

Why Humour Is The Hardest Thing To Translate

What is it that makes us laugh and why?

Before you read the complete article, look at this vocabulary and find it in the text:

whether: *if (or if not)*

chances are: *it is likely/probable that...*

punchline: *the final sentence of a joke or funny story*

encompass: *to include, to cover, to contain*

slapstick: *clown-like comedy (based on clumsiness and embarrassing events)*

subtlety: *the noun for 'subtle'; the opposite of 'obvious'.*

frowned upon: *viewed as bad and criticised by society*

broaden: *become larger in distance from side to side*

lead a life: *the life you want to live*

We all need a bit of humour in our lives, but understanding what makes us laugh isn't so simple. Defining what's funny and what's not is a complex question, which becomes immediately apparent when we try to make a joke in a foreign country and get no **genuine** laughs in return. To help make sense of this, here's a step-by-step explanation as to why humour is the single hardest thing to translate into a different language.

Your cultural makeup defines your sense of humour:

It's difficult to determine **whether** it's the weather, the political climate, national history, or any combination of these that leads to cultural norms. But the one thing that's for sure is that these cultural norms tend to imprint themselves onto a people's collective sense of humour. Ask your average Englishman his thoughts on American humour and **chances are** he'll criticise its lack of subtlety. Ask an American the same question about British humour and he'll say it's too dry and lacks **punchlines**. Neither the American nor the Englishman can understand how the other manages to laugh at what seems to them to be unbearably boring and simply unfunny - and that's between two countries that both speak English! Now add a language barrier to the situation and try to imagine how many people will be laughing at your favourite jokes.

Language defines your cultural makeup:

Language **encompasses** far more than just the words we speak. It's also the way we say those words. It's the inflection and volume of our voices and how we use our bodies in conjunction with what we're saying, and all of this plays a significant role in our respective cultures. For

example, some languages and their cultures are demonstratively more physically expressive than most English-speaking cultures. A person from Spain might be more likely to talk using a lot more volume and animated gesticulation than a person from Britain, for instance, despite the subject matter being the same. Similarly, if you look at what kind of humour is popular in one country and compare it to another, you'll usually notice a difference in the degree of **slapstick** comedy or **subtlety** that is preferred.

Local history defines your sense of humour

Humans tend to use humour as a means of making light of controversial topics. Comedians argue that we need humour to help us move past difficult times. However, without knowing the local history and, say, political background of a joke, the audience might miss out on the gravity of the punchline and the humour is effectively lost. Moreover, there's always tension with regards to who has the right to laugh at what. It may be **frowned upon** to make jokes about a tragedy that does not involve you, especially if you are from another country, and this raises questions about what kinds of comedy are acceptable and in what contexts.

Wordplay is crucial to many jokes:

Of course, the most obvious challenge is in the words themselves. Particularly in English, jokes tend to be dry, in which there's practically no physical expression, leaving all of the humour to the actual words, and sometimes their pronunciation. The joke can often be so dependent on the wordplay in the original language that it's simply impossible to translate. Many translators have mastered the art of getting around these challenges with the creative use of local expressions from the language into which they are working, but despite their efforts, we can probably all agree that when it comes to translating humour, practice will probably never make perfect. *Adapted from: www.daytranslations.com*



NO MUERE UN HUMORISTA,
MUERE UN GÉNERO

"Let's chat about that!"

Write your answers in an email and send them to your ECP coach!

- *How important is humour in your life?*
- *Do you think you're a funny person? Why (not)? Can you tell us a joke?*
- *What kind of jokes or comedy shows make you laugh?*
- *How would you describe your sense of humour? Dry or slapstick?*
- *Do you think you have a similar sense of humour to other people from your country?*
- *Have you ever had difficulty making someone laugh in another country?*
- *Do you find humour from other countries funny? Give an example.*
- *What topics would offend you if someone made a joke about them?*
- *Should comedy be restricted by political correctness? Why (not)?*



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That's so punny!

A **pun** is a play on words for comic effect, especially the use of words or phrases that sound the same but have different meanings.

- "A man just attacked me with milk, cream and butter. I mean, how dairy!"
- "I'm on a seafood diet. Every time I see food, I eat it!"
- "I want to make a joke about Sodium, but... Na."
- "Did you hear about the Roman cannibal whose wife disappeared? He said he was glad he ate her."



- "Atheism, the non-prophet organisation."
- "Did you hear about the guy whose left side was cut off? He's all right now."
- "What time do you have to go to the dentist?" – "Tooth hurtie."
- "When you get a bladder infection, you know urine trouble."
- "I just went to an emotional wedding. Even the cake was in tiers."
- "Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana."
- "Reading while sunbathing will make you well read."

Puns are sometimes known as 'Dad jokes'

Unfortunately, puns are particularly popular with middle aged men, who have a unique brand of pun called a 'dad joke'. These are generally highly predictable and nearly always produce a sigh of disapproval in the poor listener. In fact, dad jokes are like jokes about paper, they're *tearable*.

Listen to these jokes here: <https://pronunciationstudio.com/english-puns/>