

## **RENDERING OF WORDPLAY IN THE TV SERIES “FLEABAG”**

**Key words:** *wordplay, translation, ‘Fleabag’, humour, telecinematic discourse*

### **Introduction**

Humour is a universal language that cuts across cultural boundaries. In human interaction, humour relieves tension in difficult situations and allows us to express playfulness, regardless of our state of mind. We express admiration or criticism through humour, often saying things that might otherwise remain unspoken. This fundamentally verbal activity, closely intertwined with language and thinking, draws on our shared understanding of words, contexts, and cultural references to create meaning and evoke emotional responses. S. Attardo claimed that “recently, within the field of humor research, a consensus seems to have emerged, whereby humor is being used as the umbrella term to indicate the complex of humorous phenomena.” [1, p. 31-32]

People of all ages and backgrounds find humour to be enjoyable. And laughter is an everyday and universal experience. Some of the typical characteristics of humour are exaggeration, hyperbole, ambiguity, contradiction or paradox, irony, sudden insight, superiority, surprise or shock, tension and relief, a trick or a gag, wordplay, gimmick, pun, unexpected associations. In particular, humour serves several functions: entertainment, education, relaxation, healing, showing superiority, asserting status or control, arguing, persuading, or convincing, networking, supporting social change, or maintaining prestige.

People exchange humorous expressions in everyday meetings because humour has a remarkable effect on people’s daily relationships, consequently, it removes boredom and makes speech interesting and fruitful. [5, p. 329]. The use of humour is noticed in different fields such as comics, “mass media, radio, TV, stand-up comedy, and in sitcoms.” [6, p. 430].

Moreover, humour is firmly grounded in linguistic and cultural nuances, such as wordplay, irony, sarcasm and culture-specific allusions which makes it challenging enough to render. The translator’s task here is not only to reproduce the meaning accurately but also find equivalent means to recreate the comic effect in a different linguistic and cultural background. An inadequate translation of a joke, for instance, can lead to misunderstanding or even loss of its original meaning.

D. Chiaro (2005) notes that translating humour is “a notoriously arduous task, the results of which are not always triumphant” [2, p. 576]. This challenge is complicated even more when the humour takes the form of wordplay. K. Spanakaki (2007) in her journal mentioned, “When trying to translate humour, culturally opaque elements and language-specific devices are expected to make the translator's work difficult, while some elements are ultimately not transferred at all”. [7, p. 4]

The present study endeavours to identify more specific case of humour, such as wordplay, in the British series “Fleabag” (2016–2019), which is based on the theatre play of the same name. Phoebe Waller-Bridge is the author of the script and the lead actress in the play and the series. The show is a great example of sharp wit, dark humour, and meta-narrative techniques, including frequent breaking of the fourth wall. These elements make “Fleabag” a suitable research study on how translators deal with linguistic ambiguity and cultural particularities of comedy.

### **The study aims to:**

- Identify and classify the examples of wordplay in the series “Fleabag”.
- Examine the translation strategies applied in the Ukrainian version and evaluate their effectiveness in conveying the intended meanings.
- Compare original and translated examples to define the degree of equivalence and loss or gain of meaning, humour, and stylistic nuance.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to both translation theory and practice.

### **Results**

Wordplay is an essential linguistic and stylistic phenomenon that is commonly used in film discourse to create comic, ironic, or dramatic effects. It is grounded in the ambiguity of words, phonetic similarity of expressions, grammatical transformations, or cultural connotations that cause a double or unexpected interpretation of a saying.

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines wordplay in which the essence of humour is clearly evident: “making jokes by using words cleverly or amusingly, especially by using a word that has two meanings, or different words that sound the same”. [4, p. 1759]

D. Chiaro, for example, tells us that wordplay is “the use of language with intent to amuse”. But whether or not a joke will make you laugh depends on various factors. The most important one is the surroundings and the context of the joke. [2, p. 578]

The classification of various types of wordplay is quite difficult due to the fact that they are formed by numerous linguistic processes. It is also worth remembering that most examples of wordplay contain not one, but several linguistic techniques at the same time. We follow the classification of D. Delabastita (1996) who states: “Wordplay is the general name for the various textual phenomenon in which structural features of the language(s) used are exploited in order to bring about a communicatively significant confrontation of two (or more) linguistics structures with more or less similar forms and more or less different meanings”. Phonological wordplay involves relationships between words through homonymy (exact spelling and sound, different meanings), homophony (same sound, different spelling), and paronymy (similar spelling and sound). Wordplay can also arise through lexical development (polysemy, idioms, metaphors, etc.), morphological development (abbreviations, derivation and composition) and syntactic ambiguity. [3, p. 347-353]

Delebastita furthermore proposes strategies for translation of wordplay, the order isn’t taken into account. They are:

**PUN > PUN**, where the wordplay in the source text (ST) is replaced by a wordplay in the target text (TT);

**PUN > NON-PUN**, when a direct wordplay cannot be rendered and loss of the humorous effect follows;

**PUN > PUNOID** replaces the wordplay with another rhetorical device;

**PUN > ZERO**, the wordplay may be omitted at all;

**DIRECT COPY**, the ST wordplay is copied directly into the TL;

**NON-PUN > PUN** introduces wordplay where there was none;

**ZERO > PUN** adds completely new wordplay;

**EDITORIAL TECHNIQUES**, when footnotes or comments are used to explain the wordplay. [3, p. 347-353]

In the subtitles of the series “Fleabag” we have such examples of wordplay:

*Example 1*

ST: “Or perhaps, like, a little **cocky-tail**?” (Episode: S1E1)

TT: “Чи може **коктейль**?”

The above example was taken from a dialogue in a bar between Fleabag and a man she had previously met that day. This is a paronymy-based wordplay that blends “cocktail” (a drink) and “cocky”. Vocabulary.com Dictionary gives the meaning of “overly self-confident” for the word “cocky” [9]. The joke relies on phonetic similarity because “cocky-tail” sounds nearly identical to “cocktail.” Semantically, the meaning behind it, that the man wants to offer a drink in a playful manner. Having seen the result of the translation of ST, the technique applied in the wordplay is categorised as pun into non-pun. The Ukrainian literal translation completely loses the connotation of “cocky” and playful awkwardness, reducing it to a literal drink. Thus, the wordplay in the ST resulted in non-wordplay in the TT. The translator chooses to translate it literally so the sense of the wordplay can not be found in the TT, as Ukrainian lacks a phonetic equivalent for “cocky-tail”.

*Example 2*

ST: “**Madame Ovary**'s telling me to run back to safe place...” (Episode: S1E2)

TT: “**Мої інстинкти** наказують шукати прихистку...”

The line is spoken during an unsatisfactory sexual encounter, when Fleabag distances herself and thinks about her previous sex partner. She jokingly accuses her ovaries of wanting to return to a “safe place” (her ex – Haryy), punning on the idea that romantic decisions are made on the basis of primal instincts. “Madame Ovary” is wordplay that was created as metaphor for “the ovaries” (a biological term for female reproductive organs). It is also can be considered as an euphemism. The wordplay belongs to lexical type of development, because it substitutes a term “ovaries” with a playful phrase “Madame Ovary”. It uses polysemy—the double meaning of “ovary” (women organ vs. metaphorical figure). Here the strategy of pun into non-pun was used again. The translator omits the wordplay and replaces it with a straightforward phrase (“my instincts”). The translation’s loss of euphemism diminishes Fleabag’s humor and self-mockery.

*Example 3*

ST: “Just use your phone, you have a **Sat Nav** on your phone.” ST: “Do you know what the lesbian app for Grindr is called? **Twat Nav**.” (Episode S1E4)

TT: “А знаєш, як називається лезбійська версія **навігатора**? **Вагінамор**.”

The line is delivered during a car ride with her sister. The original phrase creates wordplay through phonological development specifically homophony (words that sound alike but differ in meaning). The original pun in the ST (“Twat Nav”) is a play on “Sat Nav” (UK colloquialism for GPS navigation system, short for Satellite Navigation). The key to understanding wordplay is in replacement of “Sat Nav” with “Twat” that is common vulgar slang for vagina in the UK. This is also an example of lexical-semantic wordplay, as it plays on brand name Grindr, a gay dating app. The Ukrainian translation “Вагінамор” follows Delabastita’s strategy of pun into pun, replacing the original with a culturally adapted one. Ukrainian equivalent is a wordplay too, but merges from morphological development, to be more exact from blending. It blends “вагіна” (vagina) + “навігатор” (navigator). In this instance translator did a good job. The rendering retains the humorous intent and maintains phonetic similarity.

## Conclusion

Translating wordplay poses numerous challenges due to its dependence on linguistic and cultural nuances. By analysing puns, this study highlights the difficulties between maintaining humour and ensuring comprehension. As regards translation strategies, rendering prioritises semantic equivalence and naturalness in the target language. However, there are cases when the wordplay is lost because there is no equivalent in Ukrainian, resulting in a non-wordplay.

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