

# An Analysis of Strategies in Translating American Humor into Thai: A Study of *50 First Dates*

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored strategies in translating American humor into Thai. Also, it investigated the possible linguistic and cultural factors influencing those strategies of translation. The data were collected from the subtitle of the comedy movie, *50 First Dates*. The descriptive and interpretative methods of content analysis (Berg, 2004; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were employed based on major theoretical frameworks including humor classifications (Seaward, 2006), translation approaches (Nida, 1964, 1975), translation strategies (Baker, 1992), humor translations (Delabastita, 1996; Mateo, 1995) and suggested aspects related to factors that influence the techniques of translation (Chiaro, 1992; Defense Language Institute, 1974; Nathong, 1993; Wong & Shen, 1999).

The results of the study revealed that there were six main translation techniques used in translating humor in the American comedy movie, *50 First Dates*, from English into Thai. These techniques included cultural substitution, word-for-word translation, interpretation, the mixed methods of translation, transliteration, and the use of pun with similar linguistic forms (i.e. words/phrases, meanings, and sounds). There were four linguistic factors influencing those techniques: phonological factors, lexical factors, syntactic factors, and semantic factors. In addition, five cultural factors appeared to influence the applications of those techniques: universal sense of humor, cultural-specific expressions, ethical restrictions in the target language, jargon, and period style.

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## บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อวิเคราะห์เทคนิคที่ใช้ในการแปลมุกตลกของชาวอเมริกันเป็นภาษาไทยและศึกษาปัจจัยทางภาษาและปัจจัยด้านวัฒนธรรมที่อาจมีอิทธิพลต่อเทคนิคการแปลมุกตลก ข้อมูลที่ใช้ศึกษารวบรวมจากบทบรรยายใต้ภาพ (subtitle) ของภาพยนตร์ตลกเรื่อง *50 เดท จิบเธอไม่เคยจำ* การศึกษานี้ใช้การวิเคราะห์แบบการวิเคราะห์เนื้อหา (Berg, 2004; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) โดยอาศัยกรอบทฤษฎีที่สำคัญตอบหัวข้อของงานวิจัย ประกอบด้วย ประเภทมุกตลก (Seaward, 2006) กรอบความคิดเกี่ยวกับการแปล (Nida, 1964, 1975) กลวิธีการแปล (Baker, 1992) การแปลมุกตลก (Delabastita, 1996; Mateo, 1995) และทฤษฎีกับผลงานวิจัยเกี่ยวกับปัจจัยที่มีอิทธิพลต่อเทคนิคการแปล (Chiaro, 1992; Defense Language Institute, 1974; Nathong, 1993; Wong & Shen, 1999)

ผลการศึกษาพบว่าเทคนิคที่ใช้ในการแปลมุกตลกจากภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาไทยในบทภาพยนตร์เรื่อง *50 เดท จิบเธอไม่เคยจำ* มี 6 เทคนิค ดังนี้ การใช้เทคนิคที่สอดคล้องกับวัฒนธรรมในภาษาปลายทางแทนการแปลแบบตรงตัว การตีความ การผสมผสานหลายๆ เทคนิค การทับศัพท์ และการใช้คำที่มีเสียง รูปคำ และความหมายในภาษาไทยคล้ายกับคำเดิมในภาษาอังกฤษ ปัจจัยด้านภาษาที่อาจส่งผลต่อเทคนิคการแปลที่พบในงานวิจัยนี้ ประกอบด้วยปัจจัยด้านเสียง คำศัพท์ โครงสร้างประโยค และด้านความหมาย ส่วนปัจจัยด้านวัฒนธรรมที่ส่งผลต่อเทคนิคการแปล ประกอบด้วยความเป็นสากลของมุกตลก ลักษณะเฉพาะของมุกตลกที่มีในแต่ละวัฒนธรรม หลักจริยธรรม/ข้อห้ามในภาษาปลายทาง ลักษณะการพูดเฉพาะกลุ่ม และการพูดตามยุคสมัย

## 1. Introduction

With the dramatically increasing means of the international communication, people around the world can easily communicate with one another. In those cross-cultural communications, it is not only language, but also culture that plays a crucial role in effective communication. Among other socio-cultural elements (e.g. geography, history, politics, customs, rituals), humor which is a part of human culture is also considered a sensitive factor in communication. Knauer (2001) suggested that a joke in one country might not be a joke in another or may be considered impolite in some cases. However, to develop a deep sense of humor in different culture is not impossible, particularly with the influence of the multi-media in this age of globalization. Movie is one of the channels that people can perceive the culture of the different nations.

Translation is one approach that bridges the gap and enhances understanding between people across cultures. People who live in one culture can perceive another culture through translated messages (Ames et al, 1991). However, among different types of translation, humor translation seems to require special expertise since the sense of humor is complex, unformulated and very intuitively understandable (Vandaele, 2002). Interestingly, even though a number of translations have been explored, the studies of humor translation are not substantial since the science of humor translation is rather young (Vandaele, 2002) and is not systematically and thoroughly studied, especially the translation of humor in English and Thai. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the techniques employed by a successful Thai translator when translating the American humor into Thai. In addition, the possible linguistic and cultural factors influencing those techniques of humor translation are investigated.

## 2. Literature Review

To guide this study, related theoretical frameworks were employed: humor classifications, translation approaches, translation strategies, humor translation, and the suggested aspects relate to the factors that influence the techniques of translation.

Seaward (2006) classifies humor into ten types and describes each type as follows: (1) parody is a type of humor where something or someone is imitated for humorous effect; (2) satire is similar to parody but different in the target of the imitation which focuses on a social or political issues; (3) slapstick comedy is the physical farce to generate laughs such as stepping on a banana peel; (4) absurd/nonsense is related to a violability of casual reasoning such as shark wearing glasses; (5) the double entendre is a type of wordplay where the speaker's expression has two meanings normally involving a sexual nature; (6) black humor is about changing a bad or sad situation to a joke with the intention to decrease the fear or concern of those situations; (7) bathroom humor is considered as a joke made of bodily functions; (8) irony is the saying of one thing but means another for a humorous effect; (9) sarcasm is similar to irony but has a purpose to make people embarrassed; (10) dry humor, quick wit, and puns. Dry humor involves the use of clever wording that makes an impression on the listener, the quick wit related to the use of the talented word, and pun is related to a word that has more than one meaning.

Nida (1964, 1975) suggests two major approaches for translation: (1) word-for-word translation (Nida calls 'formal equivalence') in which the wording in the target language mainly focuses on conforming the original phrase style and structure of the source language; and (2) free translation (Nida calls 'dynamic equivalence') which focuses on the receptor communication. In this case, the overall meaning of the source language is mainly conveyed into the target language.

Regarding the applications of strategies in translation, Baker (1992) introduces eight useful strategies: (1) translation by a more general word, (2) translation by a more neutral/less expressive word, (3) translation by cultural substitution, (4) translation by using a loan word or loan word plus explanation, (5) translation by paraphrase using related word, (6) translation by paraphrase using unrelated word, (7) translation by omission, and (8) translation by illustration.

In relation to humor translation, as afore-mention, Vandaele (2002) states that the translation of this field is still very young. Therefore, there have been a few experts introducing some techniques for some aspects of humor. Among those, Delabastita (1996) proposes eight techniques of pun translation. These include pun à pun, pun à non pun, pun à related rhetorical device, pun à zero, pun ST (source text) à pun TT (target text), non-pun à pun, zero à pun, and editorial techniques. In addition, Mateo (1995) introduces some useful translation of irony. The common techniques are literal translation, literal translation with no irony in the target text, and translation of irony with some words or expressions in target text.

Considering the factors influencing the translation techniques, Defense Language Institute (1974) and Nathong (1993) have discussed a wide range of aspects of contrastive linguistic features between English and Thai that can affect translation. However, as evidence this present study revealed only problematic areas in lexical uses in English and Thai translation. Only the theoretical concepts related to this aspect were employed to guide the data analysis: (1) issues related to equivalence of lexicons; (2) issues related to literal and connotative meanings of lexicons; and (3) issues related to meanings and word distribution.

In addition, Wong and Shen (1999) have noted that linguistic features at different levels of the two languages can affect the translation. These include phonological factors, lexical factors, syntactic factors, and textual factors. To illustrate, sound differences can influence choices of words or texts whose original or similar forms are needed to be preserved. Lexical problems can also occur when there are no equivalent words between the two languages. Syntactic contrasts can cause the problem of rendering the full meaning of the source text. Furthermore, in terms of textual factors, different fashions or arts of connecting sentences or developing a discourse between the two languages can cause mistranslation.

Not only do linguistic factors influence the choices of translation strategies, cultural factors also play an important role in the work. Wong and Shen (1999) classify cultural factors that can influence the process of translating into intercultural and intracultural factors. Intercultural factors include cultural-specific expressions, aesthetic differences, political interference, and ethical influence. Intracultural factors include strategic orientation, and period style. In addition, Chiaro (1992) also explains that some aspects of humor can be perceived universally. He distinguishes the three categories of the topics of universal sense of humor: degradation, sex, and absurdity.

### 3. Research Methodology

This qualitative research study investigated the techniques used in translating American humor and the possible linguistic and cultural factors influencing those techniques of humor translation. The data were collected from the movie script which has been permitted from the M V D Company Limited who owns the copyright of the DVD, *50 First Dates*. The English original version of the film was written by George Wing and the Thai translated version was translated by Thanatcha Saksiamkul.

The texts for analysis were selected from the overall subtitle of the film script. Only sentences that reflect humor (Seaward, 2006) in the subtitle were covered. In addition, the interview of the American audience to confirm identified humorous texts was conducted.

To guide the investigation of this study, the descriptive and interpretative methods of content analysis (Berg, 2004; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Strauss

& Corbin, 1998) were employed based on major theoretical frameworks including humor classifications (Seaward, 2006), translation approaches (Nida, 1964, 1975), translation strategies (Baker, 1992), humor translation (Delabastita, 2007; Mateo, 1995) and suggested aspects related to factors that influence the techniques of translation (Chiaro, 1992; Defense Language Institute, 1974; Nathong, 1993; Wong & Shen, 1999).

The procedures of analysis included (1) identifying types of humor, (2) classifying strategies used in humor translation, and (3) analyzing factors affecting the techniques of humor translation. To notes, the identification of types of humor and the translation strategies were validated by the expert in the field of translation.

## 4. Results

Findings in the study have revealed that six translation techniques were commonly used in translating the American humor in the movie called *50 First Dates*. In addition, the possible linguistic and cultural factors influencing those techniques of translation were identified.

The six translation techniques were as follows:

### 1. The technique of cultural substitution

This technique involves substituting the source text expression with the target text expression which does not have the same propositional meaning but is likely to have similar impact on the target audience. In this study, this technique was employed at approximately 48.39 percent and four types of cultural substitution were found: (1) using Thai slang; (2) coining a new slang term in Thai; (3) using a familiar expression in Thai; and (4) using a jesting word in Thai. The factors affecting this main technique can be due to the fact that the literal meanings of the equivalent words existing in the target language do not create humor. Thus, the four devices which could convey connotative meaning similar to the humorous expressions in the source text and create humor at the same time were employed to substitute the source text. The extract below exemplified the use of Thai slang to replace the original expression.

**Extract 1** [Henry, Ula, and Ula's kids are at the aids room of the Sea Life Park. Henry is suturing Ula's wound at his side after he was attacked by a shark. Ula criticizes Henry about his behavior wasting so much time on girls. He warns Henry that if he spends too much time on girls, he can possibly lose his chance to sail to Alaska on a walrus research expedition. Ula then refers to his own past experience of having a wife in order to make him quit his playboy behavior.]

*Ula: Then you won't be able to go on your boat trip to Alaska.*

อุล่า: ขึ้นนายติดหญิงนายจะอดไปอลาสก้า

*You'll be stuck here, waking up next to the same old, ugly broad, just like Ula.*

ต้องทนพาดพะไล้หม้อเก่าอยู่ที่นี่ เหมือนอุล่า

(Columbia Pictures Industries, 2004: line 126)

In the above extract (1), the Thai slang พะไล้หม้อเก่า (implying 'fat' and 'wife') were substituted the original word the same old, ugly broad, even though the direct words for translation “อ้วนน่าเกลียดและแก่” are available in Thai. This is probably because the word พะไล้หม้อเก่า can convey the connotative meaning of the same old, ugly broad in the Thai perception, and it can also create humor according to the parodic tone of the word.

## 2. The technique of word-for-word translation

This technique involves the translation that tries to make the target text as identical as the source text as possible. From the investigation, this technique was found at approximately 19.35 percent and it could be observed that it was used when the universal sense of humor was expressed.

**Extract 2** [Henry and Lucy go to the meadow on one afternoon. They both enjoy small talk and chat cheerily about their relationship.]

*Lucy: Yeah. I don't know how you get me to fall for that egg-shaped head every morning.*

ลูซี่: ฉันไม่รู้ว่าคุณจะทำให้ฉันรักหัวทรงไข่ของคุณได้ยังไงทุกเช้า

(Columbia Pictures Industries, 2004: line 1431, 1432)

The above extract (2) parodies the odd shape of Henry's head which looked like an egg. In any culture, the ill appearance of someone can provoke a sense of humor (Chiaro, 1992). Thus, word - for - word translation can be adopted to maintain the sense of humor in the target text in this context.

### 3. The technique of using the mixed methods

To convey the intended humor in some contexts, the constraints in applying a particular technique seemed to cause the translator to choose the mixed methods in her translation. This technique involves the use of several techniques to maintain the comic effect similar to that of the source text while its meaning can be roughly conveyed. In the study, this technique was found at approximately 12.90 percent and four types of the mixed methods were used: (1) using transliteration, coining a new word, and using Thai slang; (2) using loan word, Thai slang, and omission; (3) using the interpretation technique together with the technique of cultural substitution; and (4) using omission and addition. Interestingly, it should be noted that this technique has not been reported in any related previous study.

**Extract 3** [Ula knows that Henry is the love 'em and leave 'em guy who dates lots of women, but avoids commitment. In this scene, Ula's family and Henry are playing at the golf course. During playing golf, Ula introduces a girl he has met to Henry.]

*Ula: My life sucks*

*อุลา: ชีวิตฉันมันซ้ำเซ็ง*

*Now, come on. Give her the Waikiki sneaky between the cheeky.*

*เฮาน่า จับเธอไว้ก็-จี้กะดื้อ-จ้ำจี้ชะ*

(Columbia Pictures Industries, 2004: line 412, 413)

The above extract (3) represents wordplay expression which cannot be directly translated into any target language because it is restricted to the linguistic culture of the source text. The translator then used the mixed methods in order to maintain as much comic effect as appearing in the source text.

### 4. The technique of interpretation

This method involves the translation of the technical language, or the ambiguous expression or the expression whose real meaning does not show on the surface structure. Instead of using direct translation, the translator chose to interpret meanings but express them with the language that can be better understood in the target language. From the film script, it is observed that this technique was found at approximately 9.67 percent and was used in translating sarcasm.

**Extract 4** [Henry meets Lucy for the second time at Hukilau Café. He expects that she will recognize him because they just met yesterday morning and they had a good time. Henry walks to Lucy's dining table while she is building her Waffle house. Henry do it as yesterday that he put a toothpick to her Waffle house as a hinge of the door. Today, Lucy feels really upset that Henry put something to her food.]

Henry: *Why? Were you gonna eat that? Oh.*

เล่นมันแล้วยังจะกินอีกเทรอก

*All right, well, have a good meal.*

กินให้อร่อยนะครั้บ

Old Hawaiian Man: *[Henry walks back to his table, passing an old Hawaiian man] That's pathetic.*

ชายชราชาวฮาวาย: *แห้วแต่เข้า*

Henry: *Yeah? Why don't you choke on your Spam?*

เฮนรี่: *เดี๋ยวมได้แก่ตายทรอก*

(Columbia Pictures Industries, 2004: line 730, 731)

The above extract (4) displays the sarcastic expression. The translator translated the source text as เดี๋ยวมได้แก่ตายทรอก with the device of interpretation of the intended message of the context and of the old physical appearance of the Hawaiian man that Henry speaks to in order to convey the intended message of the source text and the sense of humor to the Thai audience.

## 5. The technique of transliteration

This technique involves a process that converts the source alphabet into the target alphabet. In this case, the pronunciation and the meaning of the target text appear the same as those in the source text. As investigated, this technique was found at approximately 6.45 percent and was utilized when the concept and expression of the source language do not exist in the target language.

**Extract 5** [Nick, the short cook order of the Hukilau Café in Hawaii, meets Henry for the second time. He calls Henry "Mr. Peanut Butter Cups" instead of his real name in order to parody his lifestyle of eating peanut butter cup for breakfast. Nick thinks that it is ridiculous for a grown man to eat a snack for the main course.]

Nick: Hey, Mr. Peanut Butter Cups.  
นิก: เฮ้ คุณพี้นัทบัตเตอร์คัพ  
Henry: Hey, Mr. Could-Kill-Me-in-One-Punch.  
เฮนรี่: เฮ้ คุณหมัดเดียวเอาอยู่

(Columbia Pictures Industries, 2004: line 267)

Transliteration was used in this extract (5) even though it is unfamiliar to the Thai, probably because this culture-specific expression which represents the way of an American lifestyle has no equivalents in Thai.

#### **6. The use of pun with similar linguistic forms (i.e. words/phrases, meanings, and sounds)**

This technique involves using pun in the Thai with similar forms (i.e. words/phrases, meanings, and sounds to that of the source text. The investigation revealed that this technique was found at approximately 3.23 percent. The factor influencing this technique was likely because the lexical resource in Thai (e.g. words similar to those in the source text in most aspects) can be accessible.

**Extract 6** [Henry is talking with Ula about Lucy's dad who told him to stay away from his daughter since Lucy's Dad was afraid that Henry would be gone from her if he knew that she has suffered the overnight memory loss.]

Henry: *I'm not sure about the "poofing" part,*  
เฮนรี่: ฉันไม่แน่ใจตรง "ปู้บปู้บ" นั้นแหละ  
*because I'm not a good poofer.*  
เพราะฉันไม่ใช่พวกปู้บปู้บ

(Columbia Pictures Industries, 2004: line 696, 697)

The above extract (6) consists of pun which plays on the initial sound [p] and the final sound [f] in the word poofing and poofer. In this study, this technique is applicable due to the fact that the lexical resources in the target language are similar to those word forms in the source text.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

In summary, as reported in the previous section, six translation techniques were found to convey American humor into Thai in the subtitle of the film *50 First Dates* in this study. Those devices also appeared to maintain similar comic effects as expressed in the source text.

Evidence in the contexts of the identified humorous expressions suggests possible concepts regarding linguistic and cultural factors that influenced the choices of those devices.

**1. Linguistic Factors** can be classified into four types: (a) phonological factors; (b) lexical factors; (c) syntactic factors; and (d) semantic factors:

**(a) Phonological factors.** Phonological factors play a vital influence in this study since there are a number of wordplays that play on word sound. To preserve the form of pun and keep the roughly meaning of the source text, the technique of the mixed method is used.

**(b) Lexical factors.** The lexical factors appeared to play an important role in the following situations: (1) words with equivalence in most aspects to those of the source text are available in Thai. This factor leads to the technique of using word with similar linguistic forms (i.e. words/phrases, meanings, and sounds) to substitute the source text; (2) the use of word with literal meanings does not create humor in Thai. This factor brings about the technique of cultural substitution by using Thai slang in order to mainly create humor and roughly convey the meaning of the source text into the target text; and (3) when the English words, concepts, or connotations have no equivalents in Thai, the technique of transliteration is employed even though it is considered unfamiliar to the target language audience. In this case, the translator needs to accept untranslatability.

**(c) Syntactic factors.** Syntactic barriers are also of a high degree of difficulty since Thai sentence structures are different from their English counterparts. Encountering this factor, the structures that sound natural in Thai are adopted in order to create humor.

**(d) Semantic factors.** The translation work in this study indicates that when the expressions appearing in the original text are not meant literally, the translator needs

to understand the real meaning of the source text, and the technique of interpretation can be used to help the audience explore the intended meaning.

**2. Cultural Factors** can be classified into five main types: (a) universal sense of humor; (b) culture-specific expressions; (c) ethical restrictions in the target language; (d) jargon; and (e) period style.

**(a) Universal sense of humor.** Universal jokes are not difficult to translate since the source language and target language share the similar knowledge. Thus, the technique of word-for-word translation appears effective in translating this type of humor.

**(b) Culture-specific expressions.** There are certain culture-oriented features of the source text found in the study that cannot be fully transferred into the Thai translated version. Various contexts in this study seem to suggest that the technique of transliteration is most applicable when there are no words in Thai with either similar literal meaning or connotative meaning to those of the source text, e.g., the name of foods and materials, titles of shops, and some topics of humor.

**(c) Ethical restrictions in the target language.** This study suggests that ethical restrictions in the target language can affect translation. For instance, when facing the taboo terms in the original text subtitle, the translator may need to avoid using the direct word in the target language to substitute that of the source text. In this study, the translation of expressions of bathroom humor was modified into less strong meanings.

**(d) Jargon.** The influence of jargon was also noticed in this humor translation. To make the expression sounds natural in Thai and create humor, the translator may need to adapt the common jargon used among an equivalent group of people in the target language to substitute those jargons in the source text (e.g. words that are often spoken among the homosexual or the Thai male to replace those used among American counterparts).

**(e) Period style.** Due to the evolution over time of language styles, the new style of speaking is seen stronger in Thai society. This evolution seems to lead to a tendency of choosing contemporary humorous expressions to suit the mood of the audience.

## 6. Implications and Recommendations of the Study

### Implications of the study

The findings of this study should provide some useful suggestions to novice translators in the comedy movies, students in the translation field, and people who are interested in humor translation. Findings allow translators to know that the six techniques are useful for humor translation, to learn how to choose an appropriate device to suit the context, to be aware of the non equivalent elements between the two languages that can result in ineffective translation, and, more importantly, how to deal with these problematic areas.

### Recommendations for further research

In identifying the possible factors influencing technique of humor translation, not only do the linguistic and cultural factors that affect the translation, but also the other factors including the age, emotion, status, characters of the performers, and the translator's personal attitude. Therefore, it should be resourceful to examine other aspects of relevant psychological and sociological factors to gain the more comprehensive insight into the art of humor translation.

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