

**“NOBODY COULD SLEEP WITH THIS  
INFERNAL BUSINESS ON!”**

Translations of verbal humour in Floyd Gottfredson’s *Mickey Mouse*

Bachelor’s thesis  
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<p><b>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</b></p> <p>Tämä tutkielma käsittelee verbaalisen huumorin kääntämistä sarjakuvissa ja sen aiheuttamia haasteita kääntäjille. Tutkielma keskittyy <i>Mikki Hiiri</i> -sanomalehtisarjakuviin, joiden alkuperäisiä, englanninkielisiä versioita ja suomenkielisiä käännöksiä vertasin. Tavoitteena oli selvittää, mitkä aineistossa esiintyvät verbaalisen huumorin muodot ovat erityisen haastavia mahdollisimman tarkan ja lähdetekstille uskollisen kääntämisen näkökulmasta, ja millaisia käännöstekniikoita suomalaiset kääntäjät näissä tilanteissa käyttivät. Laajemmassa kontekstissa tutkielman tavoitteena oli osaltaan valaista aihetta, jota on tutkittu varsin vähän sarjakuvantutkimuksen alalla.</p> <p>Tutkimusaineistona toimi viisi <i>Mikki Hiiri</i> -sarjakuvatarinaa englannin- ja suomenkielisinä versioina. Sarjat valittiin satunnaisesti sellaisten tarinoiden joukosta, joiden molemmat versiot olivat helposti saatavilla. Vertasin alkuperäistekstiä käännöksiin ja keräsin kaikki esimerkit verbaalisesta huumorista, jota ei ollut käännetty suoraan. Analysoidessani aineistoa jaoin esimerkit ryhmiin yhtäältä huumorityypin ja toisaalta käytetyn käännöstekniikan perusteella.</p> <p>Sanonnat ja idiomit olivat yleisiä huumorin alalajeja aineistossa, kuten myös sanaleikit ja kulttuuriset viittaukset. Löysin myös verrattain paljon esimerkkejä, joissa syy mahdollisimman suoran kääntämisen välttämiseen ei ollut täysin selvä. Useimmiten kääntäjät joko poistivat alkuperäisen vitsin kokonaan ja mahdollisesti korvasivat sen täysin uudella humoristisella ilmauksella, mutta myös tiivistämistä, poistetun huumorin korvaamista toisaalla stripissä, suomalaisia vastineita englanninkielisille ilmauksille sekä kulttuurista adaptaatiota käytettiin. Koska tutkimus keskittyi vain yhden sarjakuvan käännöksiin ja käsitti viisi tarinaa, tuloksista ei voi tehdä hyvin laajoja johtopäätöksiä. Se kuitenkin osaltaan valaisee tiettyjen verbaalisen huumorin lajien asettamia haasteita sarjakuvakääntäjille ja heidän mahdollisia keinojaan näiden potentiaalisten ongelmatilanteiden ratkaisemiseksi.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Verbally expressed humour is notoriously difficult to translate. Puns, wordplay, culture-related jokes, idiomatic expressions – verbal humour in all its forms is common in television and films, literary texts of all kinds as well as many other areas of life, art and entertainment. Comics are no exception; both comic strips published in newspapers and comic book stories are often filled with verbal humour, much of which can be difficult to translate as directly as other sequences of text due to differences between the Source language (SL) and the Target language (TL). The translation of verbal humour has been studied many times (Chiaro 1996; 2008, Leppihalme 1997, Bassnett 2002), while Zanettin (2010) researched the translation of humour in comics and cartoons. In the world of Walt Disney, Koponen (2004) investigated the translation of wordplay from English to Finnish in *Donald Duck* comic book stories. She found that wordplay was quite often lost in the translations but that it was sometimes replaced with or compensated for by new wordplays created by the translator (Koponen 2004: 62-65). Moreover, Koponen's (2004: 81-82) study revealed that in more recent translations there were fewer instances of wordplay being lost.

Besides Koponen's work, however, little research has been conducted into the translation of verbal humour in Disney comics. In this study I aim to fill some of that gap by investigating *Mickey Mouse* comic strips originally published in the 1930s alongside their Finnish translations. The focus of the research is on the different types of verbal humour found in the comics as well as the translation techniques used by the translators. *Mickey Mouse* is an iconic comic strip renowned for its creators' ability to combine adventure and suspense with humour, and it was my personal interest in the comic as well as in translation that inspired me to investigate the stories from this angle. With this study I look to make a contribution to the field of Comics Studies by researching the translation of verbal humour in a comic strip rarely subjected to this kind of analysis. I will first present and discuss some translation theories and previous research on the translation of comics and verbal humour in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3 the specific research questions of this study will be stated and the data, methods of data collection and methods of analysis will be introduced. The data will be analysed in Chapter 4, and in Chapter 5 I will summarise the main results and discuss the possible implications of this study.

## 2 BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Translation theory and the concept of equivalence

Translation has a long history. In her introduction to translation studies, Bassnett (2002: 48-78) discusses how the concepts and theories related to translation have evolved through history, from the ancient Romans to our time. She mentions Etienne Dolet as one of the first theorists of translation and lists his translation principles published in 1540:

- (1) The translator must fully understand the sense and meaning of the original author, although he is at liberty to clarify obscurities.
- (2) The translator should have a perfect knowledge of both SL and TL.
- (3) The translator should avoid word-for-word renderings.
- (4) The translator should use forms of speech in common use.
- (5) The translator should choose and order words appropriately to produce the correct tone.

(Bassnett 2002: 58-59)

Dolet's principles can be said to have remained relevant to a rather large extent for almost 500 years, but today the world of translation theories is obviously more complex. Currently, Bassnett (2002: 19-20) sees the issues of meaning, equivalence and untranslatability as important in translation studies. It could be said that Dolet's principles already show both the need for equivalence in translation as well as some issues related to the concept. In Bell's (1991: 7) view, translators have had to choose between literal (word-for-word) and free (focus on meaning) translation since Classical times. He uses the terms 'formal equivalents' and 'functional equivalents', while Chesterman (1989: 80-99) sees Nida's (1964) discussion about dynamic and formal equivalence as an important starting point. Dynamic equivalence promoted by Nida (1964; 1969), as cited by Vehmas-Lehto (1999: 54-58), emphasises the reactions of the recipient of the translation. Koller (1989: 99-104) also partly builds on Nida's work while seeking to make distinctions between different types of equivalence. Furthermore, Bell (1991: 6) points out that some things are inevitably 'lost' and/or 'gained' in translation, making total equivalence impossible.

### 2.2 Comics and their translations

The world of comics has been the subject of a wide array of studies over the years. There are many angles from which comics can be researched, but as Jenkins (2012: 4-6) points out, there is little theoretical or methodological unity in 'Comics Studies', if such a field even

exists. For instance, Murray (2012: 129-140) studies propaganda in *Captain America*, the focus thus being on the content of the comic book, while Lefèvre (2012: 71-81) concentrates on the form of the comic in his discussion of the modes of visual storytelling in *Lone Wolf and Cub*. According to Jenkins (2012: 1), comics can be and have been studied using various approaches that emerge from several different existing disciplines, including but not limited to Philosophy, Anthropology, Sociology, Literature, Media and Cultural Studies, and Art History.

Studying the translation of comic books or strips is different from most comics research in that it is not enough to subject the original work to a method or a theory. It is comparative by nature, with the original comics and their translations typically being examined side by side. Similarly to comics studies in general, research into the translation of comics is a broad field where various approaches and methods may be applied. Valero Garcés (2008: 238-243), for example, discusses onomatopoeia in comics translated from English to Spanish, whereas Rota (2008: 79-96) demonstrates key aspects and differences in the translation of various comics formats. The common denominator in these and other studies in the field is of course the focus on translation.

### **2.3 Translating verbal humour in comics**

As Chiaro (1996: 84-85) points out, translating humour is often especially tricky. Difficulties arise with puns and other instances of verbal humour or wordplay that build on homophones, homonyms, culture-related jokes and other similar phenomena. Puns can be seen as cultural expressions by nature (Bassnett 2002: 30), while Chiaro (2008: 571) goes as far as labeling them 'untranslatable'. Retaining the humour of a homophony-based joke, for instance, is a real challenge if and usually when the TL does not have similar homophones to the SL (Chiaro 1996: 92-93). This relates to the question of equivalence as translators must decide what strategy to use in such situations, choosing between formal and other types of equivalents. Discussing the difficulties in translating word play, Leppihalme (1997: 149) argues that it is necessary to prioritise and decide which factors are the most important ones regarding the translation of the text at hand. Generally, preserving the humour in some way is seen as the desired goal (Chiaro 2008: 569).

While the translation of comics has been studied from a wide variety of angles (see e.g. Zanettin 2008, Murray 2012, Lefèvre 2012), research on the translation of verbal humour in relation to comic strips or comics in general has been relatively limited. Kaindl (2004), however, examines the translation of humour in comics and the role of multimodality in it, finding that the interplay of pictures and words plays a central part. Comics are a blend of two different modes of storytelling, the pictures affecting the impact of the text and vice versa. Zanettin (2010) also touches on the issue of multimodality in his discussion of the translation of humour in comics and cartoons. Furthermore, several studies have been conducted on specific comics and the translation of humour. Delesse (2008: 262-268), for example, observes the translation of puns and spoonerisms in *Tintin* and *Astérix*. Research into Disney comics, however, has often tended to concentrate on other aspects, such as Zitawi's (2008) application of politeness theory to the study of Disney comics and their translations in the Arab world.

In a notable exception, Koponen (2004) has studied the translation of wordplay into Finnish in originally English-language *Donald Duck* comic book stories by Carl Barks. Based on her research, she argues that wordplay is often lost in translation, but that translators may also add wordplay of their own as compensation (Koponen 2004: 62-65). It also seems that in more recent translations of the stories there are fewer cases of wordplay being lost and more instances of additional wordplay being provided by the translator (Koponen 2004: 81-82). Moreover, Koponen (2004: 80) considers the image a potentially important part of wordplay in comics. She opines that the pictures may often be necessary in understanding the humour. Additionally, Koponen (2004: 80-81) maintains that taking into account the role images play in creating the humorous effect is a necessity for the translators, which can be either helpful or challenging depending on the scene. Preceding the *Donald Duck* stories studied by Koponen in the same Disney universe, *Mickey Mouse* is one of the most famous and most translated comic strips of all time, but not much research has been done on those translations, especially regarding the humorous aspect of the comics. My study will attempt to fill some of that gap, specifically focusing on verbal humour, including but not limited to wordplay.

### 3 THE PRESENT STUDY

#### 3.1 Research aim and questions

The aim of this study is to contribute to the understanding of different modes of verbal humour that appear in comics and the techniques used when translating these not easily translatable types of humour. More specifically, in my research I study and discuss some of the techniques Finnish translators of *Mickey Mouse* comic strip stories used when translating various instances of verbal humour from English to Finnish. In order to do this, I am looking at when, why and how these translators relied on translation techniques different from word-for-word or otherwise direct translations. The questions this study seeks to answer are:

1. What types of verbal humour in the *Mickey Mouse* comic strip were not directly translated from English to Finnish?
2. What techniques were used when translating such instances of humour?

#### 3.2 The data

The data of my study was collected from five *Mickey Mouse* daily strip continuities in their original form as well as the Finnish translations of those stories. The original stories and the year they were first published are as follows: *Blaggard Castle* (1932), *Editor-in-Grief* (1935), *The Seven Ghosts* (1936), *Island in the Sky* (1936) and *Mickey Mouse Outwits the Phantom Blot* (1939). Floyd Gottfredson is the artist who drew every story and also wrote the plots, whereas the scripts and inks were provided by several different people. Those who wrote the scripts for the strips studied here include Webb Smith, Ted Osborne and Merrill de Maris, while the inkers were Ted Thwaites and Bill Wright. The stories were chosen based on the easy availability of both English and Finnish versions and the fact that the translations are quite recent. The Finnish version of *Blaggard Castle* is from the year 1998 and *The Seven Ghosts* from 2008, while the remaining three stories were translated in 2014. These three most recent translations are done by Antti Hulkkonen, but the translators of the other two stories are not stated in the publications. The number of stories was determined after estimating both the amount of data one story would approximately yield and the amount needed for the purposes of this study.

The data was collected from publications (Gerstein and Groth [eds.] 2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2014) where the original comic strips appear in reprinted form. The newspaper strips have been reprinted and released as hardcover collections in the United States – and sold all over the world – without cutting or editing any panels, both the language and the pictures therefore remaining completely unchanged and uncensored. These books chronicle the golden age of the *Mickey Mouse* strip in chronological order and have been published alongside a separate series for colour Sunday strips that form their own continuities. Fantagraphics Books has been releasing the two series during the last few years with new volumes still coming out. All of the original English-language stories studied in this research are from the daily strip collections. The Finnish translations are from the local weekly Disney magazine *Aku Ankka* (Kivekäs et al. [eds.] 1998) as well as two hardcover books (Perälä and Äärilä [eds.] 2008; Viitanen and Hyyppä [eds.] 2014). It is worth noticing that although the stories have been published several times in Finland and often with different translations, I am only examining one translated version of each story. Furthermore, the stories appear in colour in the Finnish publications, in contrast with the traditional black and white strips seen in the original versions of the stories (including the American reprints) as well as earlier Finnish translations published in the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* several decades ago.

I read and compared the original and Finnish versions of each story with the purpose of collecting all instances of verbal humour where either a direct translation was insufficient or unsuccessful or the translator used another strategy. This method was chosen in order to narrow down the data to only include those instances of humour that are relevant regarding the research questions. The number of strips including humour is very large, but the vast majority of the jokes pose little if any challenge for the translator as they can be translated more or less directly while maintaining the original idea and humorous touch. Therefore my focus is on specifically those cases of verbal humour where the relationship between the original version and the translation is not that clear-cut.

### **3.3 Methods of analysis**

After identifying the parts of the stories that are relevant to this study, I proceeded to examine my data in light of the research questions. I organised my findings in relation to both questions with the help of different categories. Chiaro (1996: 38-40) discusses homophones, homonyms and polysemes in the context of humorous word play. These were some of the

phenomena I expected to find in the data, alongside syntactical ambiguity (Chiaro 1996: 40-41), culture-related humour, other types of puns as well as humorous proverbs and sayings. The idea behind drawing on such categorisations while examining the data was to make it easier to determine what types of verbal humour in the *Mickey Mouse* strip are not easily or directly translatable. Individual, telling examples of non-direct translation are examined in greater detail in Chapter 4. Scans of the strips are not included due to copyright issues, but the illustrations and the context are described when deemed necessary.

As regards the second question, the concept of equivalence was important (cf. Bassnett 2002 and Chesterman 1989: 99). The results were categorised based on the techniques the translators have used and are discussed alongside the analysis of different types of verbal humour. The techniques I identified are largely based on Molina and Hurtado Albir's (2002: 498-511) discussion on translation procedures, strategies and techniques in which they draw on previous research and also attempt to distinguish between the various terms. As noted by Molina and Hurtado Albir (2002: 508), however, the distinction between strategy and technique is not always completely clear. For the sake of clarity, I am concentrating on translation techniques when analysing the data in light of the second research question.

## **4 TRANSLATING VERBAL HUMOUR IN *MICKEY MOUSE***

### **4.1 Examples of different types of verbal humour in Gottfredson's *Mickey Mouse***

In the five Mickey Mouse comic strip stories examined, I found a total of 45 instances of verbal humour not being translated directly. Several different types of humour appear in the data. As expected, examples of homonymy, homophony and polysemy are found in the stories, and there are also cases of funny sayings, idiomatic expressions and culture-related humour. Furthermore, I identified a number of other jokes and puns not necessarily describable as any of the above, although the lines between these categories are not always entirely clear and there are jokes that could fall into more than one group. In the stories examined, occasionally some types of verbal humour listed above are translated word by word while maintaining the humorous effect; my focus is, however, on those instances where this is not the case. On occasion, the decision not to translate a joke as directly as possible

seems somewhat unnecessary, while in many cases – including most if not all puns, for example – heavy changes to the joke seem to have been the only viable option.

#### 4.1.1 Homonyms

Homonymy is a phenomenon where two or more words have a different meaning despite identical spelling and pronunciation (Chiaro 1996: 37). A *mole*, for example, can be an animal, a dark spot on one's skin, a structure used as a pier, or a unit of measurement. Perhaps surprisingly, I only found one example of homonymy in the data.

##### Example 1

**Horace:** That's right! Beefsteak is good for black eyes, but a lawsuit almost never has two pairs of pants!

(Blaggard Castle / Gottfredson, Smith and Thwaites 2011: 121; first published in 1932)

**Polle:** *Makkarassa on aina kaksi päätä. Siinä se on onnellisemmassa asemassa kuin me muut...*

(Yölinnan salaisuus / Gottfredson, Smith and Thwaites 1998: 23)

The word *suit* can be seen as a homonym in English, meaning both the procedure of litigation regarding a specific case (typically as the compound *lawsuit*) and a set of clothes. Finnish has no such homonymy, forcing the translator in Example 1 to use a different technique. As the original line is a part of extensive nonsensical twaddle by a hypnotised Horace Horsecollar, the translator did not need to worry about the effect of the translation on the story. He opted to omit the original joke altogether and introduce a completely new one in its place. The Finnish joke translates to *A sausage always has two heads. In that sense it is in a more fortunate position than the rest of us...*, making use of the slightly different meanings of *pää*, the Finnish word for *head*. The translator thus compensated for the lost homonymy with another pun, in this case polysemy.

#### 4.1.2 Homophones

Homophones are words or expressions that sound alike but have a different spelling (Chiaro 1996: 37-38). *There*, *their* and *they're* are examples of common homophones that often create problems for some native English speakers. In Example 2, it is the sequence of two words rather than an individual one that is the source of ambiguity.

## Example 2

**Ghost:** Who's there?

**Goofy:** BOO!!

**Ghost:** Boo who?

**Goofy:** Gosh! Don't **cry** about it! I was only playin'!

(The Seven Ghosts / Gottfredson, Osborne and Thwaites 2012b: 95; first published in 1936)

**Kummitus:** *Kuka siellä?*

**Hessu:** *PÖÖ!*

**Kummitus:** *Pöö itsellesi.*

**Hessu:** *Tuo ei ole reilua, mä pelottelin ensin.*

(Mikki Hiiri ja seitsemän kummitusta / Gottfredson, Osborne and Thwaites 2008: 21)

In this scene, Goofy is talking to what is assumed to be a ghost through a wall. The ghost's question "*Boo who?*" can sound like crying; indeed, *boohoo* is occasionally used in writing to depict a crying noise. This homophony is the basis for the original joke, but Finnish has no such homophones; hence the translator again had to omit the original source of humour and alter the dialogue. In the Finnish version, the ghost simply replies "*Boo to you too*" to Goofy's attempt to scare him, prompting Goofy to complain that that is not fair since he had said it first. The Finnish joke is thus arguably less funny than the rather clever original play on words.

### 4.1.3 Polysemes

Like homonymy, polysemy too refers to words that are spelled and pronounced similarly but have different meanings. It differs from homonymy in that polysemes, while different in meaning, are semantically related to one another whereas homonyms are not (Chiaro 1996: 37-40). Examples 3 and 4 below contain humorous polysemes.

## Example 3

**Phantom Blot:** Well don't worry about it, you're not going to **live** here. No, indeed --- ha-ha-ha --- you won't **live** -- here!

(Mickey Mouse Outwits the Phantom Blot / Gottfredson, De Maris, Thwaites and Wright 2014: 173; first published in 1939)

**Mustakaapu:** *Älä sure, pääset pian pois täältä. Juuri niin! Hähää! Pian olet poissa!*

(Mustakaavun ensirötökset / Gottfredson, De Maris, Thwaites and Wright 2014: 90)

The evil crook Phantom Blot has captured Mickey and is taking him to an old warehouse Mickey does not find very inviting. The Blot's goal in this scene is ultimately to kill Mickey and the original joke is in the two polysemes of the word *live*, which can mean either inhabiting a certain house or area or just being alive. Finnish has two different verbs for those purposes, *asua* and *elää* respectively, so the translator had to think of something else. In this case, compensation was possible by introducing a different polysemy that has a similar effect. A rather direct translation of the Finnish line would be *Don't worry, you'll get away from here soon. Indeed! Ha ha! Soon you will be away!* The word *poissa*, literally meaning *away*, is also a way of saying someone is dead, in a similar fashion to *gone* in English. The Finnish translation may not sound quite as natural as the original joke but nevertheless retains its idea and humour. The images play a significant part in determining what the translator can do in scenes such as this where the joke is closely tied to what is happening in the strip; going completely off-topic with the translation would feel odd here.

#### Example 4

**Mickey:** For a little man I've had a busy night! Now for some more under cover stuff!

(Mickey Mouse Outwits the Phantom Blot / Gottfredson, De Maris, Thwaites and Wright 2014: 170; first published in 1939)

**Mikki:** *Ilta on ollut kiireinen, mutta salaista puuhaa riittää vielä.*

(Mustakaavun ensirötökset / Gottfredson, De Maris, Thwaites and Wright 2014: 88)

In this strip, Mickey is going to bed after a night of secret detective work. The words *under cover* refer to both his work as well as sleeping under the covers. The Finnish translator apparently did not even attempt to maintain the humour as the translation simply states that there is more secret work to be done, with no reference to sleeping. The joke is not easy to translate, but the lack of humour and a change in the meaning of the second clause may even suggest that the translator has missed the original pun. There is a possibility that the translated version does contain a joke for adult readers – by talking about *salaista puuhaa* Mickey is basically saying he has some *secret activity* to do – but given the tendency of Disney writers and especially modern-day translators to avoid double entendres such as this, it may more likely be just a coincidence. If that is the case, there is a complete omission of the joke in translation, intentional or not.

#### 4.1.4 Other types of puns

While jokes based on words with a double meaning, such as homonyms, can be described as puns, not all puns fit into the categories above. There are, for example, several examples in the data of puns that are based on longer sequences of language than individual words or compounds.

Example 5

**Mickey:** Glad t' know ya, sir! My name is Mickey Mouse – and this is Goofy!

**Dr. Einmug:** Yes! Isn't it?

(Island in the Sky / Gottfredson, Osborne and Thwaites 2012b: 132; first published in 1936)

**Mikki:** *Hauska tutustua. Minä olen Mikki, ja tämä tässä on Hessu.*

**Tohtori Ykskorva:** *Siltä hän näyttääkin.*

(Saari taivaalla / Gottfredson, Osborne and Thwaites 2014: 72)

In Example 5, Mickey is introducing himself and his friend Goofy to a new acquaintance. The ambiguity of the phrase *"this is Goofy"*, however, causes Dr. Einmug to misinterpret Mickey's comment to be either about the weird nature of the situation – they were meeting on an island inside a cloud – or possibly about Goofy's admittedly *goofy* appearance. Goofy's Finnish name *Hessu* is not an adjective and the rest of the phrase cannot be said with a similar double meaning either. The original joke was omitted by the translator and replaced by one that centers on the way the name *Hessu* sounds. In the translated strip, Mickey introduces Goofy rather similarly by saying literally *"this here is Goofy"*, to which Dr. Einmug replies *"That's what he looks like."* The joke seems to be based on the "goofy" sound of the name *Hessu* as well as its close relationship with the adjective *hassu*, which carries similar meaning. The pictures again tied the translator's hands to an extent: Mickey is clearly introducing Goofy to Dr. Einmug and thus heavy changes to his line were not possible.

Example 6

**Colonel Bassett:** Er – yes – I was! But – uh – nobody could sleep with this infernal business on!

**Goofy:** Have yuh ever tried pajamas?

(The Seven Ghosts / Gottfredson, Osborne and Thwaites 2012b: 94; first published in 1936)

**Eversti Ruutana:** *Eh...menin, mutta en voinut nukkua tässä metelissä.*

**Hessu:** *Kokeilkaa korvatulppia.*

(Mikki Hiiri ja seitsemän kummitusta / Gottfredson, Osborne and Thwaites 2008: 20)

Example 6 above shows Colonel Bassett explaining to Mickey, Donald and Goofy why he is not in bed, the character citing loud noise as the reason he is still awake. He is dressed in a large one-piece nightgown that Goofy mistakenly thinks he is referring to as *infernal business*. That sort of double meaning would be hard if not impossible to replicate in Finnish, so the translator has removed the original joke. In the Finnish version, Colonel Bassett is clearly talking about the noise, to which Goofy quips "*Try earplugs*", making the exchange considerably less humorous, arguably not a joke at all.

#### 4.1.5 Cultural references

One challenge for translators is humour that has specific meaning or is easily understandable in a particular culture but may not carry similar meanings or connotations in the target language and/or culture. Example 7 references a well-known work of English-language fiction.

Example 7

**Mickey:** Well, Watson – what're you doin' under th' rug?  
(The Seven Ghosts / Gottfredson, Osborne and Thwaites 2012b: 94; first published in 1936)

**Mikki:** *Mitä sinä maton alla teet, Aku?*  
(Mikki Hiiri ja seitsemän kummitusta / Gottfredson, Osborne and Thwaites 2008: 20)

Talking to Donald, Mickey uses the name *Watson* in reference to Sherlock Holmes' friend and assistant. They are working as detectives, but Donald is so scared he hides under a rug, prompting Mickey to sarcastically call him Watson. It seems that the translator did not feel this sort of use of the name would make enough sense to Finnish readers, even though many would probably understand the reference. The end result is that the most humorous part of the comment has again been omitted and replaced with Donald's real name. Often translators use cultural adaptation in situations like this, but here there may not be a suitable Finnish equivalent for Watson and thus omission has been preferred as a translation technique. As with Examples 2 and 6, which are from the same story, there seems to have been little attempt by the translator to retain the humour of the original dialogue by creating a new joke in place of the omitted one.

Example 8 below also shows little if any cultural adaptation, but unlike the previous example, includes a humorous translation.

Example 8

**Horace:** When you and I were seventeen and four is twenty-one!  
(Blaggard Castle / Gottfredson, Smith and Thwaites 2011: 119; first published in 1932)

**Polle:** *Myyrä voit olla itse, mutta minä olen onnellinen!*  
(Yöllinnan salaisuus / Gottfredson, Smith and Thwaites 1998: 22)

A hypnotised Horace takes the title of a song written by Gus Kahn and Chas Roloff (*When you and I were seventeen*) here and turns it into another sentence that does not make any sense. The song was first released in the United States in 1924 and was still quite recent eight years later, undoubtedly meaning at least some American readers understood the reference. It is relatively unknown in Finland, however, and it is in any case customary to translate most if not all foreign names and titles appearing in Disney comics. In this case that seems almost obligatory as the title of the song is transformed into a different sentence in the original strip. A direct translation would naturally not have carried any cultural meaning as there is no Finnish song of the same name. Hence the translator has again opted for a completely new humorous utterance, which translates to *You can be a mole yourself, but I am happy!* This is not a known Finnish saying or part of culture, however, but rather seemingly just another funny line contributing to the overall silliness of the story. In this sense, the translator has managed to maintain the nonsensical, absurd nature of the text by creating stylistically similar equivalents to the original humorous lines, although there is no cultural reference in the Finnish version.

#### 4.1.6 Sayings

Different languages also have different sayings, many of which can be used as sources of verbal humour in various contexts. There may or may not be an equivalent in the target language that the translator can use in that specific humorous context, as seen in Example 9 below.

## Example 9

**Horace:** Life is hard in Russia, but don't drink it while it's too hot! He might bite you! Don't forget...a word to the wise is worth two in the bush!  
(Blaggard Castle / Gottfredson, Smith and Thwaites 2011: 120; first published in 1932)

**Polle:** *Elämä vaan on varjo kulkevainen, joka toiselle kuoppaa kaivaa, joka toiselle ei. Entten tentten teelika mentten!*  
(Yöllinnan salaisuus / Gottfredson, Smith and Thwaites 1998: 22)

This is yet another example of Horace's hypnotised commentary that is quite nonsensical and so irrelevant to the plot that the translator had the chance to do almost as he pleased. In this case, both the original and the translated version have some well-known sayings lumped together and modified to create some absurd humour. Direct translation would not have worked here since some of the English phrases are not known in Finnish. Furthermore, not all of them have an established Finnish equivalent, so instead they have all been replaced with similarly silly sayings that have nothing to do with the original ones. As the exact words of Horace in this situation are not important to the plot in any way, this kind of free translation has little effect on the story overall.

## Example 10

**Dippy:** Wel-l, uh – it ain't zackly newspaper 'sperience – but I got a camera an' a nosey disposition – an' I c'n cuss like the dickens!  
(Editor-in-Grief / Gottfredson, Osborne and Thwaites 2012a: 150; first published in 1935)

**Hessu:** *No, tuota...en mä mikään lehtimies ole, mutta mulla on kamera ja utelias luonne, ja mä osaan manata kuin merimies.*  
(Mikin oma sanomalehti / Gottfredson, Osborne and Thwaites 2014: 4)

In Example 10, Dippy (later known as Goofy) uses the saying *like the dickens*, which has no real equivalent in Finnish. It is basically a euphemism for *like the devil*, but even that would not work very well in Finnish in the context of *cursing*. The translator used cultural adaptation to maintain the humor but make it understandable to Finnish readers. By simply changing the last word, the problem was solved, as *merimies (sailor)* is a term often used in a saying like this in Finnish – as well as English.

## 4.2 Further observations on verbal humour

While analysing the data, I divided the 45 instances of verbal humour not translated directly into eight categories. Six of these have been presented above – in each case, the nature of the humour has forced or contributed to the decision of the translator to use an alternate strategy and a different translation technique. Again, it should be noted that some jokes might fit into several categories; I counted each example as only belonging to one that I felt was the primary category. Idiomatic expressions and sayings were counted as one group since the line between the two is often difficult to draw, with twelve strips included in total. As mentioned before, only one homonym was found in the data, while there were two homophones and five polysemes. A total of eight jokes fell into the "other types of puns" category. Finally, I found five examples of humour based on cultural references.

Of the remaining two categories, one was created principally because the humorous line in question seems to be based on neither any established saying or idiom nor a pun. The humour of the utterance, as seen below in Example 11, arises not only from its nonsensical nature but from the rhyming involved as well.

Example 11

**Horace:** The wind was whizzing through the trees, how do the holes get in swiss cheese?

(Blaggard Castle / Gottfredson, Smith and Thwaites 2011: 120; first published in 1932)

**Polle:** *Oli hepokatti maantiellä poikittain! Huh hah hei! Ja rillumarei!*

(Yölinnan salaisuus / Gottfredson, Smith and Thwaites 1998: 22)

The bulk of the humour here lies in the absurdity of Horace's words, but the rhyme plays a part in the effectiveness of the sentence. The translator omitted the original line and replaced it with Finnish song lyrics and sayings that have nothing to do with the English version or the story overall. It could be construed that the translator of this particular story merely used the same strategy and technique here as in most other cases of meaningless babble by Mickey's hypnotised friend. I would argue, however, that the inclusion of rhyming in the original strip would have made any attempt at a more direct translation more difficult.

Had there been no rhyming, Example 11 would have fallen into the last category, which includes those instances of verbal humour where the decision not to translate as directly as

possible does not seem to have been dictated by the nature of the humour. There were a total of eleven examples in the data of verbal humour that seemed to have been translatable but were either altered or completely changed by the translators. Four of these were uttered by Horace Horsecollar under hypnosis in the story *Blaggard Castle* and in those cases omitting the original joke and inserting a different one in its place had very little impact on the effectiveness of the strip. Several of the other examples are, however, more puzzling.

Example 12

**Donald:** Then – who took my gun an’ flashlight?

**Goofy:** Well, I’ll be durned! This house must be **haunted!**

(The Seven Ghosts / Gottfredson, Osborne and Thwaites 2012b: 92; first published in 1936)

*Aku:* Kuka sitten otti pyssyni ja lamppuni?

*Hessu:* Kummitus varmaan. Kukas muukaan?

(Mikki Hiiri ja seitsemän kummitusta / Gottfredson, Osborne and Thwaites 2008: 19)

In Example 12, context is key to understanding the original joke. Mickey, Donald and Goofy have been hired to exterminate ghosts from a wealthy man’s mansion, thus the possibility of them encountering some is evident. Hence, Goofy’s exclamation and the emphasis on the word *haunted*, as if it were new or surprising information, is rendered absurd by earlier scenes and, indeed, the entire basis for the story. In the Finnish version, however, Goofy’s reply to Donald is “*Probably a ghost. Who else?*” Omitting the joke and not replacing it with another one has taken away the humour of the sequence. There is no apparent reason for this choice as the joke could have been translated more or less directly into Finnish, albeit without the added emphasis on one word since highlighting words in this manner is absent from Finnish translations of Disney comics.

Example 13

**Ghost:** And when you **do** scare somebody to death, it just increases the competition – cause the new ghost remembers what killed him – an’ he steals yer stuff!

(The Seven Ghosts / Gottfredson, Osborne and Thwaites 2012b: 96; first published in 1936)

*Kummitus:* Ja kun sitten kerran onnistuu pelottelemaan jonkun hengiltä, se tuottaa vain lisää kummituksia.

(Mikki Hiiri ja seitsemän kummitusta / Gottfredson, Osborne and Thwaites 2008: 22)

Example 13 shows a different technique deployed by the translator, who compressed – in essence, shortened – the original line, leaving out the arguably funnier latter part about the new ghost stealing the first one’s tricks. The Finnish version is still relatively humorous, but the reason behind the lack of attempt to translate the whole sentence remains unclear. Occasionally comics translators in Finland are forced to compress long sequences of language as a result of Finnish words tending to be quite long and speech bubbles only being able to accommodate so much. Moreover, the font used in this specific Finnish publication is quite large, so saving space truly may be part of the reason. In any case, the shortening seems unnecessarily heavy for it to have been done solely on technical grounds.

### **4.3 Techniques used by Finnish translators**

With the second research question in mind, the instances of verbal humour collected were also divided into six categories based on the techniques the Finnish translators had used. As the examples may indicate, omission was the most common translation technique appearing in the data. A total of eighteen cases were found where the translator had omitted the original source of humour altogether, but there was considerable variation as regards replacing the omitted sequence with a new joke. The divide was clear, however: in the twelve examples from the story *Blaggard Castle* the translator had created a new humorous line in place of the original one, while in five of the six instances collected from other stories the humour of the dialogue was almost or entirely lost. It should be noted, however, that a strip or a panel may sometimes remain funny even without the verbal humour as comics also rely on situational and visual comedy. For instance, the scene in *The Seven Ghosts* previously discussed as Example 7 is still humorous in the Finnish version because of the amusing sight of Donald hiding under the rug and the other characters’ reactions to it.

Another, slightly different technique was also prominently featured in the data. This saw translators make small or sizeable alterations to the humorous sequence while retaining some key elements of the dialogue. This kind of modifying could be called partial alteration or partial omission. I included Examples 2 and 5 alongside fourteen other translations in this group, though differentiating between complete omission and partial alteration was not simple in all of the cases. In nine of the sixteen instances the translator seemed to attempt to recreate the verbal humour, while there were another three cases where some humour was lost when altering the dialogue but other humorous parts of the sequence were retained in the

translation. Finally, there were four examples of alterations that in my estimation left the Finnish sequences non-humorous.

Example 13 was the sole example of compression being used as a primary translation technique, although some instances of humour that were put in one of the two large groups discussed above included some elements of compression or shortening. Cultural adaptation, described by Molina and Hurtado Albir (2002: 509) as replacing an element in the text from the source culture with one more suited for the target culture, was used as a translation technique on four occasions in the data examined. There were also four examples of translators using compensation as a technique. According to Molina and Hurtado Albir (2002: 510), compensation means introducing a stylistic or informational element in a different place in the translated text due to it not being possible to have it in the exact same place as in the source text. Examples 1 and 3, although changed rather heavily, each show the translator replace an untranslatable pun with a new one by focusing on a different word. Finally, on two occasions a Finnish equivalent was used to translate an expression or saying that would not have made sense if translated directly. Molina and Hurtado Albir (2002: 510) differentiate between established and temporary, context-dependent equivalents, while the examples found in my data seem to be located somewhere in between.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to make a contribution to the understanding of how verbal humour in comics is translated when direct translation is not possible, focusing on *Mickey Mouse* comic strips from the 1930s. The first research question handled the different types of verbal humour translators had to wrestle while the second question focused on the techniques they used to potentially overcome these perceived obstacles. As regards the types of verbal humour appearing in the data, a large number of puns were found – including but not limited to homonyms, homophones and polysemes. This is in line with Chiaro's (2008: 571) argument that puns are essentially untranslatable. Cultural references as well as sayings and idioms were also relatively common in the stories examined. Slightly surprising was the number of instances where there seemed to have been a possibility to translate the humorous sequence either directly or by using an existing Finnish equivalent or structure, yet this was not done. It

must be noted though that these are only my personal estimations of what would be an appropriate, fluid translation; the translators may well have had different ideas. There is also always the possibility that a translator has missed a pun or a joke.

Regarding the techniques used by the translators, complete or partial omission of the original source of humour was the dominant procedure alongside slight alterations made to the jokes and the replacing of omitted parts with completely new material. There were also a handful of examples in the data collected of equivalence, compensation or cultural adaptation being used as a primary technique, but these were considerably less frequent. In some cases, the images in the comics seemed to have been a significant factor in determining what the translator could do with the joke – the text can never completely disregard the pictures. This phenomenon was also discussed by Koponen (2004: 80-81). Every scene is different in this regard, however, as some original jokes, most notably Horace Horsecollar's hypnotised ramblings in *Blaggard Castle*, had nothing specific to do with the images, giving the translators more freedom to make heavy changes without compromising the readers' ability to follow and understand the story.

Research conducted into the translation of verbal humour in the field of comics, especially with reference to Finnish, has been limited, so these findings might be interesting to researchers and students studying similar topics. It must be noted that the scope of this study was not by any means extensive as only five stories were examined, all of them from the same comic strip, by the same main artist and from the same era. It is therefore not possible to make broad generalisations about the translation of verbal humour in comics based on these results. More research needs to be carried out in the future on different comic strips and books as well as different source and target languages in order to paint a better picture of how the translation of verbal humour in comics works. There are also many other aspects of comics translation that would be interesting areas of future investigations, such as the translation of names or onomatopoeic words and expressions. Finally, the interplay between images and words in comics is an important theme that should be the focus of more research, not solely as a phenomenon in original works but also from the point of view of translation.

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