pull the road.
- Text (7) : Waiter: wait a minute, sir, and I'll cut it in two.
- Text (8) : Well, pull yourself together then.
- Text (9) : The Scotsman dropped a fivence piece... and waited for his change.
- Text (10) : But look! The ducks are only half immersed.

The punchline as a sign may contain one sign or more whose function is to discharge the joke. By this sign the sequence of signs making a joke is completed. Such a sequence is almost linear in joke texts as in the following diagram:



However, not all the signs constituting this sequence are obligatory. For instance, the orientation and sometimes the signal are optional. Unlike joke texts, other humorous texts may not develop the same linear sequence since the jab line may not terminate the humorous text but occurs somewhere other than the closing.

7. The Impact of Semiotic Structure on Translation

Communication breaks down when the levels of prior knowledge held by the speaker/ writer and by the listener/ reader are not similar. While this is true of any communication, the breakdown is particularly obvious in the case of translated humour, whose perception rests directly on the concurrence of facts and impressions available to both speaker/ hearer and writer / reader.

Most translators translate works from an acquired language into their mother tongue. The last thing we learn in a new language is the exact value of its words. Is a word commonplace or is it elevated? Is it merely strong or insulting? Is it sincere or sarcastic? No dictionary may be found to answer these questions. When a translator cannot detect word values, he/ she is unable to reproduce the tone of the original work. A translation may be literally accurate but completely mistaken in tone. This kind of shortcoming is particularly problematic in a humorous text, in which plot and

characterization are frequently subordinated to the effects created through carefully crafted language. The translator must make full use of both his ears: the ear of the knowledgeable reader of the foreign language and the ear of his alter ego. He must gauge how much humour will be lost, how much retained, and how much understood in a different way from a different perspective. However, awareness on the part of the translator of the semiotic structure of the humorous text will facilitate his task to relay the humorous effect intact. Once a translator knows the signs constituting the structure of a particular humorous text, he will start looking for their equivalents in the target language. Let us consider the following example taken from the data of the study:

Did you hear about the little moron who cut off his arms so he could wear sleeveless shirt?

On rendering the above joke the translator will give the equivalent signs for the sequence of signs constituting the structure of the text. To translate the text into Arabic, we shall trace each sign in the cycle of the joke text and offer its equivalent in Arabic. However, colouring the Arabic text with some sort of local flavour would make it sound natural and transparent. To start with, the first sign in the structure of the source language text is "Did you hear about." If it is rendered into (هل سمعت عن), it would sound unnatural in Arabic since Arabic joke openings do not start with such expressions, and hence one needs to look for the appropriate sign with which Arabic jokes open. So, the proper sign equivalence is احدهم or واحد. Thus,

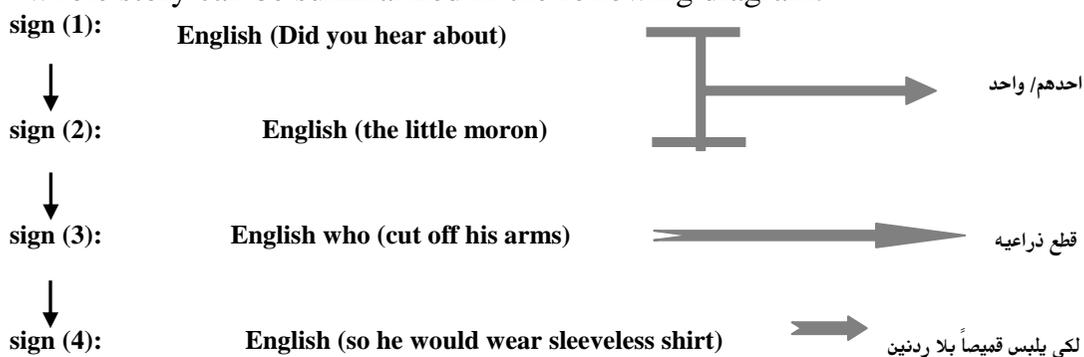
Did you hear about → احدهم / واحد

Having rendered the first sign we move to the second sign which is the orientation of the joke. The English joke has "the little moron" as its target of ridicule, whereas Arabic jokes have no such targets. Indeed, most of Arabic jokes keep the targets anonymous⁽⁶⁾. In other words, the word واحد / احدهم stands for both signs, i.e., the signal and the orientation.

The third sign in the semiotic structure of the humorous texts, namely, jokes is the context in its narrower sense. Thus, the context of the text under focus is "who cut off his arms". Being a universal joke and devoid of any culture specific concepts, the context can be easily rendered into 'قطع ذراعيه'.

Had there been a culture specific word or joke text based on linguistic ambiguity, the task of the translator would have been much more difficult in that he would have sought for another word or text having the same function as the source text had.

Finally, the last sign is the punchline "so he would wear sleeveless shirt", which is the most important sign in the text since in it lies the humorous effect. This sign can be rendered into "لكي يلبس قميصاً بلا ردينين". It is to be noted that the Arabic word 'يلبس' has been given preference over 'يرتدي' to add a local colour to the Arabic text, and thus make it more humorous. Thus, the whole story can be summarized in the following diagram:



One important point to be mentioned here is that the English four signs have been reduced down to three signs only, and this is due to the different semiotic structure between the two languages. ⁽⁷⁾

8. Conclusion

The present study has explored the structure of the humorous texts represented by joke and riddle texts and has derived insight into their functioning to achieve an effective rendering of them. The main points arrived at in this paper can be summarized as:

1. There are three interpreted factors on which incongruity depends in any humorous text, namely, an adequate sign competence of the receiver, the degree of the apparent incompatibility of the incongruous elements, and logically sufficient contextual clues allowing for a solution of the contradiction. As such, the translator has to have an adequate sign competence and perceive the incompatibility of the incongruous elements in order to do the job successfully.

2. Achieving a semiotic equivalence means that one does not restrict meaning simply to sounds, words, grammar, and rhetoric, but must recognize that within any humorous text objects and events may likewise have meaning as a result of cultural presuppositions and value systems.
3. Languages do not differ primarily in communicating humorous texts or any other genres but they differ in how they do it, and hence it is the focus upon functional equivalence within a semiotic framework which constitutes a crucial element in translation.
4. English and Arabic share a semiotic structure in the broad lines but differ in the number of the elements of this structure. In other words, English joke texts consist of four main signs, whereas standard Arabic ones are generally made up of three signs due to the fact that the signal and orientation of the Arabic joke texts are combined together making only one sign standing for both. However, other local Arabic jokes do have orientations and thus there is one-to-one correspondence between English and Arabic semiotic structure.
5. Two approaches have been forwarded to analyse the humorous texts, namely, the literary and the linguistic approaches, and both are required to comprehend the texts before embarking on translating them. However, the linguistic approach, we think, is more useful for translators as it sheds light on the structural signs of the text, which helps the translator relay them in the target text effectively.

Notes

- (1.) Text and discourse are used exchangeably in this paper.
- (2.) Among the scholars who adopt the first approach is Kolek (1985). The second approach is advanced by the researcher.
- (3.) Direct speech is a formal device generally used either to introduce narrative variety, to emphasize a special relevance of the utterance, or to distance the narratorial element from it (Kolek, 1985: 150).
- (4.) They jokester usually provides a wealth of nonverbal cues that prepare the hearer to be amused. He may communicate the message by the posture of his body or an unnoticed movement of his arm. He may emphasize various sounds or frequencies in his voice. However, nonverbal signs are outside the scope of this paper.

(5.) The most interesting issues are longer texts which are structurally dissimilar from the joke, i.e., no punch line at the end. These contain two types of humorous triggers: the punch lines and jab lines. The former effectively end the narrative, unlike the latter which are humorous turns or events essential to the narrative in which they appear or to the development of the text itself. (Attardo, 1996: 97).

(6.) This is not the case in colloquial jokes whose targets are varied and depend on the personal distance between the speaker/ writer and listener/ reader, among other things.

(7.) This example is representative of forty humorous texts collected and analysed by the researcher . However , lack of space prevents the researcher from including them in this study .

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التركيبية السيميائية للخطاب الفكاهي وتأثيرها على الترجمة

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المستخلص

البحث دراسة في البنية السيميائية للنصوص الفكاهية، التي أسبّرت عن بيان العلامات التي تُكوّن بنية النصوص الفكاهية مُتمثلة بالنكات، والألغاز، وسلطات الضوء على وظيفتها وصولاً إلى تحقيق ترجمة ناجحة لها. فقد توصل البحث إلى ثلاثة عناصر يعتمد عليها التعارض في أي نص فكاهي، وهي: الكفاءة السيميائية الوافية للمتلقى، ودرجة التناظر للعناصر المتعارضة، والمعلومات السياقية الكافية .