

# The Subtitling Translation of Humour in the Film *Hi, Mom*

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**Abstract.** The subtitling translation of humour presents unique challenges due to linguistic, cultural, and contextual differences between source and target audiences. This study examines the subtitling translation of humour in the Chinese film *Hi, Mom*, focusing on three types of audiovisual humour: international jokes, jokes reflecting a community's sense of humour, and language-dependent jokes. By analyzing examples from the film, this research highlights the complexities of translating wordplay, irony, and culturally specific references while maintaining comedic effects. It also explores strategies such as addition, replacement, compensation, and clarification used by subtitlers. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the importance of understanding the original humour, assessing the target audience's interpretation, and rephrasing humour to ensure its effectiveness in translation.

**Keywords:** Subtitling Translation; Humour Translation; Audiovisual Translation; Incongruity; Irony; Cultural Adaptation; *Hi, Mom*; Linguistic Challenges.

## 1. Introduction

At the end of 2021, *Hi, Mom* brought joy and relief to Chinese families during COVID-19 in a considerable box-office success. It is a comedy film written and directed by Ling JIA in memory of her dead mother. The subtitling translation of this film is devoted to transferring the humour to the world. In this case report, humour will be characterised by its features and the difficulties in translating it that arise from subtitling (Zaballbeascoa, 2005). Based on his classification of audiovisual humour (Zabalbeascoa, 1996), three categories will be covered to examine the subtitling translation challenges and strategies of humour in the film. They are international jokes, jokes reflecting a community's sense of humour, and language-dependent jokes.

## 2. Theories of Humour in Translation

Vandaele (1999) characterises the phenomenon based on two concepts: incongruity and superiority, which he derives from the various forms of humour. According to Asimakoulas (2002), incongruity is a departure from the norm as it is widely understood. In other words, it means, in some context, a certain phrase sets up an expectation and then falls short of fulfilling it. Consider the following example from *Hi, Mom*:

Yumei: 说你让陨石给砸了。 →	How you were hit by a meteor.
Huanying: 这什么陨石啊? →	I can assure you it's not a meteor.
是我表妹。	This is my cousin.

Yumei's words "hit by a meteor" make the viewer think that a massive object like a meteor hit Huanying. At the same time, Huanying's reply refers to her cousin, a big girl, not a thing. This unexpected reality is meant to provoke laughter.

## 3. Incongruity and Irony in Humour Translation

It is also believed that incongruity is a necessary component of irony, as Pelsmaekers and Besien (2002) briefly explain in terms of Austin (1962) and Searle's (1969) speech act theory. When there is

a discrepancy or contradiction between what is stated and what can be deduced from the circumstances, irony results. Consider the following example from *Hi, Mom*:

Yanhua: 我要弃武从文。 ———>	I gave up sport to become poet.
Huanying: 她一天学都没上过。 ———>	She never even went to school.

The words “to become poet” lead the viewer to believe that Yanhua is determined to concentrate on the poem creation instead of the volleyball exercise. However, the reply of Huanying, “She never even went to school”, arises in contrast to what Yanhua said. The sharp contrast is satirical to Yanhua’s pretended manner as educated, which makes the viewer laugh.

#### 4. Subtitling Strategies for Different Types of Humour

The film frequently uses a variety of humour styles, and the subtitlers use various strategies to address this humour. These methods are like the ones used to translate other cultural references, like adding, replacing, compensating, and making clear. It started with international jokes. In such jokes, the referents would be very global. Therefore, the audience can identify and understand the referent in context since it is well-known enough in the target culture. Consider the following example from *Hi, Mom*:

Guanglin: 陷进去了。 ———>	I’m in love with.
Shahao: 他挡的死死的。 ———>	He’s like a mountain.
Guixiang: 完了，完了。 ———>	No, hell, no.
Xiaoling: 到时候你装偶遇就行。 ———>	Just pretend it is a coincidence.
Huanying: 一鼓作气把她们打败。 ———>	Let’s kick their asses now.

##### 4.1 International Jokes

When jokes like these are translated to the target text through matching elements, the funny effect is maintained even though the referent is still in the source language. The viewers can get the meaning without losing humour.

##### 4.2 Jokes Reflecting a Community’s Sense of Humour

Then, jokes reflecting a community’s sense of humour are characteristic of a specific nation or ethnic group (Zabalbeascoa, 1996). Since understanding these jokes requires knowledge of the underlying national heritage, they rely on a type of intertextuality. Though the humour may be based on historical events or have religious elements, it is typically motivated by prejudice and occasionally entirely racism. For example:

Zhang Jiang: 我跟你说，现在生活作风抓得严。 ———>	I’m telling you, People frown upon this kind of behavior.
Zhikai: 改成女排比赛，大搞特搞。 ———>	Will be for women only, Let’s show them what we got.
Mao qin: 叫我老毛子就行。 ———>	Just call me Muscovite.

“生活作风、大搞特搞” are typical words used in a particular time called the Cultural Revolution in China, which was to set back the wheel of history, which raises the relationship between man and woman to a higher plane of principle and overstates the scale of campaigns. “老毛子” is the unique name of Russians created by the Chinese in the northern part, who consider the Russians hairy barbarians. Without a doubt, the humour is lost in the subtitling translation of the target language's lack of social and cultural context.

### 4.3 Language-Dependent Jokes and Wordplay

The last is language-dependent jokes. Wordplays and puns are included in this category of jokes, which also fits under Chiaro's (2005) definition of "verbally expressed humour." "Wordplay" refers to a wide range of textual phenomena when two or more linguistic structures have similar forms and more or less diverse meanings in communication (Delabastita, 1996). Such comedy can be highly worldwide from a referential or cultural standpoint. Still, it is rarely translated literally because the source text's semantic and pragmatic wordplay derives from certain structural features of the original language, for which the translator frequently needs to provide an equivalent in translation. For example:

Zhang Jiang: 你不叫玲儿吗？	→	I thought your name is Ling.
她怎么管你叫乐莹呢？	→	How came she calls you Leying?
Xiaoling: Le-ying 玲，玲儿嘛。	→	Ling is short for Leying.
Zhang Jiang: 那我叫张江。	→	So, my name is Zhang Jiang.
那读慢点儿，	→	Or Zhang Ji-ang if said slowly.
还可以叫张激昂呢。		
Guanglin: 她叫焕英儿。	→	Her name is Huanying.
我叫光临。	→	Mine is Guanglin.
我俩，	→	Together,
欢迎观临。	→	It means "a warm welcome".

For the first example, the spelling of the phonetics of the Chinese characters “乐莹” is made to a new sound of the character “玲”. That is tricky wordplay. The same goes for the spelling of “江” with the phonetics “Jiang” that is split into “Ji-ang” referring to another two characters “，激昂”。Homophones (exact spelling, different writing) are used in the second example. “焕英” and “欢迎” have the exact spelling with different tones that can be ignored. So, the spelling of “焕英光临” is equivalent to “欢迎光临”，which is a collocation used in the greetings to show a warm welcome. The two translation examples failed to recreate humour embedded in the source language. The source language can make the Chinese audience laugh, while the audience without the Chinese character's knowledge rarely follows the sense of humour.

## 5. Challenges and Considerations in Humour Translation

Generally, the first issue for translators is to identify the humour in the source text—that is, to spot the hints, the incongruities, and the comedic repertoires associated with specific humoristic genres or often employed devices like understatement or exaggeration. Then, they must figure out how to incorporate the perceived humour into the goal language and rephrase it to produce a fresh statement that hopefully will have the same impact as humour.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, humour is defined through two main elements: incongruity and superiority. Incongruity is demonstrated in the subtitling translation of the film and its ironic effect. The subtitling translation of humour is decoded by three kinds of subtitling humour: international jokes, jokes reflecting a community's sense of humour, and language-dependent jokes. Three steps suggest translators promote their subtitling translation of humour. The first stage is to understand the humour

in the original material; the second is to assess the target viewer's perspective and interpretation of a given text; and the third is to rephrase the humour.

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