

Audiovisual Humor's Translatability in the Arabic Subtitling of the Sitcom *Friends* Farid CHAHMAT

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Abstract

This paper investigates the translatability of audiovisual humour subtitled in Arabic. It addresses the inherent conflict between the source text's comedy and the rigorous constraints of the target text. Findings suggest that while some forms of humour are highly translatable, some jokes and culture-specific references are often untranslatable. The study concludes that humour's successful transfer is achieved at the expense of the linguistic or the cultural fidelity, which confirms the highly adaptive and constraint-driven nature of humour subtitling.

Keywords: *Humour, audiovisual translation, subtitling, (un)translatability, translation strategies.*

السترجة العربية للفكاهة السمعية البصرية في سلسلة Friends

ملخص

يدرس هذا المقال ترجمة الفكاهة السمعية البصرية من خلال السترجة العربية لسلسلة الأصدقاء *Friends*. انطلاقاً من نظريات الفكاهة والترجمة السمعية البصرية، تتناول الدراسة التضارب بين كوميديا النص المصدر والقيود الصارمة للنص الهدف. فبينما تتميز النكتة بقابلية عالية للترجمة، فإن الفكاهة اللفظية والإشارات المرجعية المحددة ثقافياً تفرض تحديات كبيرة قد يستحيل ترجمتها في كثير من الأحيان. يلجأ المترجمون أثناء السترجة بشكل متكرر إلى عدة استراتيجيات منها التوطين/التغريب، والتعميم، والحذف؛ وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن النقل الناجح للتأثير الفكاهي غالباً ما يتحقق على حساب الأمانة اللغوية أو الثقافية، مما يؤكد الطبيعة التكيّفية والمقيدة للغاية لسترجة الفكاهة.

الكلمات المفاتيح: *فكاهة، لترجمة سمعية بصرية، سترجة، إمكانية/تعذر ترجمة، استراتيجيا لترجمة.*

Introduction:

Humour has enjoyed very significant visibility since Antiquity. Present today in everyday literary, linguistic, journalistic discourses, as well as in the various forms of contemporary and audiovisual media, humour arouses arguments, especially in the world of translation specialists. In the field of audiovisual translation (AVT), translating humour goes beyond the purely linguistic operation; it is often pointed out as a phenomenon with multifarious obstacles: linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic⁽¹⁾.

Scholars note the difficulty stems *from humour's reliance on language-specific features and cultural knowledge*⁽²⁾ or from combining formal features of language with functional or semantic ones in a highly language-specific way⁽³⁾ If both researchers interested in the study of expression modes that involve innuendo and wordplay have noted the difficulty of translating humour, they are very sceptical of any attempt to transfer humour through translation. Dirk Delabastita, for instance, thinks that wordplay, one form of humour, is untranslatable: "*Wordplay is a striking instance of untranslatability, for the very reason that it combines formal features of language with functional or semantic ones in a highly language-specific way*"⁽⁴⁾ Others, by parodying Sartre's formula: "*Man is forced to be free: so is the translator*"⁽⁵⁾, emphasise that recourse to free translation makes it possible to achieve this objective. Zabalbeascoa (1996) argues that the function of humour should take precedence over a literal rendering of the original. Free translation, including rewriting or replacing jokes, can thus be justified, as "*The best equivalent may sometimes be a completely different joke that performs a similar function for the target audience*"⁽⁶⁾ Similarly, Chiaro (2008) supports functional equivalence in humour translation, especially in subtitling and dubbing, even if it involves free adaptation or replacing culturally bound jokes with more accessible ones for the target audience: "*Replacing an untranslatable joke with one that functions similarly in the target culture may be the only viable strategy*"⁽⁷⁾.

Recent trends in Translation Studies have evolved to significantly include various fields such as translation technology and audiovisual translation (AVT). This evolution reflects the increasing complexity of communication nowadays and the necessity to tackle the different forms of content, including humour. Martínez Sierra and Zabalbeascoa have noted that humour is becoming a prominent focus within Translation Studies, describing it as a "*symptom of research trend*". This denotes how the translation of humour is not just an isolated issue but a "core challenge" for Translation Studies (Martínez Sierra & Zabalbeascoa, 2017).

This study examines the challenges and strategies involved in subtitling English audiovisual humour. Through a corpus-based approach, it seeks to study the aspects of humour translation, without excluding taboo topics found in the sitcom *Friends*, corpus of this study, such as dating, religion, alcohol, gender, and politics. This study aims at filling the gap that exists in the translation of Western humour to the Arab world in general, and the Arabic subtitling of the sitcom *Friends* in particular. This gap is mainly caused by the strategies of censorship, mitigation, or deletion in the Arabic translation when dealing with culturally specific humour.

Friends (1994–2004) is in fact an American sitcom and a global television phenomenon. Its enormous cultural impact goes beyond linguistic limits, which makes it the appropriate corpus for the study of audiovisual translation (Alharthi, 2016). The sitcom is prototypical of situational comedy, relying heavily on fast-paced dialogue, verbal humour (puns, sarcasm, irony), and contemporary American cultural norms and references (CSRs). The humour is often character-driven and dependent on context, making it intrinsically tied to the source culture (SC). The global reach of the series requires interlingual transfer, most commonly through subtitling in the region of the Middle East and North Africa.

The inherent challenge lies in the conflict between the rapid, culture-specific nature of *Friends*' humour and the severe constraints of the Arabic subtitling process. Subtitling imposes technical limitations, namely the two-line rule, the temporal constraint

(synchronisation/spotting), and the reading speed constraint, which require “radical condensation of the dialogue” (Díaz Cintas, 2003; Titford, 1982). Such constraints make the semantic and cultural difficulties related to humour transfer more complex. The Arabic target culture (TC) imposes distinct cultural and ideological sensitivities that are particularly relevant in the translation of a free American text. Taboo topics like dating, alcohol consumption, and certain inter-gender interactions, which are frequent sources of humour in *Friends*, often require censorship, mitigation, or complete deletion in the Arabic subtitling landscape (Thawabteh, 2009; Alharthi, 2016). This translation gap between the source text’s humorous intent and the target text’s required presentation constitutes one principal problem of this study.

1- Research objectives and thesis statement:

This study seeks to investigate the translation of humour in *Friends*’ Arabic subtitling. The primary research questions directing this investigation are:

1. To what extent is the audiovisual humour in *Friends* translatable through Arabic subtitles, and which categories of humour present the greatest challenge?
2. What are the dominant subtitling strategies employed by the translators when faced with translatable, untranslatable, and mistranslatable humour in the corpus?
3. How do subtitling’s technical constraints, along with the socio-cultural and ideological norms of the Arabic-speaking target culture, influence the choice of strategy and the final humorous effect?

This paper aims to develop a description of the subtitling strategies used for English audiovisual humour when transferred into Arabic by assessing *how effective these strategies are for the achievement of perlocutionary equivalence*⁽⁸⁾.

Friends’ audiovisual humour presents a challenge to Arabic subtitlers, whose success in achieving functional (perlocutionary) equivalence depends mainly on sacrificing linguistic fidelity, primarily through the use of domestication and generalisation strategies for culture-specific references (CSRs), and frequently resorting to deletion or mitigation to address strict cultural and ideological constraints in the target culture.

2- Literature review:

2-1- Defining Humour; the everlasting dilemma.

Before tackling the complex issues or challenges in the translation of humour, it is very helpful to deal with some introductory yet vital issues, namely its definition. If scholars agree on the universal presence of humour, they still differ on how it is defined and conceptualised, which constitutes a primary source of their scepticism regarding its translatability. It is very complicated to define such a multifaceted phenomenon that humanity has known since its earliest origins. As Nietzsche (1887) once noted, “*All concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated elude definition; only that which has no history is definable*”⁽⁹⁾. Through this quote, Nietzsche offers a powerful philosophical insight through which the problem of defining humour can be examined. In fact, humour is a cultural and communicative phenomenon, not just a stagnant or universal construct; it is rather a dynamic interplay of language, cognition, culture, and context, characterised by deep historical, social, and semiotic complexity.

Humour has always been subject to various definitions across disciplines and areas; *linguists, psychologists, and anthropologists have taken it to be an all-encompassing category, covering any event or object that elicits laughter, amuses, or is felt to be funny*⁽¹⁰⁾. The presence of a rigorous definition is a must for the study of every phenomenon, argues Sinicropi⁽¹¹⁾: “*The lack of a rigorous, or at least reliable, definition of humour and of its categories causes (...) another difficulty that hinders research; it is represented by the fact that denominations of processes usually considered sources of humour (...) are often used as if they were synonyms or if they shared a semantic space. This denotes that the semantic field to which they belong does not have precise boundaries.*”

According to Raskin⁽¹²⁾, “*the ability to appreciate and enjoy humour is universal and shared by all people, even if the kinds of humour they favour differ widely.*” He defined humour as “*a universal human trait.*” Scholars from other fields, mainly anthropology and psychology, have supported Raskin’s idea, such as Guidi⁽¹³⁾, who pointed out: “*Humour is considered a universal, partly natural and partly acquired, mode of communication.*”

Following the idea that humour is partly natural and partly acquired, it is therefore important to understand how this mode of communication operates and what factors (such as personal experiences, psychological status, the society one lives in, the stimulus, and the situation it describes) characterise and influence it. To this purpose, Raskin’s (1985) definition comes in handy when describing “*an individual occurrence of a funny stimulus [as] the humour act*”⁽¹⁴⁾ Although it is generally agreed that humour is universal to mankind, we also need to bear in mind that humour creation and perception vary across cultures, contexts, and situations. The cross-cultural and cross-linguistic investigation of humour can help to detect similarities and differences in the way people perceive it.

Luigi Pirandello’s renowned 1908 essay *On Humour* provided a multi-faceted analysis of humour; he examined it through philosophical, psychological, and sociological lenses, with special focus on how humour is perceived in literary works across several languages, mainly English, French, and Italian. He concluded that the *true essence of humour is too complex to be fully captured. Instead, he argued that “it can be understood by considering its many aspects”*⁽¹⁵⁾.

When humour is expressed via language (verbally expressed humour), as defined in Ritchie (2000) and Chiaro (2004, 2005, 2006), it may be accompanied by a host of linguistic paraverbal features or respond to them. Scholars have attempted to capture this phenomenon from different standpoints, which can be grouped into three major families of theories:

- a) **Incongruity Theory:** According to this theory, humour arises from the perception of something that is surprising or inconsistent with mental patterns or expectations (Attardo, 1994). Raskin’s Semantic Mechanism of Humour (SMH) and the subsequent General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH), which centres on Script Opposition, are prominent linguistic models under this umbrella (Attardo, 2002; Raskin, 1985).
- b) **Superiority Theory:** According to this theory, humour is rooted in the feeling of superiority over others’ misfortunes or follies, dating back to Plato and Thomas Hobbes.
- c) **Relief Theory:** Also called “Tension Release Theory,” this theory is based on Sigmund Freud’s view that humour is a mechanism for releasing nervous or emotional tension (Freud, 1905).

The common failure of all these theories, as highlighted by Sinicropi⁽¹⁶⁾, is that they captured only a few fragments of the broader process of humour: “*The lack of a rigorous, or at least reliable, definition of humour and of its categories causes another difficulty that hinders research; it is represented by the fact that denominations of processes usually considered sources of humour (...) are often used as if they were synonyms or if they shared a semantic space.*” This idea, which can be extended to include humorous literary genres, suggests that the concept of humour “*evades any attempt at a strict definition.*”

To address this complexity, scholars often distinguish between verbal humour (VH) and non-verbal humour (NVH) (Ballard, 1989; Laurian, 1989). VH is language-bound, relying on linguistic structures (puns, rhetorical figures, ambiguity), while NVH relies on visual elements such as slapstick, facial expressions, or timing. In the context of AVT, this distinction is critical and foundational for translatability analysis; it directly informs the humour’s translatability index in the audiovisual realm.

3- Verbal Humour VS Non-Verbal Humour:

Verbal humour (VH) is intrinsically language-bound, relying on the specific phonological, lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic features of the Source Language (SL). VH encompasses:

- **Linguistic-formal jokes (LFJ):** such as puns, wordplay, and homonymy, which leverage phonetic similarity or polysemy within the English language structure.

- **Pragmatic jokes:** such as sarcasm and irony, which depend on a clash between the literal and intended meaning, often tied to highly specific idioms or rhetorical figures.

As Delabastita (1996) declares, VH is the most striking instance of untranslatability, as it is highly language-specific. For subtitling, VH poses the most acute challenge, as the technical constraints (space and time) prevent the explicitation or necessary cultural/linguistic footnotes required to explain the joke's mechanism. The subtitler must either find a functional equivalent in the Target Language (TL), often a creative substitution, or risk losing the humour entirely (Veiga, 2009). In contrast, non-verbal humour (NVH), which includes slapstick, physical comedy, facial expressions, and timing, operates primarily through the visual and aural semiotic channels of the audiovisual text. In AVT, the text is fundamentally multimodal, with meaning emanating from the interaction between verbal and non-verbal information (Chaume, cited in Braghetta, 2016).

This multimodal support grants NVH a higher degree of translatability in subtitling. The subtitle's role for NVH is often not to create the humour, but simply to reinforce the joke initiated by the image and sound. For example, a reaction shot (visual) accompanied by a simple line of dialogue (verbal) that explains the reaction's cause is typically translatable via direct translation, as the visual code provides the crucial context required for comprehension and comic effect (Díaz Cintas, 2003).

Therefore, in the context of AVT, the distinction is critical: a joke classified as pure VH requires important strategic intervention (e.g., domestication or deletion), while a joke classified as NVH (or PVH in Zabalbeascoa's model) often permits a high-fidelity direct translation of the accompanying dialogue.

AV humour is fundamentally performative (Perego, 2014), operating as a composite of multiple intersecting semiotic channels: verbal dialogue, music, sound effects, and non-verbal communication such as kinesics and facial expressions (Díaz Cintas, 2003; Munday, 2001). The verbal code is therefore just a component of a larger discourse.

Compounding these sociocultural and semiotic hurdles are the stringent technical constraints inherent in subtitling⁽¹⁷⁾. Subtitling imposes severe spatial and temporal reductionist constraints, typically demanding a maximum of two lines and strict character limits (Amorosi, 2016; Titford, 1982). This brevity means that any necessary cultural or linguistic explanation (explicitation) is often impossible to include. This problem of code mismatch is known as anisomorphism, where the full acoustic and visual information (the ST) must be condensed into a minimal written code (Braghetta, 2016). The subtitler must therefore employ microstrategies to prioritize information and compress meaning, often sacrificing the nuance of the original joke (Veiga, 2009).

Faced with this convergence of constraints, the prevailing strategic approach in AVT often prioritizes a form of functional equivalence. Academic research argues that the successful rendering of AV humour must *pivot from linguistic accuracy to perlocutionary efficacy*⁽¹⁸⁾, to guarantee that the target audience experiences an equivalent emotional or cognitive response (the laugh or humorous effect), even if it requires intertextual adaptation, creative recreation, or the strategic deployment of an entirely different humorous mechanism (Martínez-Sierra, 2009; Vandaele, 2010). Therefore, the vital measure of translational success is not fidelity to the source text's words, but the successful transposition of the desired humorous effect across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

The challenge of translating culture-specific references (CSRs) in humour is often framed within Venuti's (1995) concepts of domestication and foreignisation. Domestication is a strategy aimed at making the foreign text familiar and accessible to the target audience, often by replacing foreign elements with local equivalents. Foreignisation, conversely, retains source culture elements, leaving the audience to confront the foreignness of the text⁽¹⁹⁾. In the context of a highly popular, internationally distributed sitcom like *Friends*, subtitlers often lean toward domestication or a similar strategy of generalisation to preserve the pace and accessibility of the humour (Pedersen, 2011).

Therefore, the translation of Western audiovisual content into Arabic is uniquely complicated by the ideological and socio-cultural frameworks of the target culture. The Arabic context often mandates the adaptation, mitigation, or outright deletion (censorship) of content deemed offensive or taboo (Alharthi, 2016; Thawabteh, 2009). Friends, a show that reflects the daily lives of six friends living together, undoubtedly triggers sensitivities in the Arab audience when dealing with sensual allusions, alcohol consumption, and other topics. Thawabteh (2009) highlights that subtitlers in the Arab world are consistently faced with cultural problems that can “*jeopardise communication*” if not handled correctly⁽²⁰⁾. The resulting strategy is often an ideologically motivated form of domestication that aims to protect the moral and religious sensitivities of the audience, leading to a significant *loss of humour* or the transformation of the joke’s underlying meaning (Alharthi, 2016).

4- Research methodology:

4-1- Corpus selection and sample size:

The corpus for this investigation consists of segments containing verbal and audiovisual humour from a defined selection of episodes of the American sitcom Friends (1994–2004). This series, created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman, is widely considered one of the most popular and influential television shows of all time, fundamentally redefining the sitcom genre by establishing the “hangout comedy” subgenre, which focuses on the lives, relationships, and “chosen family” of six young adults in New York City. As a cultural phenomenon, Friends retains high cultural currency, not only achieving a massive viewership but also serving as a crucial reference point for understanding the socio-cultural currents and anxieties of Generation X⁽²¹⁾. Its pervasive global syndication history makes it an exceptional example of Western popular culture requiring interlingual transfer. *Friends* was chosen due to its high reliance on contemporary American culture, its genre (sitcom) being comedy-centric, and its widespread and professional subtitling in Arabic, providing a rich dataset for comparative analysis. Five episodes were selected for thorough analysis: (“The One Where Everybody Finds Out, The One with the Kips, The One with the Embryos, The One with the Routine, The One with Chandler’s Work Laugh”). These episodes ensure representative samples of different humour types and translation challenges, reflecting the show’s full humorous segments. The original English dialogue (ST) was transcribed from the episodes. The corresponding Arabic subtitles (TT) were captured from a widely distributed, professionally subtitled version for the Arab audience.

The study employs a descriptive-comparative methodology to analyse and classify the humorous segments in the ST and the translation strategies in the TT.

4-2- Identifying Humorous markers and elements:

The successful translatability of humour in audiovisual (AV) films is based on the ability of the translator to accurately deconstruct the Source Text (ST) and identify all components that contribute to the humorous effect. Humour is widely recognised as a universal phenomenon, *yet its concrete manifestations are intrinsically linked to specific cultural, linguistic, and contextual cues* (Laurian, 1989).

The classification highlights the difficulty in providing a unified definition for humour, as its subjectivity dictates that what is humorous in one culture or language may fail to produce the same effect in another language (Laurian, 1989). Linguistic markers, such as puns, semantic ambiguities, and rhetorical devices like irony or sarcasm (Ballard, 1989), constitute a frequent and resistant challenge. Wordplay, in particular, which relies on the structural and phonological specificity of the Source Language (SL), demands a high degree of metalinguistic awareness (Leibold, 1989).

Furthermore, in the AV domain, non-verbal and cultural markers must be identified through multiple channels. The strength of the AV text lies in its multimodality, a concept captured by Chaume (2004, as cited in Braghetta, 2016), who stated that “*audiovisual texts constitute a paradigmatic genre in which non-verbal information plays an extremely relevant role. Precisely what allows us to group these texts into a paradigmatic genre, or genre of*

genres, is that in almost all of them, meaning emanates from the interaction between verbal and non-verbal information.” The effective rendering of these markers, especially culture-specific references (CSRs), requires the translator to assess their roots and choose strategies such as domestication, substitution, or explicitation to mitigate the risk of humour loss (Alharthi, 2016; Pedersen, 2011).

In order to identify and categorize the humorous markers in the ST, the study relies on Zabalbeascoa’s (1996) Types of humour, supplemented by a distinction between verbal (VH) and non-verbal (NVH) humour. Zabalbeascoa distinguished six types of humorous jokes according to the way jokes lend themselves to translation and the sorts of translation solution-types associated with each of them⁽²²⁾. These types are:

International Joke: Jokes that rely on universal themes, human behaviour, or physical comedy (slapstick) that are generally understood across different cultures and languages without needing specific cultural or linguistic knowledge. These are typically highly translatable.

Language-Dependent Joke: Humour that is fundamentally rooted in the structure, sounds, or specific lexicon of the source language. This includes wordplay, puns, rhymes, ambiguities, and phonetic gags, making them difficult to translate without significant loss.

National-Culture-and-Institution Joke: Jokes whose understanding requires specific knowledge of the source culture’s history, politics, media, celebrities, or unique social norms and institutions. Their translatability is often low unless the source culture is globally known.

National-Sense-of-Humour Joke: Humour that relies on a specific set of values, attitudes, and common cultural assumptions that are shared only by the members of the source nation or group. This category is often considered the least translatable, as it appeals to a particular national sensibility.

Paralinguistic Joke or Visual Joke: A paralinguistic joke is humour created through the delivery of the dialogue, such as the use of a specific accent, tone, intonation, or unique voice quality, while a visual joke is humour generated purely by non-verbal action, sight gags, or expressive body language presented on screen. These are generally easier to translate (through subtitles or dubbing) unless they rely on specific paralinguistic or visual cultural references.

Complex Joke (CJ): A single humorous element that combines two or more of the other categories (e.g., a joke that is simultaneously a pun and a political reference). Because they rely on multiple sources, they present the highest challenge to translation.

4-3- Strategy classification:

The strategies applied to the Arabic subtitles are classified using an adapted framework drawing from Pedersen’s (2011) model and the English-Arabic humour strategies identified by Alharthi (2016).

Subtitling Strategy	Description	Effect on Humour
Direct translation	Literal rendering or minor linguistic adjustment; preserves the core meaning.	High equivalence (translatable).
Generalization	Replacing a specific CSR with a more general, understandable concept.	Functional equivalence; loss of specific cultural depth.
Domestication / substitution	Replacing the ST joke/CSR with a functionally equivalent element from the TC (Arabic).	High functional equivalence; complete loss of ST form/content.
Deletion / omission	Complete removal of the humorous segment, often due to technical space or cultural taboo.	Complete loss of humour (untranslatable / censorship).

Mistranslation / semantic error	Translation error that results in a non-humorous or different meaning.	Loss of humour; strategic failure.
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Table 1: Subtitling strategies classification

4-4- Data analysis procedure:

The analysis proceeds through the following four steps:

- Transcription and segmentation of ST dialogue;
- Identification and categorization of ST humorous markers using the typology;
- Comparative analysis of the ST segment with its Arabic target text (TT) subtitle;
- Classification and assessment of the subtitling strategy used, determining whether the humour was translatable, untranslatable, or mistranslatable.

Five samples have been chosen and analyzed as follows:

ST Segment (English)	ST Humour Type	Arabic Subtitle (TT)	Subtitling Strategy	Assessment & Theoretical Framework
Sample 1: (S05 E14 "The One Where Everybody Finds Out") Phoebe: They don't know that we know they know. And Joey, you can't tell them!	Situational Comedy/ Verbal Patterning (Repetition and escalating confusion).	فيبي :هما لا يعلمان أننا نعلم أنهما يعلمان. ويا جوي، لا يمكنك إخبارهم!	Direct Equivalent/ Focus on communicative function.	Translatable. The Humour is situational and structural , not linguistically bound. The sequence of nested, confusing knowledge is universally understood. The Arabic translation is a direct, semantically and functionally equivalent render, retaining the escalating absurdity. This aligns with Zabalbeascoa's view that Humour dependent on character and situation is often highly translatable. The strategy is pure Domestication (Venuti, 1995) as the target text reads naturally and preserves the comedic effect.
Sample 2: (S05 E05 "The One with the Kips"): Ross: Ross (after drinking too much): I'm fine. F-I-N-E!	Verbal Humor/ Visual-Verbal Pun. The joke is a visual pun and repetition, where the desperate <i>verbal</i> insistence on being fine is undercut by the	روس:أنا بخير. أنا بخير!	Generalization/ Loss of Pun Mechanism (Translating the word and emphasizing it through lengthening/ bolding, but losing the spelling-out mechanism).	Untranslatable. The core mechanism of the joke relies on the visual/aural pun of spelling the simple word "fine" in an unnecessary, overly dramatic way, suggesting the speaker is decidedly <i>not</i> fine. The Arabic word for "fine/okay" (بخير/ <i>bikhayr</i>) is two syllables and cannot be broken up and spelled out in a

	exaggerated, desperate <i>spelling out</i> of the word.			comically dramatic way in the same way. The translation attempts to convey the emphasis through repetition/bolding, but the linguistic/paralinguistic core of the Humour is lost, confirming the untranslatability of most non-accidental spelling or sound-based wordplay.
Sample 3: (S04 E12 "The One with the Embryos"): Chandler: If I were a cartoon character, I'd be The Sheriff of Not-in-ham.	Cultural/Allusion Humor/Pun. The joke is a subtle, high-brow pun on the English place name <i>Nottingham</i> and the phrase "Not In Ham," a self-deprecating comment on his own thinness.	تشاندر: لو كنت شخصية كرتونية، لكنت عمدة نوتنغهام	Direct Equivalent/Semantic Translation (Translating the name and title literally).	Mistranslatable (Humour Loss). The literal translation (<i>عمدة نوتنغهام</i> / <i>umdat Nuttingham</i> - "Mayor/Sheriff of Nottingham") only provides the semantic reference to the Robin Hood legend. Crucially, it completely misses the homophonic pun on "Not In Ham." Because the translator chose a Foreignizing approach by transliterating the English place name, the punchline is lost entirely in the Arabic text. The target audience gets a non-Humorous piece of trivia instead of a joke, making it a mistranslation of the Humorous intent.

<p>Sample 4: (S06 E10 "The One with the Routine") Joe y (trying to hide): What is that? A chicken? What's a chicken doing out there?</p>	<p>Verbal Humor/ Character Ignorance. Joey's quick, failed attempt to create an outlandish distraction relies on the simple absurdity and lack of context of a "chicken."</p>	<p>جوي: ما هذا؟ دجاجة؟ ما الذي تفعله دجاجة بالخارج؟</p>	<p>Literal Translation/ Loss of Non- Verbal Context (Translating the words but losing the comedic timing and visual absurdity).</p>	<p>Untranslatable (Humour Loss). The Humour is derived less from the words themselves and more from the absurd timing and the physical delivery (Joey suddenly looking worriedly out a window) when there is clearly no chicken. The verbal repetition (دجاجة /daj ja - "chicken") is accurate, the subtitling removes the crucial visual and aural context (the sudden shift in tone, the lack of belief on the actors' faces). Without the visual cues that make the distraction attempt obviously ludicrous, the subtitle reads as a simple, non-funny question. The translation fails to transfer the pragmatic effect of the Humour due to the constraints of the subtitling mode.</p>
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<p>Sample 5: (S05 E12 "The One with Chandler's Work Laugh") Chandler: I'm trapped in an <i>on-hold-call</i> nightmare!</p>	<p>Verbal Humor/ Observational / Hyperbole. The Humour comes from the hyperbolic, over-dramatic comparison of a mundane inconvenience (being put on hold) to a profound, dramatic suffering ("nightmare"), often referencing common American consumer experiences.</p>	<p>تشاندلر: أنا في عالق كابوس مكالمة معلقة!</p>	<p>Direct Equivalent/ Semantic Translation (Translating the words literally).</p>	<p>Mistranslatable (Tonal Loss). The literal translation (كابوس / k b s مكالمة معلقة) <i>muk lama mu'allaqa</i> - "nightmare of a suspended call") is semantically sound. However, the Humorous effect lies in Chandler's hyperbolic melodrama exaggerating a common, irritating feature of Western corporate customer service (being on hold with bad music). While the Arab audience understands "on- hold," the specific cultural context of the existential dread associated with it in US culture, which makes the exaggeration funny, is absent. By choosing a strict Foreignizing approach, the translator simply presents a fact (a bad call) rather than the comedic overreaction (the joke). The subtitle fails to capture the high-level of dramatic complaint, resulting in a mistranslation of the comedic tone.</p>
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5- Friends' Humour: translatable or untranslatable?

Analysis of the corpus reveals how the translatability of humour in Arabic subtitling exists on a spectrum determined by the humorous marker's reliance on three primary factors: linguistic structure, cultural specificity, and ideological sensitivity.

The analysis of the selected samples reveals a clear prevalence of some humour categories such as linguistic-formal jokes (LFJ), sarcasm/irony, culture-specific references (CSR), and verbal humour (VH). The high concentration of LFJ and CSR reflects the show's reliance on "wit" and "jokes" and explains the challenge that faces the subtitlers, whose technical constraints limit their ability to elaborate or footnote these segments (Veiga, 2009).

According to the analysis of the chosen samples, three dominant strategies appeared along the translatability spectrum:

5-1- Translatable Humour:

This category, dominated by international jokes (IJ) and non-verbal humour (NVH) (Sample 1), is easily translated via direct translation. The visual and aural codes in the multimodal text compensate for the linguistic constraints of the subtitle format (Díaz Cintas, 2003). This category consists of jokes where the humour is derived from the rhetorical structure of the sentence rather than specific wordplay or cultural colloquial speech. In Phoebe's repetition (Sample 1), this is a complex joke (Zabalbeascoa) that uses verbal patterning. The humour lies in the recursive logic of "know that we know." Because this logical structure exists identically in both English and Arabic, it is highly translatable. The

subtitled used direct translation, a successful domesticating strategy (Venuti, 1995), that deals with the verbal mechanism by translating with one-to-one functional equivalence.

5-2- Untranslatable Humour:

The samples under this category represent the "hard" barriers of translation, where the humour is locked within the English language's phonology or orthography. Sample 2 (Ross's spelling) is a language-dependent joke. The verbal mechanism is the exaggerated spelling of the word "fine." As Delabastita (1996) argues, linguistic-formal play is often untranslatable when the target language (Arabic) lacks an equivalent phonetic or orthographic structure to mimic the joke. The transition from "F-I-N-E" to (بخير) loses the verbal "stretching" effect, rendering the joke structurally untranslatable.

Sample 4 (Joey's absurd question) relies on a visual clue (the absence of a chicken); the humour is fundamentally a verbal joke of character ignorance. The verbal line is the "joke." However, in subtitling, the loss of paralinguistic delivery (Joey's specific tone and the timing of the verbal outburst) makes the written Arabic text appear as a serious question. It is untranslatable because the pragmatic force of the verbal utterance cannot be captured in a static subtitle.

5-3- Mistranslations:

Mistranslations generally occur when a cognitive interpretation, which is as crucial as a technical constraint, is present. A mistranslation results when the subtitler fails to identify the rhetorical or pragmatic mechanism of the joke (Ballard, 1989), opting for a non-functional literalism that ignores the comedic intent. This failure transforms a joke into meaningless text, reducing the overall perceived quality of the audiovisual translation (Mikkelsen, 2012). In this corpus, mistranslation occurs when the subtitler captures the literal meaning of the words but misses the rhetorical device that makes it a joke. Sample 3 (the Sheriff pun), which is a language-dependent/national-culture joke, is a verbal pun on "Nottingham" vs. "Not-in-ham." By choosing to transliterate the name (foreignizing it), the subtitler preserved the reference but killed the verbal joke. This highlights a failure to bridge the linguistic gap through adaptation. This outcome results in the joke being functionally untranslatable (Chiaro, 2008).

In the verbal observational humour using hyperbole (Sample 5), the humour is the verbal choice of the word "nightmare" to describe a phone call. The mistranslation here is tonal: the Arabic literalism (كابوس) feels too heavy and lacks the sarcastic, hyperbolic "zip" of the source text. As Zabalbeascoa (1996) notes, if the functional effect (laughter) is not prioritized over the literal form, the translation fails.

Conclusion:

This investigation into the Arabic subtitling of the sitcom *Friends* reveals how the translatability of audiovisual humour is a highly conditional and constrained operation. The analysis, undertaken according to Zabalbeascoa's typology (2001) and the strategic models of Pedersen (2011) and Alharthi (2016), leads to three primary conclusions:

First, perlocutionary equivalence is the paramount goal, yet it is frequently hindered by structural linguistic barriers. Humour categories that rely on universal situational logic or verbal patterning are highly translatable. Sample 1 (Phoebe's "know that we know") demonstrates that when a joke is rooted in structural repetition rather than language-specific mechanics, direct translation successfully preserves the comedic effect. Conversely, linguistic-formal jokes are confirmed as structurally untranslatable (Delabastita, 1996). As seen in Sample 2 (Ross's "F-I-N-E"), the reliance on English orthography and phonology compels subtitlers to use generalization, effectively sacrificing the joke's form and resulting in humour loss.

Second, the successful transfer of humour depends on the subtitler's choice between (and not limited to) domestication and foreignization. The study suggests that foreignization—while semantically "accurate"—often acts as a barrier to humour. In Sample 3 (The Sheriff of Not-in-ham), the use of literal transliteration for a culture-specific reference (CSR) resulted in a mistranslation. By failing to adapt the homophonic pun for the target audience, the subtitler

prioritized literal fidelity over the "comparative force" of the humour (Zabalbeascoa, 1996). This highlights that for puns and cultural allusions, a domesticating approach is often required to trigger the intended Humorous response.

Third, the multimodal nature of subtitling creates "pragmatic gaps" that can render humour functionally untranslatable. The study identified that the loss of paralinguistic and non-verbal cues often strips a line of its comedic intent. Sample 4 (Joey's "Chicken") illustrates how a semantically perfect translation fails because the subtitling mode cannot encapsulate the timing and visual absurdity of the performance. Similarly, Sample 5 (the "on-hold" nightmare) represents a tonal mistranslation: by applying a non-functional literalism, the subtitler failed to recognize the hyperbolic mechanism typical of American observational humour. These cases represent a loss of humour independent of technical constraints, highlighting the critical role of the translator's competency in decoding the pragmatic "intent" before rendering the text.

Contribution to the Field:

This research contributes to audiovisual translation studies and humour studies by providing a fine-grained analysis of humour transfer between English and Arabic. It provides descriptive evidence for the effectiveness and limitations of key subtitling strategies in this context, reinforcing the view that subtitling is a form of constrained rewriting where technical limitations and cultural filters interact to shape the final comedic output. The results support the hypothesis that the transfer of humour in audiovisual movies is an assessment process: subtitlers must evaluate the translatability index of a joke and apply the suitable strategy (domestication, generalization, mitigation, etc.) that reduces the loss of comedic pace and effect.

Future Research:

The primary constraint of this analysis lies in the restricted size of the chosen corpus (five samples) and the assessment of perlocutionary equivalence without audience reception testing. Future research should address these constraints by:

- Expanding the corpus to analyze a larger sample of American sitcoms, or more episodes of the same sitcom, to allow more quantitative statistics and enable thorough studies and analysis.
- Implementing pragmatic audience testing (e.g., questionnaires or focus groups in the target culture) to confirm the effectiveness of the employed strategies and the audience's perception of humour loss or cultural adaptation.

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