

**Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy (JSSRP)****Lost in Laughter: Linguistic and Cultural Challenges in Subtitling Urdu Humour for English Audiences****Alia Imran<sup>1</sup>, Liaqat Iqbal<sup>2</sup>**

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**Abstract:** Humour is deeply embedded in linguistic structures and cultural references; therefore, it is difficult to translate humour across languages. But when it comes to translating humour in subtitling, the task is more challenging because of spatial and time constraints of subtitling. This study explores the task of translating humour in subtitles from Urdu to English in the context of Pakistani comedy serials. Through a qualitative analysis of a comedy serial *Chaudhry and Sons*, this study explores the linguistic and cultural gaps between both the languages and investigates the role of language and cultural factors that affect translation of humour. By analyzing the humorous dialogues from the drama and its English subtitles, the finding shows that various forms of humour are lost in the English subtitles because of the lack of linguistic elements (i.e., wordplays, puns and idioms, etc.) and cultural references (i.e. social norms, etc.). This necessitates the need for creative and context-sensitive translation strategies to preserve the linguistic and cultural elements in subtitling to maintain the comic impact for the target audience.

**Introduction**

In today's globalized world, the importance of audio-visual translation is of great concern. The highly sought-after type of translation with a high increase in the production of entertainment and informative audio-visual sources at the start of the 21st century is audio-visual translation (Martinez Sierra 2012 & Mayoral 2001). Audio-visual translation is the process of translating an audio-visual text from a source language into a target language (Ranzato and Zanotti, 2018). This type of translation is considered more difficult than translating standard written text (Chaume, 2012). Audio-visual content needs to be available in both written and oral form. Subtitling and dubbing are the main solutions to this problem (Vazquez, 2022). This study is confined to the subtitling mode i.e., by analyzing humour in the English subtitles. According to Chiaro (2007) quoting Gottlieb (2001, p. 87), subtitling is the technique and process of translating spoken media messages into moving written texts that are displayed on a screen to the audience. When actors and actresses communicate in a language different from the viewer's language, subtitles are thought to be important and beneficial here, as they help the audience understand what the actors and actresses are saying.

The important variable in this study is humour, which is a fundamental component of any language and

is discussed in detail in this study in the analysis section by doing a translation of humour in subtitling in Chaudhry and Son's drama. Humour is used universally as people laugh at funny things everywhere and it provides a special means of communication that can unite people with different cultural and national boundaries. Humour serves as a vehicle for popular entertainment, and it is meant to create moments of pure joy, excitement and laughing. As stated by Vandaele (2010), p. 149, "humour occurs when a rule is violated, an expectation is formed but not fulfilled and incongruity is overcome unexpectedly."

The language and culture in which humour formation occurs have a strong influence on its creation. Therefore, linguistic and cultural considerations should be taken into account while translating a humorous text (Alharthi, 2016). Due to linguistic and cultural restrictions, translating humour is considered a complex topic (Chiaro, 2008). Through translating humour, we can investigate a labyrinth of linguistic, cultural, and contextual complexities. Differences in linguistic structures, wordplay and idiomatic expressions create many challenges; it needs creative adaptation and preserving the meaning of the original joke (Attardo, 1994). Therefore, humour translation is a challenging task, especially in subtitling, where spatial and temporal constraints are the main obstacles.

Various scholars have contributed to the work of audio-visual translation. Especially, if we consider subtitling mode, several studies have been done on the translation of humour in audio-visual translation whether humour is conveyed to the target audience or not. For instance, Gishyan (2020) investigated translating humour in subtitling, with a special focus on the translation of Armenian comedy into English using translation strategies. Comparably, Leshkovich (2016) conducted a study on how humour is translated from English speech to Swedish subtitles in a few episodes of the sitcom "Friends", considering the language and cultural factors. One of the studies is of Alharthi (2016) who examined the methods of Arab subtitles used to translate dialogue from the American comedy into Arabic. In a related study, Sadeghpour & Omar (2015) used the movie "Lizard" as the corpus for analysis to investigate translation strategies employed in the subtitling of Persian comedy movies into English. There is no work when it comes to the specific context of translating humour in subtitles from Urdu to English in Pakistan comedy serials. This research aims to address this gap in the specific context of Pakistan comedy serials considering the linguistic and cultural factors.

### **Literature Review**

Over the last twenty years, audio-visual translation has been used in movies and television shows and is also now quickly permeating into our daily lives. Nowadays, the discipline of audio-visual translation has broadened to include a wide range of areas, it has also restrictions and scholars have different opinions who want to learn more about this subject (Ossgea, 2017). According to Cintas and Anderman (2009), audio-visual translation is subfield of translation studies, considered as a dynamic and active field. According to them, the main reasons for this are the expansion of the media, especially in films and television series, and the need for audio-visual translation in many nations. The term "audio-visual translation" has been described in many ways. For example, Luyken (1991) defined it as "the process of making a movie or TV show comprehensible for the target audience that does not understand the source language" (p. 11). For translating audio-visual content for the screen, two of the most popular models are listed by Chiaro (2008) as dubbing and subtitling.

Researchers have been studying translation for decades, but subtitling has not received as much attention as it has now (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2014). A "simplified version of what is audible on screen in the target text" is created and presented through the process of subtitling (Chiaro, 2008, p.148).

As there is an increasing availability of on-demand streaming services as well as traditional media (TV, movies), so humour spreads throughout the diverse entertainment landscape (Dore, 2019). Since

humour is present in our daily lives, it is of high value in all languages and cultures. According to Attardo (1994), humour is considered by linguists, psychologists, and anthropologists as a universal phenomenon that include any situation or thing that makes people laugh, feel amused, or find humorous. Why is it so hard to translate something so common? By nature, humour is sensitive and understanding it is un-dimensional (Popa, 2005). "Verbal humour relies on particular linguistic elements such as similar-sounding words i.e., homophones or ambiguous phrase patterns depending on the language used through which they are conveyed." (Ritchie, 2010, p. 34). Furthermore, there is a great difference among societies because of the kinds of humour that are valued in their social situations. Some sub-types of humour are more popular in some societies than others. The cultural and linguistic environment is a problem for translators in which humour is created. The translator's goal is to transfer the same humorous effect in the target language (TL) while translating humour and to examine whether the target audience finds the humour amusing or not. According to Chiaro (2010), as humour travels from border to border, it must accept linguistic and cultural aspects that are characteristic of the original society from which it originated, losing its function to entertain in the new setting. According to Popa (2009), translation is determined by one of the elements, i.e., culture and because of cultural differences, there is a great impact on one's ability to find humour in certain situations. Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007) state that transferring cultural elements can be problematic, especially when there is a lack of similar elements in the target culture. Translators must therefore devise substitutes to convey humour that will bridge the cultural differences. Comparably, Chiaro (1992) focused on the importance of the target audience's expectations and language which needs to be taken into account. She claims that to transfer a joke, the listener has to understand its cultural and linguistic elements; if this is not attained in the target context, the translator must replace a joke. It navigates the text with ease and without any interruption in the target language.

Translating humour is different from any other kind of writing translation. Contrary to other forms of translation, subtitling uses several technical limitations and standards, including time, spatial limitations, synchronization and visual components, all of which are more challenging in conveying humour in comedies or movies. Whitman, (1992) emphasizes that preserving foreign proper names, historical events, or geographical references is not necessary because doing the procedure of comprehending the ST would be compromised. Translators need to find equivalents in the target culture that "trigger" the same impact. Salvatore Attardo conducted a study by concentrating on linguistic elements while translating humour. Attardo (2002) provides a translation model for humour analysis based on the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) developed by Attardo and Raskin (1991). "The model is also considered as a practical recommendation for future translators of humor text", claims Attardo (2002, p. 183). Additionally, according to the studies, translating universal jokes is the simplest part of translation. Another difficult topic for translators of humour is wordplay and puns. A lot of work has been done on this subject by other scholars (see Delabastita, 1996, p. 128). Subtitling is considered by some scholars as modifying rather than translating. According to them, subtitling is a less worthy job than translation because it only includes making sure that the target segments fit within the different inherent limits, which could also result in the loss of some elements of the source text. Because of its semiotic composition and constraints, subtitling is one of the most complex translation techniques. Additionally, the media also provides a wide variety of film genres, which are also very detailed. Among them is humour, which requires special attention. The linguistic and cultural aspects of this complicated issue must also be addressed. When we watch a foreign comedy with subtitles, we are not aware of the complex task that the translator has done. For instance, a translator has to consider the constraints of

subtitling as well as challenges emerging from linguistic and cultural differences when handling a comedy with subtitles. This indicates that because of the creative and hard work of a trained translator, a successful final product can be obtained. (Panek, 2009).

### Methodology

As a data source, one of the famous dramas Chaudhry and Sons on the popular channel Geo was selected. This drama is selected because it is rich in humorous lines, deeply rooted in Pakistani culture and numerous instances of wordplay and puns are seen in this drama. Its well-known characters have given delight to this drama, and above all, authentic subtitles are available for this drama. The Urdu humorous lines and their English subtitles are selected from the drama and then analyzed qualitatively. By thoroughly comparing both the source text and target text, the researchers find how the comic impact is lost in subtitling because of linguistic and cultural factors.

### Analysis and Discussion

This section provides an analysis of instances of humour which are collected from the drama serial "Chaudhry and Sons". The main aim of the study is how the linguistic and cultural factors impact the translation of humour in subtitling. So, both the original language and its English subtitles are analyzed qualitatively. In the following section, first linguistic factors are discussed.

### Linguistic Challenges

Linguistic factors can have a strong impact on humour translation, especially when moving between languages that differ significantly in structure, idiomatic use, and cultural embedding, such as Urdu and English. In humour translation, these factors can either enable or obstruct the preservation of comedic effects.

### Example 1

Original Text	English Subtitle	Back Translation
<b>Malka:</b> ہمیں تو بس یہی فکر کھا رہی ہے کہ اگر ہم مر گئے تو تمہیں تو یہ دنیا کھائی گی۔	<b>Malka:</b> I am just worried that if I die, then the world won't leave you.	<b>Malka:</b> We are only thinking that if we die, then the world won't spare you.
<b>Pari:</b> ہائے دادی، اگر تم مر گئی تو پری کے کھانے کا کیا ہوگا۔	<b>Pari:</b> Oh grandma if you die, then what will happen to Pari's food?	<b>Pari:</b> Oh grandma, if you die, then what will happen to Pari's food?

Humour in this dialogue comes from the playful banter between Malka and Pari. Malka expresses concern about the consequences for Pari if she dies, implying that Pari would have to face the difficulties of the world because of her careless and irresponsible nature. Pari responds humorously by suggesting that she's more concerned about what will happen to her food if Malka dies. It also incorporates a touch of absurdity, as Pari's response adds an unexpected and humorous element to the conversation. Here we can also see elements of playing on the words کھانا and کھائی as both have similar sounds but here, they have different meanings. The first one is used metaphorically for trials in life and the second one refers to eating. In this example, humour is not conveyed in the English subtitle because the wordplay, which is used in the Urdu language is not maintained in the English subtitle. Also, the Urdu ہمیں تو یہ دنیا کھائی گی metaphorical language is different from the English

## Example 2

Original Text	English Subtitle	Back Translation
<b>Bilal:</b> ایک بات ہزار بار بتا چکا ہوں تمہیں کہ میں نے نہیں اُڑایا تمہارے تارا کو۔	<b>Bilal:</b> I have told you one thing thousand times that I didn't set your Tara free.	<b>Bilal:</b> I have told you one thing a thousand times, that I didn't release your Tara.
<b>Pari:</b> ایک بار پری کو ثبوت مل جائے۔ دن میں نہ تارے دکھا دوں گی۔	<b>Pari:</b> Let Pari find the proof once. I will make you see stars in daylight.	<b>Pari:</b> Let Pari find the evidence once. I will make you see stars in broad daylight.

This dialogue between Pari and Bilal includes a type of humour i.e., wordplay or pun-based humour, by doing a play on the word "Tara". In the first line of this example, Bilal argues that he didn't set Pari's parrot free called "Tara". Pari responds in a playful way that after finding proof, she will make Bilal see stars in daylight, playing on the double meaning of "tara" as it is used for stars and also the name of Pari's parrot. Here, clever linguistic usage i.e., wordplay creates the comedic effect. The wordplay i.e., تارا and تارے دکھا دوں گی are not maintained in the target text because it does not have an equivalent wordplay in the target text. So, the target text is not as humorous as the source text. So, because of the linguistic differences, wordplay cannot be transferred to the English subtitle.

## Example 3

Original Text	English Subtitle	Back Translation
<b>Shakir:</b> تو چپلیں کھائے گا مجھ سے۔	<b>Shakir:</b> I will throw this slipper at your face!	<b>Shakir:</b> I'll make you eat slippers!
<b>Bilal:</b> چپلوں سے یاد آیا چچی بتا رہی تھی چپل کباب اور پلاؤں کا پروگرام ہے آج۔	<b>Bilal:</b> Slipper reminds me, aunt was saying there is a plan of kebab and rice today.	<b>Bilal:</b> Speaking of slippers, Aunt was mentioning there's a plan for slipper kebabs and rice today.

The humour in this example includes types of humour, i.e., wordplay. Shakir in a strict way responds to his son Bilal, I will beat you by throwing slippers. Bilal humorously responds by doing wordplay on Shakir's threat i.e., by connecting چپلیں

چپل کباب with کھائے گا. He brings the conversation of food, i.e., Chapli kebabs and rice to a serious situation in an amusing way. The contradiction between Shakir's exaggerated threat and Bilal's playful response creates a light-hearted and witty dialogue. But the humour is not transferred to the English subtitle because of the language differences, the Urdu wordplay is not maintained in the English subtitle. So, the English subtitle is not funny for the target audience.

## Example 4

Original Text	English Subtitle	Back Translation
<b>Bunty:</b> وہ حسینہ نہیں ہے جو حسین کہی سے بھی نہیں	<b>Bunty:</b> That Hasina who is not pretty at all.	<b>Bunty:</b> That Hasina who is not pretty at all.

The humour in this dialogue is based on irony and wordplay. Bunty is playing on the word “Hasina” which has two meanings: the name of a girl and also in the sense of beautiful. Bunty is playing on this word. He is telling Bilal about the girl named Hasina and then playing on the word جو حسین کہی سے بھی نہیں creates humour. This also creates irony because he is describing Hasina “who is not beautiful”. The unexpected comparison and wordplay create a comic effect. But, when it is translated to English, it is not humorous for the target audience because neither the pun is maintained in the English subtitle, nor the English audience understands the meaning of Hasina and is not as ironic as the source text.

## Example 5

Original Text	English Subtitle	Back Translation
<b>Dildar:</b> او روکو تو سہی یہ میرے جگرے یار کی نواسی ہے۔	<b>Dildar:</b> Hey, wait she is my beloved friend's grand daughter buddy.	<b>Dildar:</b> Hey, wait; she is the granddaughter of my dear friend.
<b>Bilal:</b> یہ جگر ، کلیجی ، گردے کا حساب بعد میں کرے دادا ۔	<b>Bilal:</b> You take care of this beloved later, Grandpa.	<b>Bilal:</b> Let's settle the accounts of this liver, heart and kidneys later, Grandpa.

Humour in this conversation is a combination of wordplay and situational humour. In the dialogue, Dildar responds to Bilal by highlighting his relationship with Tooba, that she is the granddaughter of his dear friend by using metaphorical expression جگرے یار کی نواسی. Bilal's response, یہ جگر ، کلیجی ، گردے کا حساب بعد میں کرے دادا creates wordplay by comparing Dildar's response to human organs, especially جگر (liver) and suggests that Dildar should give importance to other matters rather than Tooba. Overall, in this dialogue, Bilal response creates humour through the unexpected and beautiful usage of wordplay. Because of the language difference, there is no exact equivalent for the Urdu humour. So, wordplay is not maintained in the target text because the play on words جگرے یار کی نواسی and یہ جگر ، کلیجی ، گردے has no exact equivalent in the target text to transfer the meaning. The target text remains not as funny as the source text.

## Cultural Challenges

Culture and related factors also contribute to humour. In fact, many concepts are culturally bound, and if not taken the exact context, they lose humours meaning. Some examples, given below, are discussed here.



**Example 1**

Original Text	English Subtitle	Back Translation
<b>Dildar:</b> ایسے کسی رکشے والے کے ساتھ انگریزی بولی ہونگی تو جگڑا شروع ہو گیا ہونگا۔ ان پڑھ بندے کے ساتھ انگریزی بولے تو وہ لڑ پڑتا ہے۔	<b>Dildar:</b> She must have spoken English with a rickshaw driver, he must have fought. If you talk in English with an illiterate person, he fights.	<b>Dildar:</b> If someone spoke English with a rickshaw driver, there must have been an argument. If you speak English with an uneducated person, he starts to fight.

This dialogue between Pari and Dildar inculcates humour i.e., cultural stereotypes and irony. Pari is worried about her grandmother who has visited Hyderabad and not attending her call. So, Dildar predicts that Malka would have spoken English with a rickshaw driver; it would have led to a fight between them. It is further said that by speaking English with an uneducated person, would mind it. This statement is a stereotype of our society that English is associated with an educated class and rickshaw drivers may not be fluent in English and might react negatively when you communicate in English. This is also an irony for Malka as Malka is an educated woman, and she always mixes English with the Urdu language. Overall, the exaggeration of stereotypes and irony creates humour in this example. But, because of the cultural differences between both the languages, this example is not as humorous as the source text for the target audience.

**Example 2**

Original Text	English Subtitle	Back Translation
<b>Sabir:</b> پھر کوئی نیا چاند چڑھا دیا ہوگا تمہارے چاند نے۔	<b>Sabir:</b> Your son must have created a new scene again.	<b>Sabir:</b> Again a new moon must have risen by your moon."
<b>Sheeba:</b> جب اس گھر کے رویت ہلال کمیٹی کے چئیرمین ہونگے ماما جی تو روز صبح وشام چاند تو چڑھتے ہیں نا۔	<b>Sheeba:</b> When the uncle will be the chairman of the moon sighting committee then every day we will have a new scene created.	<b>Sheeba:</b> "When Mama Ji will be the chairman of the Halal Committee of this house, the moon rises every morning and evening doesn't it?"

This conversation between Sheeba and Sabir is a type of humour i.e., situational humour and wordplay. Sabir's complaint about his son to his wife Sheeba that he has again created a new scene means that he has again done something wrong in his school. Sheeba's response adds to the humour by doing a play on the word (Chand) and by referring to the "Roya Hilal Committee" which is a moon sighting committee in Pakistan and implying that if her uncle i.e., Dildar would be the chairman of Moon sighting committee, he would continuously create new scenes because Dildar does not warn his grandson Bunty on his misbehaving. This exaggerated comparison creates humour. This dialogue also includes a play on the word "چاند" here it refers to son and it also refers to creating a moon sighting scene. The comparison to the moon sighting committee and wordplay generates humour in this context. But

because of linguistic and cultural differences, this example is not as humorous as the source text for the target audience because neither the wordplay is maintained of the word “chand” nor the concept of Royat Hilal committee is maintained because of the cultural differences.

### Example 3

Original Text	English Subtitle	Back Translation
<b>Dildar:</b> - او مسٹر ڈی ڈی ڈنگر ڈاکٹر I mean میرا نام چودھری بکرا نہیں ہے۔	<b>Dildar:</b> Hey, Mr DD. I mean dumb doctor. My name is not that.	<b>Dildar:</b> Hey, Mr. DD. I mean, Dumb Doctor. My name is not Chaudhry Bakra.

This conversation between Chaudhry Dildar and Sabir includes types of humour i.e., playful banter and irony. Dildar humorously refers to Sabir as Mr DD by using only the initial letters “DD” of the word (dunger doctor) instead of addressing him by his actual name. Dildar calls Sabir "Mr. DD" by making fun of him, so, it's a kind of teasing. Further, the funny name "Chaudhry Bakra" used by Dildar adds to the humour as it is a kind of irony on Sabir because Dildar's son Sabir is a veterinary doctor, so, Dildar is teasing him. The teasing between the characters creates humour in this example. But, because of the cultural differences, there is no equivalent of Chaudhry Bakra in the English subtitle. So, the English subtitle is not as humorous as the source text.

### Example 4

Original Text	English Subtitle	Back Translation
<b>Pari:</b> - تیس مار خان ، بات سنا ۔	<b>Pari:</b> Hey, Robinhood, listen to me.	<b>Pari:</b> Thirty shots, Khan, listen to me.

This example involves a type of humor i.e., irony. Pari uses the nickname, "تیس مار خان" for Bunty and then tells him to listen to her. The contradiction between the name “تیس مار خان” and the character shows irony in this example. It's also a form of light-hearted teasing or playful banter between the characters. "تیس مار خان" is a character from Urdu folklore. He is a famous legendary figure known for his bravery and sharpness in tales, often depicted as a hero who defeats his enemies. "Robin Hood," on the other hand refers to the character "Robin Hood." The character "Robin Hood" from English folklore is well-known for robbing the rich to benefit the poor. But because again of the cultural differences, this example is not as humorous as the source text because the concept of “تیس مار خان” is not understandable to the target audience and instead “Robin Hood” is used.

### Example 5

Original Text	English Subtitle	Back Translation
<b>Dildar:</b> او شاکر ، مجھے اندر کیوں نہیں جانے دیتے۔ مجھے یہاں کیوں بٹھادیا پتھر۔ میں کونسا گاؤں کی بینڈ ڈالنے والی پھوپھی ہوں۔	<b>Dildar:</b> Hey Shakir, why don't they let me go inside? Why do you have me seated here, son? I am not some superstitious aunt from the village.	<b>Dildar:</b> Hey Shakir, why don't they let me go inside? Why do you have me seated here, son? I am not some superstitious aunt from the village.



Humour in this dialogue is generated from the character Dildar's frustration about the situation. Dildar expresses his disappointment because he is prevented from entering the hospital's room and asks Shakir why he has been seated outside in such a position. Here, in this example, we can see an important component of humour i.e., self-deprecating humour. Dildar's remark about himself as a "phuphi" (aunt) adds a comic touch to the dialogue and creates a humorous situation. But because of the cultural differences, the target text translation is different from source text and is not as humorous. The subtitle translates *میں کوئسا گاؤں کی بینٹ ڈالنے والی پھوپھی ہوں۔* with "I am not some superstitious aunt from the village". The English subtitle is not as humorous as the original language.

### Conclusion

This study highlighted the challenges involved in translating humour from Urdu to English with a particular focus on linguistic devices and cultural references in the Pakistan comedy serial. Through qualitative analysis, it was observed that many humorous elements, i.e., wordplay, puns idioms and culturally loaded expressions lose their comic effect when translated due to linguistic and cultural differences between two languages. This study emphasizes the need for subtitlers to be creative and have strong command of the linguistic and cultural references of both the languages to maintain the comic effect of the original language. Subtitlers need to go beyond literal translation and should adopt strategies that can preserve the function of the original humour in the target language. This study fills a vital gap of translating humour from Urdu to English and encourages further research for developing effective strategies that take into account linguistic nuances and cultural references.

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