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ENGLISH

## **Translation of Humour in Media**

### **From English Speech to Swedish Subtitles:**

A Pilot Study of Selected Episodes in the Sitcom *Friends*

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BA Essay

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**Abstract:**

The aim of this pilot study is to analyse the translation of humour in selected episodes in the American sitcom *Friends* from speech to Swedish subtitles in terms of linguistic and cultural aspects. The study was conducted qualitatively by choosing several episodes and thoroughly analysing the translation of linguistic and culture-specific features in order to explore what strategies of translation were implemented on different kinds of jokes, noting the constraints of interlingual subtitling. For linguistic jokes, a word-for-word strategy was used, as the morphology, syntax and lexis of Swedish language allowed it. The humorous utterances that included idiom and cultural-reference, on the other hand, did not allow the same strategy, as it would lead to misunderstandings. Neither could an equivalent expression be used, as it did not exist in Swedish. Overall, the findings were that an appropriate translation strategy for linguistic jokes between English and Swedish that preserves both the linguistic ambiguity and the humour is word-for-word, while in the translation of idioms and cultural references, literal translation causes loss of humour.

**Keywords:** English, Swedish, Audiovisual translation, humour, culture, Friends

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# 1. Introduction

In Sweden and other Scandinavian countries, tv programs are not dubbed as in many other countries in Europe. All American movies, tv programs and tv series are shown in the original language - English- and supported by subtitles. However, translation into subtitles comes with many difficulties such as summarizing a speech in two lines of text at the same time as it has to contain all the important details so that the viewer follows the events. Another issue with subtitle translation is culture. Liu (2012) investigates translation of idioms between Chinese and English from a cultural perspective and points out that the concept of culture is ambiguous and can cause disagreements, since there are over 200 definitions of culture. Goodenough (quoted in Liu, 2012:2357) claims that culture is what people have in mind, how people interpret things and relate to them. Although there are different views of culture, they all agree on one thing - culture and language are interconnected. (Liu, 2012). Therefore, translating culture-specific references is a difficult task that includes various strategies, especially when it comes to translating humour.

Since culture and language are interconnected, translation can be described as inter-lingual communication and as a process of cultural transfer. Pettit (2009:44) writes that translators mediate between cultures and are expected to be both bilingually and bi-culturally competent. The complex semiotic text, film or a programme that an audiovisual translator works with consists of various signs: verbal/nonverbal, intentional/unintentional, implicit/explicit and all of them construct a network of codes that create the message for the recipients. The task of the translator is to transfer the message from the *source language* (SL) to the *target language* (TL) so that the message becomes understandable and acceptable for the target culture as well. Verbal humour tends to exploit linguistic equivocality together with specific cultural references which makes translation of verbal humour complex.

Therefore, the aim of this project is to conduct a pilot study of selected episodes in the sitcom *Friends*, in order to analyse the translation of selected humorous utterances from English speech to Swedish subtitles, considering previous research in the field. The essay also aims to explore the choice of translation strategies behind each selected humorous utterance in *Friends*. English and Swedish are chosen because these languages derive from the same family of Germanic languages and have similar morphology, so the small linguistic differences can be discovered and discussed in detail. The study will focus on the American

sitcom *Friends* in terms of linguistic and cultural aspects. The sitcom *Friends* was chosen because of its story about six friends who spend all their time together, a situation that allows for humorous circumstances to arise.

The essay is structured as follows. The remainder of the introduction presents previous studies (section 1.1) and research questions (section 1.2) followed by section 2 that presents theoretical background on humour and the translation of humour (section 2.1), idioms (section 2.2), wordplay (section 2.3) and subtitling (section 2.4). Section 3 presents the methods of the study (section 3.1) and materials (section 3.2), followed by the analysis of the jokes (section 3.3) and discussion of the results (section 3.4). Section 4 concludes.

### **1.1 Previous studies on the topic**

Studies on humour are a popular field that is widely discussed among linguists. It goes from Plato to Cicero to the more recent theorists such as Freud and resulted in as many theories as there are theorists. Nonetheless, the most popular aspects of humour among studies are physiological, psychological and sociological while linguistic aspects of humour have received less attention (Chiaro, 1992:1).

Translation of tv programs, on the other hand, has been an unknown area until very recently although it has now become a salient field of academic research (Diaz Cintas, 2009:1). Plenty of studies have been carried out on the subject of translation of humour, irony, idioms and other linguistic features in media. However, most studies examine the translation between two different cultures and languages that derive from different language families.

One example is a study by Veiga (2009:158) which investigates the strategies used by translators in order to subtitle humour on screen. Her study analyses linguistic exchanges in the subtitling of the film *Bridget Jones's Diary* from English into European Portuguese. The study includes a discussion of language levels that cause humorous effects, which makes it similar to this project. However, her study covers the pragmatic aspects in general, while this study will look into linguistic details and cultural details (e.g. morphology, syntax, idioms).

Cavaliere (2008:165) investigates how locations where the target audience live affect the perception of culture-specific issues in an Italian movie with Neapolitan setting. The study focuses on individuals living in Naples and Milan and Americans living in Naples, as their cultures are distinct. The movie is translated into English subtitles. One of the translation

strategies mentioned is *chunking*, which is used in the neutralisation of culture-specific references and is regarded as one of the most important strategies used in transposition of culture from one language to another. The name of the strategy refers to changes in size of something. There are three options for chunking: *chunking up*, which means that translators choose to put a cultural-specific term in the SL into a more general context in the TL. *Chunking down* is the opposite- a generic term in the SL is translated into the TL with a more specific term, and the third one, *chunking sideways* when "untranslatable" material occurs and the translator has to find other examples which belong to the same class. The result of Cavaliere's study showed that Neapolitans and Americans had more or less similar perception while the Milanese did not share the same Neapolitan cultural context. The results also showed that cultural differences require sensitivity from translators and by not translating them properly, translators created a gap in the communication.

One study that is especially of interest to this project is Reholova (2010), which investigates cultural clashes in translation of *Friends* script from English to Czech. She defines humour together with audiovisual translation. There are two main methods of audiovisual translation that are discussed: *dubbing* and *subtitling*. Dubbing is when the original soundtrack is replaced by a soundtrack in the target language, while subtitling is the written presentation of the oral output that gives an account of the original conversations of the speakers (Diaz Cintas, 2009:4-5). The results of Reholova's study show 75% of the Czech community prefer the subtitled version to the dubbed one. The paper suggests that there is no optimal method in translation, in order to achieve resemblance between the source and the target text, and that the translator needs to evaluate the situation and in some cases combine several approaches in order to achieve the best result.

Another study carried out by Kucharova (2013) analyses the linguistics of wordplay in the sitcom *Friends*. The study concentrates on linguistic details such as morphology, phonology, lexis and syntax. The original wordplay is confronted with the dubbing in Czech. The results showed that most of the wordplays were constructed with morphological means, wordplays of syntactic structure were not recognized and the most problematic wordplays in terms of translation were based on polysemy, single words that have multiple meanings. Idioms, on the other hand were easy to translate, as the translators could find a Czech equivalent.

In conclusion, studies on translation of culture-specific references as well as broad and detailed investigations on subtitled and dubbed utterances between nonrelated languages

abound. However, none of them explore translation of humour into subtitles in terms of cultural and linguistic aspects between related languages.

Given the discussion above, three problems arise. First, there is lack of research about translation of humour into subtitles between related languages. Second, since English and Swedish have similar morphology and syntax it is important to understand how the translators solve linguistic and cultural problems during translation. Third, it is necessary to provide better understanding of subtitling and strategies that are used in transferring linguistic and cultural features from speech to subtitles between different, but still related languages. How is proposed solve the problems is explained in the section 1.2.

## 1.2 Research issues

This project aims to investigate the translation of humour in selected episodes of the American sitcom *Friends* into Swedish subtitles. The sitcom is about the every day life of six friends who spend most of their time together, which is a perfect case for humorous situations to arise. In *Friends*, some jokes are translated into Swedish subtitles in a different way, i.e. the spoken words differ from the translation (example (1)) and when literal translation is used it does not always have the right humorous effect in the TL. An example, from season 1 episode 1:

- (1)
- a) Ross: *I just grabbed a spoon*
  - b) Ross: *Jag har just "tagit för mig"*
  - c) Ross: "I just "took for me"".

The project aims to answer the following three questions:

1. What does the difference between the spoken and the subtitled utterances depend on?
2. What translation strategies are used in the selected humorous utterances in *Friends*?
3. Why are these strategies used?

Analysing the choice of strategy that the translator used in a particular humorous utterance will contribute to the discussion on how verbal humour is translated into subtitles. However, it is not certain that the translator used the best possible strategy for that particular humorous utterance. Why s/he chose to use it and what strategy could be more appropriate is explored and discussed in the analysis. Hence, in some cases, proposed translations are provided. This study only deals with subtitling, but differently from Reholova's study it analyses the linguistic aspects of jokes and explains why some could have been translated better. Overall, this pilot study sheds a new light on the translation of humour from speech to subtitles between related languages.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

The goal of this section is to offer background on humour and its translation (section 2.1). Idioms and subtitling are presented and different translation strategies are explained and discussed (sections 2.2-2.4).

### **2.1 Humour & Translation of Humour**

The goal of this section is to define humour and discuss why jokes provoke laughter. It also aims to explain some issues a translator can encounter when translating humour and present different kinds of jokes and their translatability.

Before examining humour in the media, it is crucial to define humour. According to Alison Ross one definition of humour is "something that makes a person laugh or smile" (Ross, 1998:1). Zhang (2012) points out that humour can be defined in various ways, but there is no agreement on one definition. However, humour is often identified via jokes. In turn, according to Oxford English Dictionary a joke is something "said or done to provoke laughter and amusement" (Joke 1901, OED [online]). However, jokes do not always result in a humorous effect.



The perception of humour is different in every culture and depends on the person and situation as well. A joke can make some people laugh, while it can go unnoticed for others (Jimenez Carra,2009:133). The humorous effect of a joke depends on the timing and company as well. A witty remark expressed at the wrong time, in the wrong company often leads to embarrassment (Chiaro, 1992:5). The important factor in considering something as humour is the response. Social context plays an important role in the creation and reception of humour, and often depends on particular attitudes and cultures. Whether an individual finds something humorous or not is determined by the context for humour.

The concept of humour and what makes people laugh has been of interest to scholars of various disciplines for centuries (Chiaro, 1992:5). The studies on humour and its essence have resulted in many theories, which have different degrees of validity. In this essay three of the most popular theories are briefly discussed: the incongruity theory, the general theory of verbal humour and the skopos theory. The incongruity theory concerns humour and its linguistic features, the general theory of verbal humour explains the construction of verbal humour and its translation in terms of lingua-cultural specificity. The skopos theory concerns translation between languages with different cultural backgrounds. These theories are defined in more detail in the rest of the section.

Incongruity is something unexpected, out of context or inappropriate. According to the proponents of the incongruity theory, incongruity is at the core of all humour (Lili 2012). This theory focuses on the element of surprise and means that there is a conflict between what is expected and what happens in the joke. Humour is created out of this conflict (Ross, 1998:7). The pivotal point in the incongruity theory is the congruous resolution of the incongruity that makes a situation funny (Zhang, 2012). The incongruity theory leads to the most obvious feature of humour - ambiguity. According to Ross (1998:7) it is possible to examine the features of language that have the potential to amuse people. Ambiguity or double meaning is the most evident feature of humour, as it purposely misleads the audience and is followed by a punchline. The punchline is surprising because it is not the expected interpretation; however, it solves the conflict. In general, humour often implicates conventions about language as a social act. When people participate in a discourse they must understand the conventions, and what utterances are appropriate in different situations. For example, in a conversation between a doctor and a patient, the doctor might conclude by saying

- (2) a) Doctor: *Don't hesitate to ask if you have any worries*
- b)The patient: *If the universe is expanding all the time, where does it all go?*

Obviously, the word *worries* here was alluded to health worries, but the patient misinterpreted by asking an inappropriate question for that particular situation (Ross, 1998:9)

More in general, in a joke a speaker might be intentionally inappropriate (Ross, 1998:9). The ambiguity in jokes can occur at different levels, therefore it is convenient to look at structural ambiguity, as it will be of great help in understanding the interpretation of a joke. The levels of ambiguity are phonology, graphology, morphology, lexis and syntax. Some of them are discussed in section 2.4, as they are the levels of ambiguity that occur in many verbal jokes, including the ones in *Friends*.

Once moving to the problem of translating and subtitling jokes, transposition of verbally expressed humour between SL and TL becomes a difficult task. Thus, according to general theory of verbal humour (Chiaro, 2010:1) verbal humour consists of two overlapping and, at the same time, opposing scripts that are discerned to the recipient as a single semantic script. Therefore, any translation of *verbally expressed humour* (VEH) should aim to reproduce the overlap and opposition that are in the SL. It means that the translator has to match the linguistic ambiguity in the SL with similar ambiguity in the TL. Furthermore, culture-specific references require a solution as well, as they need to pertain to the culture of origin.

Finally, according to the skopos theory, the translation should aim to achieve the same effect among the target audience as among the original audience rather than trying to preserve the form of the original output (Diaz Cintas, 2009:75). Whitman, (quoted by Gottlieb in Diaz Cintas, 2009:23) states that the most successful translation is the one that links the original message to the minds of the target audience. However, verbal humour tends to utilize the ambiguity to extremes. The fact that it is often combined with specific cultural references makes translating verbal humour an especially complex task. The translator has to mediate between two cultures and participate in the act of communication in order to deliver the essence of the SL to the target audience and make them get the most out of the original source (Diaz Cintas, 2009:75). Different jokes require different levels of effort in translation. Some jokes can only be accepted within a certain culture and require bi-cultural knowledge from the translator while other jokes are universally recognized and can be translated literally.

Consequently, in a sitcom such as *Friends* where many humorous situations arise all the time, it is important to distinguish between different kinds of jokes in order to understand the strategies behind their translation. A paper by Raphaelson-West (1989:130) on feasibility and strategies of translating humour presents three groups of jokes: linguistic, cultural and universal. Linguistic jokes are language-based and are often difficult to translate to another

language. In order to do that, the translator needs to find an idiomatic expression that will have the same meaning in the TL. If the pun in the SL has a rhyme, the idiomatic expression in the TL needs to rhyme as well. Cultural jokes are more widely translatable but require a background knowledge in order to be comprehended. Universal jokes, on the other hand, are usually generally understood and do not require a background knowledge. However, according to Chiaro (1992:77) it does not matter how well the translator knows the target language, there are always items and cultural references that may need long explanations which can affect the experience of the programme in a negative way, i.e. the target audience will not find the joke funny.

## 2.2 Idioms

In this section a brief explanation on how to comprehend idioms is presented as well as strategies that are used in order to translate idioms from one language to another.

An idiom is a construction that is familiar and conventional within a given speech community, composed of at least two lexical items and has the compound structure of a phrase, which can feature constructional idiosyncrasy. An idiom is always collocationally restricted (Langlotz, 2006:5).

Idioms present a challenge for models of sentence comprehension, too. According to Glucksberg (1993:4) there are two classes of models that help to comprehend idioms, a *direct look-up* and a *compositional* model. The idioms in the first model have a non-compositional meaning and in order to understand them, the meaning of the idiom as a whole has to be retrieved. An example of such an idiom can be *kick the bucket*. The assumption is that we cannot know the meaning from the words, but the meaning has to be memorized. However, there is a possibility to create a wordplay. One example is the utterance: "Did the old man kick the bucket last night?" Followed by comment: "Nah, he barely nudged it". The speaker who replies plays with the literal meaning of the idiom instead of referring to the idiomatic meaning by uttering: "no, he did not die" (Langlotz, 2006:202).

Idioms in the latter class model, on the other hand, do not have non-compositional meaning. Therefore in order to understand them, sentence processing must be combined with pragmatic interpretation of its use in discourse contexts. An example is *carrying coals to Newcastle*. The idiomatic meaning derives from its literal meaning and allusional content.

Carrying coals to Newcastle refers to the pointlessness of literally bringing coals to a large coal manufacturing city. The literal act of it alludes to uselessly bringing something to somewhere (Glucksberg, 1993:4).

Since idioms are a conventional construction within a given speech community, they indirectly reflect people's culture and history. Therefore, translating idioms from one language and culture to another might be considered a difficult task. Liu (2012) suggests that translation of culture-specific conventions has two opposite approaches: 1) literal translation in order to convey the maximum cultural messages and 2) adaptation to the target culture, in that way evoking the greatest effect. However, neither of them has a powerful effect. Literal translation will confuse the reader if used in improper situations and the nationalization of a foreign culture will eliminate cultural consciousness caused by different cultural backgrounds. To translate means to seek the highest degree of cultural exchange, which means that the translator needs to compare, introduce and absorb the cultures. In order to do that, the translator needs to use certain strategies when translating idioms.

Wang (2013) studies the strategies of idiom translation between English and Chinese and presents four strategies of idiom translation in the paper. However, the only two relevant ones for our study are discussed below:

- Literal translation - the most common strategy when translating idioms. Idioms are translated to similar idioms in the TL.
- Free translation - some idioms can never be translated literally, as the idea of the TL will get lost in the translation. In that case, it is preferable to give up the form of idioms and use the method of free translation.

In a sitcom such as *Friends* there is a high possibility of idiom usage in order to make a joke. Hence, any of the strategies above can be involved. It is necessary to translate the idioms so that the meaning and the humorous effect are preserved in the TL. Since idioms are an essential language phenomenon that play an important role in communication, these idiom translations strategies are discussed in the analysis of *Friends*.

## 2.3 Word play

This section analyses word play by discussing their levels of linguistic ambiguity.

World play is one of many ways of evoking laughter. As far as sitcoms are concerned, it seem to be the perfect choice for amusement. Chiaro (1992:17) points out that word play does not necessarily occur deliberately and it is possible to provoke laughter unintentionally, for instance by wrong pronunciation or a misplaced preposition. It is the havoc of the meaning that provokes laughter.

One type of verbal slip is based on *metathesis*, and occurs when two phonemes in a word are transposed e.g.

(3) *I fool so feelish.*

Metathesizing can be deliberate as well, e.g.

(4) *I'd rather have a full bottle in front of me than a full frontal lobotomy* (Chiaro, 1992:19).

Another kind of verbal slip is based on *malapropism*. It occurs when the speaker instead of using the right word, uses a word which resembles the right one in sound. That type of verbal slip makes the meaning inappropriate, e.g.

(5) a) *Arrangement of epitaphs*

instead of

b) *Arrangement of epithets* (Chiaro, 1992:20).

As mentioned earlier, jokes occur at different levels of ambiguity one of which is phonology. Playing with sounds and stress of words often creates a humorous effect. e.g.

(6) a) *How do you make a cat drink?*

b) *Easy, put it in the liquidizer.*

Here the questioner obviously means *cat* as a noun and *drink* as a verb. But the one who answers means *cat* and *drink* as a single item (Chiaro, 1992:33). Stress determines whether the words are separate or compound. In spoken language where all individual words are run together, the division of stream of sounds depends on the context, e.g.:

(7) a) *Some others I've seen*

and

b) *Some mothers I've seen* (Ross, 1998:10).

Metathesisms and malapropisms belong to the phonologic level of ambiguity.

Another level of ambiguity, morphology, refers to the formation of individual words and can be exploited in jokes as well. An example is this exchange:

- (8) a) *What's a baby pig called?*  
b) *A piglet*  
c) *So what's a baby toy called?*  
d) *A toilet.*

The joke contains a linguistic trap which in this case means a rude outcome, which provokes laughter (Chiaro, 1992:36).

The lexis level covers the properties of words as units, in particular their meaning and pronunciation. In order to understand how it can be exploited it is crucial to mention three related but distinct word-play options: homophones, homonyms and polysemes. Homophones sound the same but have different meaning, e.g.

- (9) a) *What's black and white and red all over? A newspaper.*

The words "red" and "read" are pronounced in the same manner, i.e. /raed/. Homonyms are words that have the same form, pronounced the same but have different meanings. Polysemes, instead, are single words with multiple meanings. An example of a polysemic word that has more than one meaning is *showing*:

- (10) a) *I'm in the bath*  
b) *What are you doing in the bath?*  
c) *Watching television*  
d) *What's showing?*  
e) *Nothing, I've got a towel round me.*

The word *showing* can allude to the television or to what parts of the body are not covered (Chiaro, 1992:40). The difference between them is subtle and it can be hard to know whether something is a homonym or a polyseme (Chiaro, 1992:39).

Syntax, which is about the structure of the words into phrases, clauses and sentences can cause ambiguity in an utterance, e.g.:

- (11)      a) *Mummy, can I go out and play?*  
             b) *With those holes in your trousers?*  
             c) *No, with the girl next door.*

The word "with" was misinterpreted by the child who thought of it as an item while the mother meant "with" as the prepositional opening (Chiaro, 1992:40-41).

Now that the features of the language system and their ambiguity have been discussed (excluded graphology since it concerns the language in written form) for the sake of completeness it is necessary to mention pragmatics, which is a supra-structure that lies above the language system. A language user experiences choices and restrictions in a conversation that can be ambiguous, e.g.;

- (12)      a) *Oh, I hear you buried your mother-in-law last week*  
             b) *Had to. She was dead.*

The speaker who started the conversation with "I hear.." clearly aims to continue the conversation and make the other person to develop the story. Instead the recipient explains the already obvious reason why she was buried (Chiaro, 1992:43-44).

Now that the levels of word ambiguity have been discussed, it is important to know how to transfer verbal word ambiguity from spoken SL to written TL using subtitles. Gottlieb (1997:210) investigates translation of satire in a satirical television programme into Danish subtitles, highlighting the key points that need to be kept in mind when analysing linguistic jokes. The points are:

- Wordplay can be rendered word for word, with or without humorous effect;
- Wordplay can be adjusted to the local setting;
- Wordplay can be replaced by non-wordplay;
- The rendering can be skipped, using the space for the adjacent dialogue;
- Wordplay can be inserted in a different position in the text, where the TL allows it.

Consequently, the linguistic jokes of the sitcom *Friends* are analysed with regard to the aspects above, together with the aspects pertaining to idiom translation discussed in the previous section. Before to do so, audiovisual translation is discussed.

## **2.4 Audiovisual translation; subtitling**

The goal of this section is to explain the norms of subtitling and present strategies that translators use when translating linguistic and culture-specific references into subtitles.

With the arrival of globally spread television, American movies and tv-series became ubiquitous and consequently, audiovisual translation was required in many countries. There are two main approaches in order to make the media comprehensible for the audience that are not familiar with the source language: dubbing and subtitling. Subtitling is a quicker and cheaper technique than dubbing. However, it comes with some issues, such as the fact that the translator's work is more exposed to the audience when transferring spoken utterances to written words. Unlike dubbing, the target audience has access to both the original and the translated work, which makes it easier to notice differences in translation. Another issue is the limited space on the screen. According to Pedersen (2007:35) a subtitle can be a single line or any number of lines. Subtitles could in theory cover the whole screen. However, as a rule a subtitle consists of one or two lines but it could at times consist of three lines. A line can only consist of a certain number of characters. A character is defined as any visible outcome from pressing a keyboard key including commas, exclamation marks, blank spaces, full stops and dashes. The number of characters that fit into a line depend on many factors such as bulky capital letters or letters "w" and "m" that take up more space than for instance "l" and "i". There are various academic texts on subtitling with slightly various records on how many characters can fit into a line. However, according to Scandinavian guidelines there should be maximum 35 characters per line but fewer in italics (Pedersen, 2007:43-44).

The purpose of subtitles is not only to display the dialogue, but to reproduce the verbal material in the SL. Quite often subtitles show written material from the SL as well, such as letters, street signs and other linguistic signals. Gottlieb (as quoted in Pedersen, 2007:36) suggests that subtitles act as a synchronous semiotic channel. The idea is that subtitles should appear on screen simultaneously with the utterances and ideally end at the end of an utterance. He also points out that subtitles follow the image and disappear after reading. This means that



the viewer cannot go back and reread if s/he has misunderstood something and explains, according to Pedersen (2007:37) why individual subtitles should be syntactically and semantically self-contained.

Interlingual subtitling is unique according to Pedersen (2007:37) since it is not only translated from one language to another, but from one mode to another: spoken to written. Gottlieb calls it semiotic jaywalking – it is not translated straight from spoken SL to spoken TL, nor from written SL to written TL, nor straight from spoken SL to written TL, as it would be in the case of transcription. Instead it crosses over or “jaywalks” from spoken SL to written TL and that brings a necessity for deletion of unessential oral features. According to Gottlieb (as quoted in Pedersen, 2007:45) a translator can leave out approximately 50% of the dialogue, measured in quantitative terms, i.e. word count. However, in order to decide which oral features are appropriate to delete from the subtitles, translators need to follow certain rules and translation strategies.

Pettit (2009:45) presents strategies used in film subtitling when translating culture-specific references, noting that some culture-specific terms are untranslatable. Strategies that are relevant to this study are presented:

- Omission - the cultural reference is omitted completely, i.e. not translated to the TL.
- Literal translation - the target text matches the original. The words are translated singly but the grammatical construction is changed to its TL counterpart;
- Generalisation - neutralisation of the original. A culture-specific term in the SL is replaced by something more general in the TL;
- Explication - a paraphrase that explains the cultural term.

It is possible that more than one strategy operates at the same time. The strategies mentioned above are dealt with further in the analysis.

Before to do that, it is necessary to take stock. Interlingual subtitling aims to reproduce the verbal material of the SL, hence subtitles should appear and disappear simultaneously with the utterance. According to Scandinavian guidelines, a line should contain maximum 35 characters. Therefore, translators are allowed to exclude up to 50% of the verbal material (word count) from the subtitles. However, in order to achieve a successful interlingual

translation, translators need to use certain strategies. The features mentioned in the list above are tested further in the analysis.

### **3. The study**

The goal of this section is to present the method (section 3.1), materials (section 3.2), and analysis of selected jokes (sections 3.3-3.4).

#### **3.1 Method**

This essay provides a pilot study of selected episodes in the sitcom *Friends* in order to investigate the translation from English speech to Swedish subtitles of selected humorous utterances that appear in the selected episodes. The methods used in this project are data collection and observation. Therefore the important task is to find humorous utterances that are of interest for this study and observe them in terms of cultural and linguistic aspects. According to Ross (1998:1) people tend to laugh in company. Research has shown that people rarely laugh when they are alone because it is important to be surrounded by other people who response to humour. Therefore, "canned laughter" is used for television and radio comedy. It is a soundtrack that contains audience laughter and is used directly after a funny utterance. In this essay, it is assumed that every utterance followed by canned laughter is intended to be humorous. The utterances that are interesting to analyse are those that are not translated literally, as well as those that are translated literally but lost the humour in the TL.

However, it is not the intention to analyse every episode of *Friends* since it consists of ten seasons with about twenty episodes each. The selected episodes for this study are from season one, six, seven and ten because it is the beginning, the middle and the end of the series. The seasons and the episodes were selected randomly but with the requirement of covering the whole period of the sitcom. The episodes were chosen as follows: the author started by watching the first half of season one, noting every humorous utterance that did not match with its translation into Swedish as well as every humorous utterance that was translated literally and had lost the humour in the translation. Every cultural reference and idiom usage followed by canned laughter were of interest as well. The author continued by watching the second half

of season six, the first part of season seven, concluding by watching a couple of episodes in the beginning and in the end of season ten. The findings were then carefully examined and some linguistic, culture-specific and idiom jokes that are consistent with the objectives of this study were chosen in order to explore the strategies used for different kinds of jokes. Therefore, the study will be qualitative because it provides an analysis of the linguistic and cultural features of selected jokes in depth.

### **3.2 Materials: the sitcom "Friends"**

This section aims to give a brief presentation of the sitcom *Friends* and its characters.

*Friends* is an American television sitcom of ten seasons, created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman. It originally aired on NBC from September 1994 to May 2004 and is considered one of the most popular television shows ever (Friends n.d., Wikipedia [online]).

The characters of the sitcom have their own distinct quirks that have to be examined in order to understand the humour of the situation. Ross compiles a range of comments made by her students (Ross, 1998:94); Rachel (Jennifer Aniston) is described as sexy, funky and dotty. Monica (Courtney Cox) is obsessive and competitive. Phoebe (Lisa Kudrow) is unpredictable. Chandler (Matthew Perry) is the witty one, he is also cynical and insecure while Joey (Matt LeBlanc) is an over-confident lad. Ross (David Schwimmer) is a sensitive, odd, introspective and geeky guy.

The sitcom explores different combinations of characters as well as the comic potential of the encounters. Ross and Monica have a brother/sister relationship, Joey and Chandler are flat-mates and rivals, they are both young, attractive single guys. Rachel and Ross have an unstable love affair with each other and Phoebe is "out on a limb", i.e. she often states opinions that are different to other people. (Ross, 1998:94).

Ross (1998:95) implies that every part with utterances which gains a laugh is often associated with a particular character and personality, therefore it would be easy to match an utterance with a character even if the name of the speaker was not revealed. For instance, Phoebe's responses are often odd, she interprets the questions and comments literally and that is what the humour is based on. At any case, an analysis of various jokes in detail is made in the next section.

### 3.3 Analysis

The goal of this section is to provide analysis of the jokes found in selected episodes of the sitcom *Friends*. The episodes selected are the following: season 1 episode 12, season 6 episode 25, season 7 episode 22, season 10 episode 1. The most relevant strategies that are discussed regarding translation of culture-specific terms are the following. One is generalisation (Pettit, 2009:45), which is used to neutralize a culture-specific term of the SL to a general utterance in the TL, and has the same function as the strategy of chunking up mentioned by Cavaliere (2008:165). The explication strategy are mentioned briefly, as a possible alternative in a humorous utterance. The strategies of omission and literal translation (Pettit, 2009:45) are discussed as well. When analysing jokes that involve idioms, the strategies that are referred to are free and literal translations (Wang, 2013). When it comes to linguistic jokes, the strategies of word-for-word rendering and adaptation to the local setting will be used (Gottlieb, 1997:210).

#### 3.3.1 Season 1, episode 12.

Rachel is planning a trip with her date, Ross is jealous:

- (13) (a) Ross: Wasn't this supposed to be just a fling, huh? Shouldn't it be..flung by now?
- (b) Ross: *Var inte det här ett svärmeri, bara? Har det inte.. svärmat över snart?*
- (c) Ross: 'Wasn't this just an infatuation? Has it not.. swarmed away soon?'

The humorous effect here is the play with the words *fling* and *flung*. The first one is a noun. The term *have a fling* is used quite often among young people and refers to a brief romantic relationship. The translator chose to translate it to Swedish noun *svärmeri* which means 'a brief infatuation' but is almost never used in Swedish among young people. In this case, a better translation would be *en flört* which means a flirt. However, looking into the next utterance explains the choice of the translator. *Flung* is the verb "fling" in past tense, which means to throw or move something suddenly. In this case it refers to the idea that the fling should be over or finished by now. *Svärmat* is the verb 'svärma' in past tense which in this case means 'swarmed' and *över* in this situation obviously refers to something that is done or finished. Normally, *svärma över* is used with an object, to swarm over something. However, in this case it is clear that Ross wants Rachael's fling to be over, so the translation works well both semantically and syntactically.

The joke in English revolves around lexis (Ross, 1998:8) and belongs to the category of linguistic jokes (Raphaelson-West, 1989:130). The noun *fling* and the verb *fling* are different words, even though they look and sound the same. Therefore, they are homonyms (Ross, 1998:17). In this situation the fact that they are homonyms is exploited in order to create a humorous utterance as well as the fact that both of the words can be used together and make sense - a fling can be flung. In Swedish, the noun *svärmeri* and the verb *svärma* are not homonyms, therefore it is impossible to maintain the ambiguity level of lexis. Here the morphology is exploited instead. However, it is not followed by a humorous outcome as in the example (7). Instead, it is used in order to maintain the aim of the SL, i.e. a noun that refers to a romantic relationship becomes a verb that refers to the relationship being over. The translator successfully transferred the purpose of the SL to the TL using the strategy of word-for-word translation (Gottlieb, 1997:210).

### 3.3.2 Season 1, episode 12 (2).

Monica, Chandler and Joey are playing a game of foosball . Monica against Chandler and Joey. Monica makes a goal:

- |      |     |                    |   |
|------|-----|--------------------|---|
| (14) | (a) | Monica:            | And that would be a shut down!  |
|      | (b) | Monica:            | <i>Och därmed blev ni mållösa</i> ('And now you got goalless/speechless') |
|      | (c) | Joey and Chandler: | Shutout!  |
|      | (d) | Joey and Chandler: | <i>Det kan du vara!</i> ('You can be that!')                              |

First, it is necessary to know the difference between the two terms *shutout* and *shut down*. *Shutout* is a term that can be used in a game, when preventing an opponent or opposing team from scoring (Shutout 1933, OED [Online]). *Shut down* means to close something temporarily and is not used in sports (Shut down 1914, OED [Online]).

The humour in this situation is based on either Monica's lack of knowledge or confusion. However, while Monica's utterance is translated in a comprehensible way, Chandler and Joey's answer does not make sense in the translation. *Mållösa* means 'goalless', it is easy for the target audience to understand that Monica scored and left the opposite team without scores. The answer *det kan du vara* literally means 'you can be that'. It is crucial to mention that *mållösa* is a polyseme that also means 'speechless'. It is not obvious for the audience how to interpret the word *mållösa* since there are two possible interpretations. Either way the humour is not only lost in the translation, it leaves the audience confused as well. By choosing a polysemic word *mållösa* the translator created an ambiguity on the level of lexis (Chiaro, 1992:40) , which does not exist in the SL. Monica confused the end of the word *shutout* with the adverb particle "down" in the phrasal verb *shut down*. This kind of joke can be considered linguistic (Raphaelson-West, 1989:130) with a morpho-syntactic ambiguity (Ross, 1998:8). It involves verb-particle constructions (morphology), and their use in a sentence (syntax). *Down* and *out* were confused with each other, thus, another meaning was created. Whether the

choice of the translator to use a polysemic word *mållösa* was on purpose or not is unclear since the translation did not preserve the humour as it was presented in the SL.

It seems like the translator used the strategy of adaption to the local setting when translating this wordplay (Gottlieb, 1997:210). However, the meaning was not preserved it was rather changed. In my opinion, a better solution for the translation of the two utterances would be the strategy of word-for-word translation (Gottlieb, 1997:210). *Shutout* is 'hålla nollan' - 'hold the zero', *shut-down* is 'lägga ner' - 'put down'. Therefore a translation that keeps both the meaning and the humorous effect could be:

- |      |     |                    |                                     |
|------|-----|--------------------|-------------------------------------|
| (15) | (a) | Monica:            | <i>Och där la jag (ner) nollan!</i> |
|      | (b) | Chandler and Joey: | <i>Höll nollan!</i>                 |
|      | (c) | Monica:            | 'And there I put (down) the zero!'  |
|      | (d) | Chandler and Joey: | 'Held the zero!'                    |

This translation would not preserve the morpho-syntactic ambiguity, since it would revolve around ambiguity of lexis and syntax instead. It would maintain Monica's word confusion and the inaccurate meaning of those words together in the sentence, which is the humorous meaning in the SL.

### 3.3.3 Season 6 episode 25

Chandler comes in the apartment and sees Joey, dressed as captain.

- |      |     |           |   |
|------|-----|-----------|---|
| (16) | (a) | Joey:     | Where the hell have you been?                   |
|      | (b) | Joey:     | <i>Var har du varit?</i>                        |
|      | (c) | Chandler: | I was making a coconut phone with the professor |
|      | (d) | Chandler: | <i>Jag har gjort en kokosnötstelefon</i>        |
|      | (e) | Joey:     | 'Where have you been?'                          |
|      | (f) | Chandler: | 'I have made a coconut phone'.                  |

The humour is based on Joey's clothes and Chandler's astonishment. However, Chandler's utterance is only funny to those who understand the reason behind it. The professor that Chandler mentions is a castaway in the American sitcom "Gilligan's Island" that aired on the CBC network from 1964 to 1967 (Gilligan's Island n.d. Wikipedia [online]). The professor could create anything from coconuts but he could not repair a hole in the boat. Therefore, Chandler sarcastically told Joey that he was making a coconut phone with the professor, so that he could call Joey who was trying to get hold of him.

That joke is culture-specific and requires a specific background knowledge (Raphaelson-West, 1989:130). It can only be comprehensible for the audience that has watched *Gilligan's Island*. However, since that sitcom is quite old, there is a high possibility that the American audience of *Friends* is not familiar with the sitcom either.

First it seems that the translator chose to use the strategy of omission (Pettit, 2009:45), *with the professor* was not translated into Swedish. However, the rest of the utterance was translated literally. It is a possibility that the translator chose to delete *with the professor* because of the limited space on the screen. If the whole utterance were translated it would include more than 35 characters per line, which is over the limit for the subtitling norms (Pedersen, 2007:43-44).

However, the humour in the translation is lost because of its background-specific reference. It is arguable that it could be omitted completely and that the strategy of generalisation could be used instead. Another solution could be the strategy of explication in order to explain why Chandler mentioned a coconut phone (Pettit, 2009:45). Unfortunately, the humour would be lost either way, unless the translator would do a funny generalisation. In my opinion, the original translation is the best choice because it does not make any sense for those who have not seen *Gilligan's Island* and according to Joey's reaction he was not familiar with it either.



### 3.3.4 Season 7 episode 22

Chandler talks to Monica about his relationship with his dad, who is a drag queen, telling her that he used to avoid his father when he tried to get in touch:

- (17) (a) Chandler: You know it's all very cats in the cradle... I don't wanna get into it.  
(b) Chandler: *Förr ville jag bli som han... jag vill inte prata om det.*  
(c) Chandler: 'I wanted to be like him before...I don't want to talk about it'.

*Cats in the cradle* is an expression that derives from a song by Harry Chapin that tells a story about a father that never has time for his son but the son still admires the father and strives to be like him. However, when the son is grown up, he never has time for his father (*Cats in the cradle*, n.d. Wikipedia [Online]).

The fact that Chandler's father is a drag queen and that Chandler compares their relationship to the song "cats in the cradle" creates a humorous effect. Most likely Chandler referred to the song in order to underline the fact that he avoids his father but the expression of the song also means that the son wanted to be like his father. The humorous effect grows even stronger when Chandler says that he does not want to talk about it, as he understood that it could be interpreted in a wrong way. Another detail that makes the situation more humorous is the word "very" that is used before the expression *cats in the cradle* and strengthens its meaning. It can be considered a kind of wordplay with the idiom (Langlotz, 2006:202).

The translation into Swedish subtitles literally means 'before I wanted to be like him...I don't want to talk about it'. Since the expression *cat's in the cradle* derives from a song, it can be considered a culture-specific idiom. In Swedish there is no phrase equivalent to that, hence the translator used the strategy of free translation (Wang, 2013) and generalisation (Pettit, 2009:45) in order to neutralize the culture-specific reference, keep the meaning and prevent misunderstandings that would arise from a literal translation. The cultural term idiom is omitted completely so it is possible to say that the strategy of omission is used as well (Pettit, 2009:45). It is clear that the translator chose to translate only the humorous idea of the idiom, that Chandler wanted to be like his father: *förr ville jag bli som han*, even though Chandler obviously referred to the idiom for another reason.

### 3.3.5 Season 10 episode 1

Phoebe's boyfriend Mike was about to end his relationship with another girl, but she did not show up. Mike calls Phoebe and suggests that he can break up over the phone instead:

- (18) (a) Phoebe: You can't do that, oh c'mon Mike, strap on a pair!
- (b) Phoebe: *Så får du inte göra! Skärp dig Mike. Spänn på dig lite stake*
- (c) Phoebe: 'You cannot do that! Get it together Mike. Strap on some courage/testicles'.

*Strap on a pair* is an idiomatic expression that means being brave and showing some courage. The expression is an abbreviation of *strap on a pair of testicles* which is ambiguous and also can have sexual connotations (Strap on a pair, n.d. Wiktionary [Online]). Judging by Mike's reaction that was the case in this situation. The expression "grow a pair" could be used instead but then it would not have the ambiguity and therefore no humorous effect. It is possible to say that the expression contains ambiguity on the level of both syntax and semantics.

The Swedish word *stake* is a polyseme that can mean either a rod, courage or testicles. In this case it seems that it refers to courage. However, since there is an ambiguity in the SL involving sexual hints, the word *stake* seems a good choice in the translation since it also can allude to testicles and that in turn is interconnected with courage (e.g. *du har inte stake nog att...* - "you don't have the balls to..."). *Strap on* is a phraseological verb in English language which means "bind to the body". In this case the translator chose to translate the wordplay using the strategy of word-for-word translation (Gottlieb 1997: 210): *strap on* - *spänn på* which is a phraseological verb in Swedish as well. However, the equivalent phrase to *strap on a pair* is *visa lite stake*, but choosing the equivalent expression would lead to loss of the humour. Word-for-word translation works well in this case, as it transfers the humorous meaning of the SL.

In the subtitles, the ambiguity is on the level of lexis, since a polysemic word is used instead of an ambiguous phrase as in the SL (Chiaro, 1992:40). However, the humorous and ambiguous effects of the utterance were preserved.

### 3.4 Discussion

Some general observations that can be made from the analysis of these jokes are the following. A general strategy for translation of linguistic jokes is word-for-word. In one of three cases (i.e. example (14)), another strategy was used that did not preserve the humorous effect. This joke was translated according to the strategy of adaption to the local setting. The wordplay with *shutout and shut down* in the SL which is ambiguous on the morpho-syntactic level was translated into a polysemic word in Swedish, *mållösa*. This created an ambiguity on the level of lexis. However, the ambiguity in the TL became so strong that it made the interpretation of the joke difficult. Consequently, the humour was lost in the translation. A better strategy for this joke could be word-for-word translation, as Swedish language allows for it: *shutout- hålla nollan, shut down - lägga ner*. It would gain ambiguity on the level of lexis and syntax instead of the morpho-syntactic ambiguity. However, the humorous meaning of the SL would be preserved.

A general pattern for the analysed jokes can be seen concerning the levels of ambiguity in the jokes. The ambiguity of the SL and the TL never revolves around the same linguistic level. In two of three cases the original jokes are ambiguous on the morpho-syntactic (example (14)) and syntactic and semantic levels (example (18)), while the translated jokes both revolve around lexis, since the translator chose to use polysemic words, *mållösa* and *stake*. The third case, example (13) consists of a wordplay on the level of lexis while the translated version has the ambiguity on the morphological level. However, the wordplay and the humour are preserved so that the translation evokes the same feelings as the original joke.

The differences in translation emerge when culture-specific references need to be translated, when the translator believes that the word-for-word strategy will not deliver the message of the SL or because of limited space on the screen. Two jokes with culture-specific references were analysed whereof one (example (16)) was translated literally but with omission of the last part of the utterance. It can be assumed that it depends on limited space on the screen. According to Scandinavian guidelines there should be maximum 35 characters per line (Pedersen, 2007:43-44). The second culture-specific joke, (example (17)), was translated according to the strategy of free translation and generalisation and the culture-specific term, in this case expression *cat's in the cradle*, was completely omitted since an equivalent in Swedish does not exist.

## 4. Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to conduct a pilot study of selected episodes in the sitcom *Friends* in order to analyze the selected humorous utterances that appeared in the episodes and provide answers on why the difference between the English speech and Swedish subtitles exists, as well as explore what strategies the translator used when translating humorous linguistic and culture-specific jokes, and why those strategies were used. Since a similar study has been conducted by Kucharova (2013), which investigates dubbing translation from English to Czech, concentrating on linguistic details, it is interesting to see if the results apply to this study as well. Random episodes from seasons 1, 6, 7 and 10 of the sitcom *Friends* were analysed in order to provide answers to the research questions. The particular seasons were chosen in an attempt to cover the beginning, the middle and the end of the sitcom. Since it is a pilot study, only five humorous utterances were analysed, whereof three of them belong to linguistic group of jokes and two are idiomatic expressions with culture-specific reference. One of the linguistic jokes is based on the ambiguity of a phraseological verb.

The analysis showed linguistic wordplay was translated with word-for-word strategy, as the morphology, syntax and lexis of Swedish language allowed for equivalent words and expressions that maintained the meaning and the humorous effect of the SL. Other strategies such as free translation, generalisation and omission were implemented in the translation of idiom and culture-specific references, as was discussed. That depends on non existing equivalent expressions in Swedish.

When it comes to linguistic details, the ambiguity in the humorous utterances in the SL and the TL do not revolve around the same linguistic level. However, the humorous ambiguity in the SL is recognized and replaced by a different linguistic level in the TL, which allows to preserve the humour of the SL. It is possible to say that the results of this study differ much from Kucharova's results. Of course, future research is needed in order to analyze the translation of further other jokes from English speech to Swedish subtitles and explore if this newfound pattern applies on other linguistic and cultural humorous utterances in the sitcom *Friends*.

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