

Equivalence and Divergence: A Comparative Study of Humor, Irony and Narrative Voice in Literary Translation

MAMBETOVA ROZA BALTABAEVNA
Karakalpak State University, Uzbekistan

ABSTRACT

This article develops a comparative method for analysing how humor, irony, and first-person narrative voice are transferred from a source text to its translations. Drawing on descriptive translation studies [9], translation quality assessment [7], comparative stylistics [12], shift theory [3], and strategy-based models [4; 8], it argues that equivalence in comic and ironic prose is an equivalence of relations rather than of isolated lexical items. The analysis aligns functional units – situational comic scenes, verbally marked jokes, ironic utterances, and socially indexed speech-across an English source text and two major Russian target texts. Case studies include the whitewashing episode, the robber-gang oath, the opening vernacular sentence, eye dialect, the torn-letter scene (I'll go to hell), and the Grangerford parlor catalogue. The article proposes a reusable scoring protocol for doctoral research and for multilingual comparison, including Russian and Uzbek versions.

Keywords: Literary translation, comparative analysis, equivalence, translation shifts, humor, irony, narrative voice, source text, target text, retranslation.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERARY REVIEW

Comparative analysis is not an optional supplement to translation studies; it is the method by which equivalence can be observed

rather than merely asserted. Gideon Toury's descriptive programme shifted the field from prescriptions of how a translation "ought" to read toward systematic comparison of source text (ST) and target text (TT) as facts of culture [9: 23-39]. Juliane House's model of translation quality assessment likewise rests on a double comparison: the ST's register and genre against the TT's, and a covert translation against an overt one [7: 63-80]. The present article adopts that comparative stance in order to examine three tightly linked problems of literary transfer – humor, irony, and first-person narrative voice – as they appear in a pair of nineteenth-century American novels that have generated a dense international series of translations.

The classical toolkit of comparison was assembled earlier. Vinay & Darbelnet's *Comparative Stylistics* distinguished direct procedures (borrowing, calque, literal translation) from oblique ones (transposition, modulation, equivalence, adaptation) [12: 30-42]. J. C. Catford described translation shifts at the level of level, category, structure, class, and intra-system [3: 20-31]. Andrew Chesterman later regrouped such operations into syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic strategies, a grid that is especially useful when the unit of comparison is not a word but a comic effect [4: 87-116]. In the Russian tradition, V. N. Komissarov treated equivalence as a hierarchy of levels – from pragmatic purpose down to formal structure – and warned that identity at a lower level may destroy equivalence at a higher one [8: 51-68].

Humor and irony complicate the grid. Salvatore Attardo's script-opposition theory treats a joke as the collision of two incompatible semantic scripts; the translator must reconstruct the collision, not the wording [1: 103-120]. Delia Chiaro has shown that verbally expressed humor is among the least portable features of a text because it is parasitic on shared encyclopaedic knowledge and on the phonology of the source language [5: 77-99]. Irony, as Wayne Booth argued, is even more fragile: it requires a reader who can detect a stable unspoken meaning behind an uttered one [2: 1-31]. If the TT reader cannot hear the gap between what a narrator says and what the implied author means, the satire collapses into naïveté or into cruelty.

Korney Chukovsky's *A High Art* remains the most influential practitioner's statement in the East-Slavic school. He insisted that a translation of comic prose must be funny in the target language, even if that requires abandoning a local idiom, and he rejected the illusion that a source dialect can be replaced by a target dialect without importing a false social world [6: 23-40]. His own versions of the Mississippi novels, together with those of N. L. Daruzes, form a convenient comparative pair: two TTs, one language, divergent solutions. The analysis below uses that pair, and the English ST, as a working corpus, while the method is offered as transferable to other language combinations, including Uzbek.

METHOD: WHAT A COMPARISON MUST ALIGN

A responsible ST-TT comparison does not count lexical coincidences. It aligns units of function. For the present corpus four functional units are decisive: (1) the comic scene whose humor is situational rather than verbal; (2) the verbally marked joke that depends on a misspelling, a tautology, or a frozen idiom; (3) the ironic utterance whose surface meaning is the opposite of its ethical meaning; (4) the stretch of first-person speech that constructs a social identity. Each unit is described in the ST, then compared with at least two TTs or with two plausible procedures. Divergence is recorded not as error by default but as a redistribution of meaning – what Toury would call a shift governed by target norms.

SITUATIONAL HUMOR: THE FENCE AND THE GANG

The whitewashing episode is a textbook case of situational humor. A boy converts unpaid labor into a scarce privilege and collects an apple, a kite, and a dead rat on a string [10: ch. 2]. The comedy is economic and psychological: Tom inflates the value of a chore by appearing reluctant. Comparison shows that TTs rarely fail on the plot and frequently fail on the *tempo* of the swindle. Chukovsky accelerates the scene with historic present and short clauses; Daruzes stays closer to the ST's past-tense

narrative and therefore to its leisurely deadpan. The first solution raises comic energy; the second preserves the narrator's unhurried cruelty. Neither is "wrong." They instantiate different points on Komissarov's hierarchy: pragmatic vividness versus narrative stance.

A second situational complex is Tom's robber gang and its oath. The boys swear in blood to "kill" informers and then spend their afternoons waiting for caravans that never come; when they do "rob," they steal jam [10: ch. 8]. The humor is a script opposition between chivalric romance and village boredom. Translations that upgrade the diction of the oath toward high literary language sharpen the parody; translations that flatten the oath into ordinary children's speech lose the collision of scripts. Comparative scoring, following Attardo, asks only whether both scripts remain audible. A TT that keeps the murderous formula and the jam has transferred the joke; a TT that keeps only the jam has transferred a prank.

VERBAL HUMOR AND THE SPOKEN NARRATOR

The first sentence of the later novel is already a comparative problem: "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter" [11: ch. 1]. Double negation, "ain't," and the casual dismissal of the previous book construct a speaker who is semi-literate, commercially aware, and socially unembarrassed. Vinay & Darbelnet's "equivalence" – the recreation of a comparable situational effect – is here in tension with their "literal translation." A grammatically corrected opening in the TT gains readability and loses character. Chukovsky's practice, consistent with *A High Art*, is to keep a colloquial lexis while restoring morphology; the boy still sounds oral, but he no longer sounds ungrammatical. Daruzes is slightly more conservative. Both TTs therefore perform a syntactic shift (Catford) that is also a social shift: the narrator rises one step on the scale of schooling.

Eye dialect multiplies the difficulty. The notorious *sivilize* is not a random misspelling; it is the narrator's resistance to the Widow's programme of shoes, prayers, and table manners,

written into orthography. Comparative options include: a) an analogous misspelling in the target orthography; b) a colloquial synonym without graphic distortion; c) a correct verb plus a compensating idiom elsewhere in the sentence. Procedure a) is foreignizing and often unreadable; b) saves tone and loses the joke on literacy; c) is Chesterman's compensation. Most published TTs choose (b) or (c). The comparison is useful precisely because it makes the cost visible: one cannot keep the spelling joke and the fluency of a children's classic at the same time.

IRONY: SURFACE CREDULITY, ETHICAL REVERSAL

The decisive ironic unit of the later novel is the torn letter. The narrator writes to Miss Watson to betray the runaway, feels "saved," and then remembers companionship on the raft. He tears the letter up: "All right, then, I'll go to hell" [11: ch. 31]. The uttered meaning is damnation; the unspoken meaning is a moral awakening that the community cannot name as virtue. Booth's stable irony is here unusually unstable for the boy himself: he believes he is choosing evil. A translation that inserts clarifying evaluation ("I knew it was right, though I thought it was a sin") destroys the irony by saying what the ST refuses to say. A translation that keeps the theological vocabulary of hell, conscience, and "the wages of sin" without explanation trusts the TT reader as the ST trusts the ST reader. Comparative work on Czech, Persian, and Slavic versions shows a historical drift: earlier TTs tend to protect the young reader with soft paraphrase; later TTs restore the naked sentence. The drift is a change of target norms, not an improvement in "accuracy" measurable by word count.

A quieter irony organizes the Grangerford chapters. The family is "quality"; they own books, a clock, and sentimental crayon drawings of mourning maidens; they also conduct a feud in which children are shot from ambush [11: ch. 17]. The narrator admires the parlor and reports the killings in the same even voice. Humor here is not laughter but the reader's recognition that admiration is misplaced. House's distinction is pertinent: a

covert translation will naturalize the parlor furniture and risk making the feud look like local color; an overt translation will keep the slightly stilted catalogue of objects so that the clash of gentility and murder remains audible. Comparison of TTs shows that the catalogue is often shortened. The omitted crayon drawings are not decorative. They are the ironic evidence that “civilization” and barbarism share a house.

WHAT COMPARISON CHANGES IN THE THEORY

Three conclusions follow for a comparative poetics of translation. First, equivalence in comic and ironic prose is an equivalence of “relations” – between two scripts, between uttered and implied meaning, between narrator and implied author – and not of items. A TT may replace every noun and still be equivalent if the relation survives; it may keep every noun and fail if the relation is explained away. Second, the spoken narrator is a comparative object in his own right. Shifts in morphology, address, and orthography reposition him on a social scale; those shifts should be described, not only deplored. Third, series of TTs in one target language (Chukovsky against Daruzes; early against late Czech or Persian versions) are more revealing than a single “best” translation, because they display the range of norms that Toury placed at the center of the discipline.

The practical implication for doctoral research is a protocol. Select a closed list of functional units (the fence, the oath, the opening sentence, *sivilize*, the torn letter, the Grangerford parlor). Align each unit across ST and two or more TTs. Code the procedure with Chesterman’s labels. Score, independently, whether the script opposition or the ironic gap remains recoverable for a competent target reader. The resulting matrix does not declare a winner. It maps divergence. In a multilingual setting – English into Russian and into Uzbek, for example – the same matrix will show which losses are language-specific and which are produced by a shared school of “children’s classic” editing. That is the proper use of comparison: not to rank translators, but to make the conditions of literary transfer visible.

CONCLUSION

Humor, irony, and narrative voice travel badly when they are treated as ornaments on a portable plot. They travel better when ST and TT are compared as systems of relations. The Mississippi novels remain an exacting test because their comedy is ethical and their ethics are comic: a boy sells a chore, a gang steals jam, a narrator chooses hell in order to remain human. Comparative translation studies, from Vinay & Darbelnet [12] to Toury [9], House [7], supplies the instruments for describing what happens to those relations in another language.

The instruments do not abolish loss. They prevent loss from being mistaken for silence. Further work should enlarge the corpus beyond two Slavic TTs and should include retranslations, abridgments, and versions marketed for children, each of which rewrites the same units under a different norm. Only a comparative series can show whether a given target culture has heard the irony or merely inherited the adventure.

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MAMBETOVA ROZA BALTABAEVNA

ACTING PROFESSOR,

DEPARTMENT OF THEORY AND

PRACTICE OF TRANSLATION,

KARAKALPAK STATE UNIVERSITY

NUKUS, UZBEKISTAN.

E-MAIL: <ROZA.MAMBETOVA.66@BK.RU>