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## | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Pragmatics of Humor in the English Sitcom *Friends* and its Arabic Subtitles: A Pragmatic Analysis of Humor Types and Transfer

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## | ABSTRACT

Interlingual subtitling is a popular mode of audiovisual translation in the Arab world and a manifestation of linguistic and intercultural communication that yields a wide range of audiovisual products exchanged overseas, among which, sitcoms. Presumably, sitcoms are intended to be primarily humorous and entertaining for both the source audience and the target viewers, and usually it is the punch line, that is the last few words of a joke, that makes it funny to the audience. In case of television and radio comedy, a canned laughter under the form of a recorded laughter is systematically used after punch lines to accentuate the humor intention and trigger the laughter effect. However, subtitling humor from English into Arabic is polysemiotic and proves to be challenging due to some linguistic and pragmatic differences between both languages. This research investigates humor in one of the most outstanding American sitcoms, that is *Friends*. The aim of this research is to examine the pragmatics of humor by identifying the different humor types in English-Arabic subtitling of sitcoms and their corresponding pragmatic transfer type using an inductive qualitative research method. Based on the theoretical framework of Raphaelson-West (1989) that advocates three types of humor; namely cultural, universal and linguistic; the analysis has been conducted over 33 episodes of *Friends* to analyze the translation of punch lines in Arabic. Results have showcased that Raphaelson-West (1989) threefold taxonomy has unfolded 9 other subtypes of humor that correlated with either negative or positive pragmatic transfer, and revealed that universal and linguistic humor were successfully transferred to the target language except for the phonological humor type. Cultural humor involving idioms and cultural concepts, however, proved to be challenging, literally translated and devoid of humor. Particularly, the transfer of taboo-based humor and inferred humor are conditioned by understanding and recognizing the pragmatics of punch lines. The findings would contribute to existing literature and research on interlingual subtitling and humor studies.

## | KEYWORDS

Arabic; English; Humor; Sitcom; subtitling; Transfer; Typology

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### 1. Introduction

Humor can occur in natural data settings, (in)formal exchanges, fiction or multimedia milieu. It could be either verbal or non-verbal depending on its context and purpose of use. The former is performed through jokes, parody, puns or funny utterances, while the latter is produced through funny gestures, facial expressions and proxemics of people in general. Regarding the subtitling of both verbal and non-verbal humor, few studies were accomplished on the translation of comics across English and Arabic in an audiovisual context. Gottlieb (1997) drew the attention to this research gap years ago by underlining that few studies were accomplished on the translation of comics in a genre combining visual progression with written dialogues, while Attardo (2020, p.

357) has lately asserted that “subtitling translation causes meaningful loss of the humor”. Moreover, Yu-Tong et al (2024) attest that humor translation in audiovisual products has attracted significant attention from scholars. After conducting a research on 35 articles, they confirm that data sources range from TV series (45.7%), films (48.6%) and other types advertisements and stand-comedy (with only 5.7%). Yu-Tong et al (2024, p. 338) further deduce that “the types of audiovisual products being studied in the selected articles are confined mainly to TV series or films”. Sitcom, then, would also fall under the underrated last category and represents a research gap.

Considering the three motives above, the current research is at the crossroads of humor theories and audiovisual translation theories, basically between sitcoms and subtitling, respectively. In fact, “being an inter-discipline, Humor Studies could well play an important role in empirically grounded cross-cultural research within the field of translation studies” (Chiaro 2006, p. 206). Humor is essentially culture-bound par-excellence and rooted in the pragmatic, socio-cultural practices and lifestyles of every country. Similarly, lexical items, metaphors, idioms, proverbs, dialects, slangs and the linguistic repertoire are all at the service of expressing humor.

Dias Cintaz & Remael (2015, p. 216) conclude that “when subtitling classics, subtitlers will tend to be more careful with far-fetching interventions than when subtitling soaps or sitcoms”. Most often, it is a challenge to get humor across when people use different languages, come from different cultural backgrounds and have different sets of norms (Lutviana & Subiyanto, 2012). However, when translated, humor could be (mis) understood by non-native speakers of the target language. When misunderstood or misconceived, humor loses one of its main communicative functions which is triggering laughter of the target language receivers and fails to transfer the linguistic and cultural specificities of the source language besides creating a disbalanced version of the same joke. This is partly due to the fact that humor in any audiovisual setting is multidimensional and polysemiotic. As a matter of fact, humor is subject to multiple channels of communications such as, oral and written channels, verbal and non-verbal codes, dialogues, actors, sound effects, pictures etc. Attardo (2020, p. 356) confirms that “the mixed modality (auditory and visual) or multimodality of audiovisual humor presents unique challenges”. Subsequently, owing to the linguistic and socio-cultural attributes of humor and its semiotic complexity, the paper would provide answers to the following research questions: (1) What are the different sub-types of humor spotted in the English corpus? (2) How does pragmatic transfer vary when subtitling humor? The purpose of the study is to identify humor types along with their ensuing pragmatic transfer type and expand the taxonomy used for this research. The linguistic, pragmatic and sociocultural subtitling challenges in the negative transfer will be highlighted and explained.

## **2. Literature review**

Humor is the natural outcome of fun, puns, play on words, and cracking jokes. It is the deviation from the conventional norms that makes people feel exhilarated. Scholars have suggested various taxonomies of humor in written or spoken discourses, and audiovisual contexts. As for written texts, Attardo’s (1994) typology consists of verbal humor and referential humor. Raphaelson-West (1989, p. 130) contends that determining the type of humor is important to translate it properly and for this, she proposed a taxonomy of humor which is threefold and based on three types of jokes: linguistic humor based on linguistic jokes such as puns and wordplay, cultural humor based on ethnic and culture-related jokes and universal humor, such as the unexpected. In other words, the linguistic humor consists of specific features in the phonology, morphology or syntax and lexis of particular languages, including puns and wordplay. Cultural humor is mainly comprised of ethnic and pragmatic jokes. Universal humor, however, is composed of the unexpected and the unusual weird response. In this case, humor emanates from the context and the general functioning of the world. Presumably, universal humor would continue to be humorous in translation from English into other languages.

Dynal (2009), for his part, has examined conversational humor in spoken discourse, and draws a clear-cut distinction between real-life humor as in everyday conversations or TV programs, and fictional humor observed in film and book dialogues. On the other hand, in the audiovisual context, Jaskanen (2001) divides humor into intralinguistic humor including catch phrases, slangs, allusions, and wordplays, puns; as opposed to extra-linguistic humor based on culture-related elements. Alternatively, Schmitz (2002) has explored humor in foreign language learning and translation courses using Raphaelson-West (1989) typology, while another German researcher applied the same typology to a German film comedy ‘die Friseurin’ in order to analyze the German subtitles for the deaf and hard-of-hearing and the resources used to convey humor to them (González & Pleguezuelos, 2015). Still, Alnusairat & Jaganathan (2022) have investigated the translation methods and strategies of humor in the comedy sitcom ‘Friends’ by applying the same taxonomy. Recently Yu-Tong et al (2024), having scrutinized 35 articles sourced from Web of Science collection and Scopus on verbally expressed humor in audiovisual products, they found out that Raphaelson-West (1989) humor types are the most commonly applied and generalized taxonomy. Consequently, the current research investigates humor in English sitcoms subtitled into Arabic using Raphaelson-West’s taxonomy, and probe into other humor types, if any, and how they are transferred from English into Arabic.

In audiovisual translation, more particularly in sitcom subtitling, the pragmatics of humor is one pivotal element that can secure the positive transfer of humorous particles. According to Vandaele (2002, p. 150), humor as an intended effect has an exteriorized manifestation (laughter) which is quite difficult to render, whereas the meaning of other texts is “less compelling” in terms of perception. In fact, the illocutionary force or intention of sitcoms is humor as uttered and formulated by actors on stage,

while laughter is the perlocutionary effect on spectators or viewers. Dias Cintaz & Remael contend that “subtitling humor requires insight and creativity, but it is also a matter of establishing priorities” (2014, p. 214). They advocate that sometimes laughter is more important to render than the semantics of a passage and at other times, the reverse is the case. Humor proves to be challenging in interlingual subtitling since translating humor is a process bound to considering humor with all its associated pragmatic dimensions in the source language and the transfer should also comply with the linguistic and sociocultural norms in the target language. Overall, in sitcoms “comedy seeks and secures the effect of laughter with the same perlocutionary force of intention” (Glazov-Corrigan, 1994). While different intentions are transmitted into a target language and a different culture, laughter is the perlocutionary effect of humor. The perlocutionary effect is meant to be humorous and it is usually the punch line, that is the last few words of a joke, that makes it funny to the audience. In case of television and radio comedy, canned laughter under the form of a recorded laughter are used after punch lines to accentuate the humor intention and trigger the laughter effect. This is what is actually used in the *Friends* sitcoms. In live comedy shows “all humorous situations are marked by outbursts of laughter from the audience” (Gottlieb, 1997, p. 216). Conversely, in sitcoms, only specific scenes which are followed by laughter would make up for the humorous utterances and most of comic scenes “finish with a punch line stressed by the sound of a canned joke” (Romero Fresco 2006, p. 4). Accordingly, only punch lines that feature laughter are included in the forthcoming analysis.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research design

Having piloted the lack of equivalence in the subtitling of punch lines from English to Arabic in sitcoms and scrutinized a gap regarding humor studies and its relation with audiovisual translation, the current research investigates the sitcom *Friends* as a case study. The sitcom lends itself to be the source data for this case study as it is deemed a popular and entertaining audiovisual product that lasted for 10 years and was dubbed and/or subtitled into many languages including Arabic. In addition, opting for “Friends” was intentional, as more than 90 % of the scenes in “Friends” is comical (Romero Fresco, 2006). Apart from its availability online, the subtitled Arabic version of the sitcom used to be aired regularly on MBC Masr and MBC4 on Thursdays and Fridays at 5 p.m. and. The sitcom ran for 10 seasons and consisted of 236 episodes which were broadcast between 1994 and 2004. The average time for each episode is roughly 22 minutes. There were 6 main characters, namely, Joe, Ross, Chandler, Phoebe, Rachel and Monica.

#### 3.2 Research instruments and sampling

The research was carried out within an inductive qualitative research method, with the researcher as a key-human instrument who is responsible for collecting and analyzing data to gain in-depth understanding of the pragmatics of humor subtitling. The inductive reasoning would link theory and research building from particulars to general themes (Zou & Xu 2023). The corpus is made of 33 randomly selected episodes, for sake of representativeness, from the American sitcom *Friends*. Actors’ utterances and the Arabic subtitles represent the bilingual corpus. Afterwards, 17 pairs of English-Arabic punch lines were collected from the compiled episodes and displayed in the next section through a generic purposive sampling. Zou & Xu (2023, p. 26) confirm that “the purpose of this sampling method is to select units that best provide insight into the research questions and will convince the audience of the research”. Accordingly, only specific scenes, namely those which are followed by canned laughter are considered for the analysis.

#### 3.3 Data collection and research procedure

The data was collected from YouTube where the English episodes subtitled into Arabic were uploaded from different free open access sites such as @friendstv, cera.online, comedy central, Feduo and MyEgy. The researcher relied on various subtitling sources to extrapolate the findings and maintain variability of source data. Moreover, different seasons and episodes with different on-screen transcriptions font size were explored and analyzed based on the theoretical framework (see literature review section) of Raphaelson-West (1989). After watching all the episodes, the researcher has observed recurrent humor types that would fall under the three main ones initially stated in the theoretical framework, and discovered new humor types in the sitcom. The collected data used for the qualitative analysis below then consists of 17 examples which showcase each humor type and their correlation with the pragmatic transfer type. A positive pragmatic transfer denotes a successful transfer of humor while the negative pragmatic transfer marks a failure of humor translation. Most significantly and for sake of accuracy, only shots that feature the joke were included in the qualitative analysis so that the viewer “knows exactly where fun should be” (Gottlieb, 1997, p. 216). Thus, essentially funny punch lines which occur right before the canned laughter were collected from the actors’ dialogues along with their subtitles.

### 4. Results and discussion

The qualitative analysis yielded 9 subtypes of humor along with their transfer type, thus expanding the taxonomy used in the theoretical framework and adapting it to the context of sitcom subtitling. The cultural humor was further subdivided into cultural concepts, idiom-based humor, and taboo-based humor. The universal humor was bisected into reality-detached humor and non-verbal humor. As for linguistic humor, it was split up into inferred humor, pun-based humor, meta-humor and phonological humor.

## **4.1 Cultural humor**

### **4.1.1 Cultural concepts**

This type of humor is created by using cultural concepts proper to the target language.

#### **Example 1:**

*Chandler: Ho-Ho-Ho (canned laughter)*

*Phoebe: excuse me?*

*Chandler: Your pants*

*Phoebe: Oh yeah you like them?*

Phoebe was wearing Santa Claus pants and using them as maternity pants as they were very comfortable. Chandler is being sarcastic as he thinks wearing Santa Claus pants was inappropriate. Chandler was very ironic when uttering "Ho-Ho-Ho" referring to how Santa laughs and his way of expressing his happiness and joy. This very expression which is culture-bound and very common in Western societies was not subtitled in the Arabic text. This cultural aspect was omitted as it is insignificant in the target language.

#### **Example 2:**

*Rachel come in and saw Phoebe wearing the pants: Hi Pheeb how are the elves (canned joke).*

مرحبا (فبيز)، كيف حال الاقزام؟

"Elves" are those supernatural creatures that have supernatural powers. This word collocates with Santa Claus and part of the semantic field of Christmas festivals. It remains confusing for the viewer who should activate his/her background knowledge and a particular brainstorming about vocabulary related to Christmas, the pants Phoebe is wearing and the humor created through Rachel's sarcasm. Subtitles remain on-screen for a very short span of time (usually 5 to 6 seconds) that does not allow for the synthesis of all these elements and an easy assimilation of the culture-based humor.

### **4.1.2 Idiom-based humor**

#### **Example 3:**

*Phoebe: Oh come on you tell me everything?*

*Monica: what haven't I told you?*

*Phoebe (addressing Monica and the rest of their friends are listening): oh I dunno... emm ...how about the fact that the underwear out there on the telephone poll is yours from when you were having sex with Fan Bobby out in the terrace*

*All the gang: what?*

*Monica: who told you? (Finger-pointing chandler) You are dead meat!*

*Chandler: I didn't know it is a big secret (canned laughter)*

"You're dead meat" is an idiomatic expression which is part and parcel of the cultural heritage in the English language. It is used in this context to suggest that someone is in serious trouble and Monica intended to express that Chandler is the one who told on her and spread the word about her love affair. Humor fails to be transferred since literal nonsense translation of this expression into "انت ميت لا محالة" makes the subtitles meaningless and devoid of any humor.

### **4.1.3 Taboo-based humor**

This type of humor relies on the use of pragmatic context of utterances to infer correctly the tabooed words.

#### **Example 4:**

*Chandler is having a bath in the bathroom. Joey, Monica and phoebe are talking about Rachel.*

*Chandler to Joey: you like Rachel?*

*Joey: look it's no big deal ok? Phoebe and I talked about it it's just a crush it's gonna go away. Hey dude you're gonna rearrange your bubbles... (canned laughter) ohhhh (then he turned his head and everybody looked at where joey was pointing)*

Joey's request for Chandler to rearrange his bubbles has a deeper implied meaning loaded with sexual connotations as it is an indirect request to cover his genital organ that was hidden with the bath bubbles. The Arabic subtitles "يا صاح، عليك إعادة تسوية فقايعك" are positively transferred as the tabooed meaning is supported by the pragmatics of the act like the body language of Joey pointing out to the bubbles and the hilarious setting itself with all Chandler's friends gathered at the bathroom while he's having a bubble bath.

**Example 5:**

*Phoebe is at the flat with chandler and Monica*

*Phoebe: my guy is a lawyer who does volunteer work and he has one of these (she pinched her chin)*

*Chandler: a face ass*

*Phoebe: a chin dimple*

Chandler was very ironic by saying "face ass" instead of chin dimple. The English taboo word was literally subtitled into "مؤخرة ذقن", thus bearing no humor.

**Example 6:**

*Joey was taking a shower and Rachel lifted up the curtains mistaking him for chandler, then she went out in a hurry.*

*Joey: what's wrong with you?*

*Rachel: I thought you were chandler. (Chandler coming out of the room)*

*Rachel (irritated): You were supposed to be in there so I could see your thing (pointing to his penis) (canned laughter)*

*Joey (came out of his bedroom): Sorry my thing was in there with me (canned laughter)*

The word "thing" is a general word that might refer to many objects but here it's used as a cover term to refer to Joey's genital organ. It is literally subtitled into "الشيء" which is also a general word in the Arabic language reiterated in Rachel's statement "اسف شيتي كان معي هناك" and Joey's reply "ان تكون هناك لارى شيتك". Presumably, taboo-based humor is transferred successfully into the target language as they are enhanced by the extra-linguistic context of utterances and the pragmatics of the punch lines, mainly the body language of Rachel talking furiously and pointing to Joey's genital organ.

**4.2 Universal humor**

Universal humor such as the unexpected and the unusual weird response that goes against the world common sense. They emanate from the context and the general functioning of the world.

**4.2.1 Reality-detached humor**

This type of humor marks a disjunction between reality and punch lines. It is successful in both the target language and the source language as the jokes go against the logic and common sense not only in the English language but in all target languages.

**Example 7:**

*Rachel woke up in the middle of the night exasperated by the crowing of the rooster. She walked out of her bedroom and when she saw Monica who was also wondering about the crowing, she asked her angrily: "what the hell is that? is that you?" (canned laughter).*

The subtitles "ما هذا الصوت؟ هل هو صوتك؟" convey the same expected weird statement as in English. Obviously, the sound of the rooster Rachel is hearing is not emitted by Monica, which creates a universal humor.

**Example 8:**

*Rachel is knocking at the door while Joey, Monica and chandler are sitting around a table.*

*Monika speaking to Joey: Joey, you have to talk to her*

*Joey: no no no I can't I can't not after the other night...it's too weird...don't tell her I'm here ok? (he hid himself in a room)*

*Monica and chandler: hey*

*Rachel: Hey, is Joey here?*

*Chandler: I don't see him, do you see him?*

*Monica: I don't see him heeeey may be he's in the sugar bowl, (lifting the lid of the bowl and calling out to Joey). no (canned laughter). Outbursts of laughter from Chandler and Monica.*

In this example, humor is created by the contrast between Monica's punchline uttered simultaneously with her gesture (lifting the sugar bowl lid and looking for something). Successful subtitling of the punchline "heeeey may be he's in the sugar bowl" into "ربما هو في وعاء السكر (جوي)؟ لا" where humor is rendered in the target language with the help of the visual context and the pragmatics of the punch line.

In examples 7 and 8, humor emanates from utterances that are counter-logic and goes against common sense and knowledge of the world. The subtitling of punch lines conveys this type of humor which is easily assimilated by target language viewers as they share knowledge of the world with source language speakers.

#### **4.2.2 Non-verbal Humor**

##### **Example 9:**

*Ross's friends invited people and organized a surprised party for him. When Ross knocked at the door, Monica opened the door and everybody shouted "surprise". Ross, who was carrying a cake, was dumbstruck and the cake fell down (canned laughter) out of his surprise.*

Non-verbal humor in audiovisual translation is very powerful for it does not need any subtitling. The facial expressions and body language are very expressive and can transfer humor to the recipient language easily.

#### **4.3 Linguistic Humor**

##### **4.3.1 Inferred Humor**

Inferred humor is based on the pragmatics of utterances and jokes. It emanates from indirect speech acts and implicit utterances, which requires the viewer in the target audience to read between the lines and infer the intended meaning.

##### **Example 10:**

*Joey: look Rachel my parents bought this fridge right after I was born...ok? Now I have never had a problem with it...then you show up and it breaks (canned joke) What does that tell you?*

*Rachel: that refrigerators don't live as long as people (canned joke)*

There are two intentions in this example. The first one when it says "then you show up and it breaks" subtitled into "لم نواجه اي مشكلة حتي جئت فتعطلت". Joey was alluding to the possibility that Rachel was the one who broke the fridge. The second intentional utterance is "that refrigerators don't live as long as people" subtitled into "أن الثلاجات لا تعمر مثل البشر". One can infer that Rachel is not willing neither to mend the broken fridge nor to buy a new one.

##### **Example 11:**

*Monica (as a cook at a restaurant kitchen): I need more swordfish?*

*(No one answers)*

*Monica: can you get me some more swordfish?*

*Her colleague: I don't speak English (canned joke)*

The answer of Monica's co-worker "I don't speak English", though she does, is hilarious as it is linguistically paradoxical. Monica's co-worker was not helpful and acts like she did not understand her request. The reply has a pragmatic intention of not being willing to help out Monica. The transfer of humor is successful as the subtitle "انا لا أتكلم الانجليزية" conveys both the illocutionary purpose and the perlocutionary effect.

##### **Example 12:**

*All the friends were gathered at Monica's apartment and irritated because they thought Joey is deceiving them as he was going to the party and made them believe that he was not. They thought he was dressed up under his robe.*

*Joey: Hey guys I'm turning in, have fun*

*Phoebe: We know about your party Joey*

*Joey: What party?*

*Monica: The game is over take off your robe. (He literally untied his robe)*

*Everybody: noooooo no no no no*

Joey was saying the truth but his friends did not believe him and insisted on taking off the robe. When he untied his robe, the viewer must have inferred that he was naked and his friends were surprised and asked him not to do that.

#### **4.3.2 Pun-based Humor**

This sub-linguistic type of humor is generated when puns are used to crack jokes.

##### **Example 13:**

*Chandler is at Monica's place irritated and complaining to Ross and Joey who were busy playing and concentrating on their video games (because Monica's parents don't seem to like him):*

*Chandler: this is just Great this is another thanksgiving I'm not gonna give thanks*

*Joey: yeah I give thanks if you're shutting up (canned laughter)*

*Chandler: May be I give thanks by taking my play station over my new apartment*

*Joey: May be I love you*

In the aforementioned example, humor is created by making the word "thanks" redundant and collocating with words like "thanksgiving" and "give thanks" where the social occasion and his state of mind are totally opposing each other. The same redundancy, collocation and play on words were successfully recreated in Arabic subtitles as follows:

"عيد شكر اخر وليس لدي ما انا شاكر له"  
 "ربما سأكون شاكرًا لو تخرس"  
 "ربما سأكون شاكرًا لو اخذت لعبتي البلايستيشن الي شقتي الجديدة"

#### 4.3.2 Meta-humor

Meta-humor is also called self-referential humor or humor about humor. Actors are creating humor through a linguistic process that is the use of words that are pertinent to the word humor and/or refer reflexively to it. Hence, Meta-humor vocabulary revolve around the theme of humor and fun.

##### Example 14:

*Chandler and ross were surprised by Monica's attitude. She was tossing her head inside the open fridge while giggling and laughing. (canned joke)*

*Ross: what's so funny?*

*Monica (with an earnest mood): I'm not laughing*

Meta-humor expressions like "what's so funny?", "I'm not laughing" were subtitled into "ما الذي يضحكك هكذا" and "انا لا" respectively, with a successful transfer of the expressions from English into Arabic. Monica's denial of her laughing, while she does, contradicts with Ross and Chandler's puzzlement. It is this paradox between the pragmatic context and the utterances that creates the humor.

##### Example 15:

*Phoebe: May be your resolution should be not to make fun of your friends especially the ones who may soon be flying you to Europe for free on their own planes (canned joke)*

*Monica: she has a better chance of sprouting wings and flying off your nose than you do not if you're not making fun of us. (canned joke)*

*Ross: in fact, I'll bet 50 bucks you can't go the whole year without making fun of us...you know what, I'll bet a week (canned joke)*

Reiterating words like "make fun" in English and Arabic "تستهزئ استهزاء" three times in the above extract with the intention of chandler to literally make fun of his friends.

#### 4.3.3 Phonological Humor

This type of humor is made out of making fun through playing with the phonological sounds of language and prosodic features.

##### Example 16:

*Phoebe playing with her guitar on a New Year's Eve occasion she's making fun by creating a song specially made of her friends where she used their names that rhyme with other English words.*

*Phoebe (singing): happy new year snowy Joey, happy new year chandler and Ross sprinter dreidel Rachel (canned laughter)*

*Rachel: Phoebe that's great*

*Phoebe: Oh yeah!*

*Rachel: but you know emm Rachel doesn't rhyme with dreidel*

*Phoebe: I know but it's so hard nothing with your stupid name (canned laughter)*

*Joey: what are you talking about? Lots of things rhyme with Rachel bagel, mail, jail, bail, cable, maple (canned laughter).*

Punchlines that are marked by a canned laughter were subtitled as follows:

مثلجا جوي يسرع دريدل رايتشل  
 رايتشل لا تتفق مع دريدل  
 كعكة، بريدل، سجن، كفالة، سلك، ناغط

The fun created with the phonological play with English sounds is lost during the subtitling process. "snowy Joey" was translated as "مثلجا جوي", "sprinter dreidel Rachel" as "يسرع دريدل رايتشل" and "Rachel bagel, mail, jail, bail, cable, maple" as "رايتشل رايتشل". The phonological parallelism between words in the English version failed to be transferred to

the target language because of the differences between English and Arabic. It is this very parallelism which is at the origin of humor in the source language.

**Example 17:**

*Chandler, Monica, Ross and his British girlfriend are at a café. Chandler is trying to be nice and helpful to the British guest.*

*Chandler: anyone for more tea? No, just me there*

Joe is making fun at the British accent “*no just me there*” which means “*that’s just me*” is an *Interjection* (colloquial, idiomatic) that indicates the expression of a personal opinion, but often used ironically as an understatement. Phonological features of the British English accent fail to be transferred to the target language.

The following table sums up the types and sub-types of humor subtitling along with the way they are transferred from English into Arabic.

**Table 1. Types of Humor and Pragmatic Transfer in subtitling sitcoms**

Type of humor	Sub-types of humor	Type of pragmatic transfer
<b>Cultural humor</b>	1. Cultural concepts	Negative
	2. Idiom-based humor	Negative
	3. Taboo-based humor	Positive (with the help of pragmatic context)
<b>Universal humor</b>	4. Reality-detached humor	Positive
	5. Non-verbal humor	Positive
<b>Linguistic humor</b>	6. Inferred humor	Positive (with the help of pragmatic context)
	7. Pun-based humor	Positive
	8. Meta-humor	Positive
	9. Phonological humor	Negative

The abovementioned analysis has showcased a typology of humor in subtitling sitcoms, from English into Arabic, along with their types of transfer. In general, subtitlers managed to transfer successfully linguistic humor except for phonological humor due to large differences at the level of prosodic features between English and Arabic. Chiaro contends that “linguistic differences alone are an obstacle to a positive humor response across cultures” (2006, p. 207), which is not the case in this case study as there was a positive transfer despite linguistic discrepancies between English and Arabic. The translation of inferred humor was accomplished with the help of the pragmatic context of punch lines that allowed for clarifying the illocutionary force of utterances. Similarly, taboo-based and inferred humor can be transferred positively when matching the pragmatics of humor to verbal utterances. In a similar vein, Kostovčik (2009, p. 235) further confirms that “on the screen if the verbal joke is bound to a visual stimulus, it provides less room for the translator to alter the joke”. Therefore, the physical context of the joke and the visual stimuli guarantee the positive transfer of humor and a downgrade on the possibilities of distorting jokes in the TL.

As for universal humor, it was transferred positively and appropriately, which validates Alnusairat & Jaganathan’s statement that “universal jokes are easily transferred into different languages” (2022, p. 1447). However, this finding contradicts with Raphaelson-West’s premise that “linguistic, or language-based jokes are among the most difficult to translate” (1989, p. 131). Non-verbal humor has been positively perceived since the facial expressions, body language and gestures are powerful on-screen and do not require efforts, and the funny perlocutionary effect is immediate on viewer.

Nevertheless, subtitling humor is prone to cultural constraints which may hinder positive transfer. Cultural discrepancy between English and Arabic is as important as linguistic differences and prevents the cultural particularities included in jokes and

punch lines to be rendered in the target language. Ben Slamia (2022, p. 80) argues that similarly, in dubbing, “equivalence grows challenging” when transferring distinctive culture concepts to another language. In audiovisual translation, when speech acts, colloquial expressions etc., are translated literally, the linguistic, communicative and socio-cultural structure of the target language is affected (Fernández, 2006). Thus, literal subtitling of jokes entails a breakdown in communicating the intended fun and a breach in the translation of socio-cultural items and idioms. Usually, the translation of verbal humor on screen shall be able to preserve the semantic, pragmatic and formal aspects of the source language instances of humor in order to evoke a similar reaction to that of the original and create fun in the translated version (Kostovčík, 2009; Gottlieb, 1997). However, cultural humor could not transfer the linguistic and pragmatic aspects in the English punch lines and the Arabic version is devoid of fun. Cultural humor is more problematic than the other humor types as cultural items and idioms fail to be transferred correctly.

Alternatively, Chiaro (2006, p. 200) devised three translational strategies of verbally expressed humor (VEH) on screen: (1) The substitution of VEH in the source language (SL) with an example of VEH in the target language (TL), (2) The replacement of the SL VEH with an idiomatic expression in TL and (3) The replacement of the SL VEH with an example of compensatory VEH elsewhere in the TL text. However, in this research, idioms failed to be rendered and were replaced with literal erroneous translation. Compensatory verbally expressed humor denoted creativity when subtitling hilarious puns, meta-humor taboos and puns.

## 5. Conclusion

Humor stands for a major cross-cultural difference between English and Arabic in audiovisual translation. In this case study, the theoretical framework of Raphaelson-West (1989) was expanded and adapted to the context of sitcom subtitling. The researcher has come up with an illustrated typology of humor and its pragmatic transfer type. Cultural humor proved to be the most challenging type, while universal and linguistic humor were more likely to be successfully transferred. Cultural concepts, idioms and phonology failed to be transferred due to cultural discrepancy and lack of phonological affinity between the English and Arabic languages. Taboo-based humor, inferred humor and non-verbal humor, however, could be transferred positively with the help of all the pragmatic components of humor visible on-screen.

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