

Humor in Translation: An Analysis of *Johnny English Reborn*

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Abstract: This study examines the translation of humor in the film *Johnny English Reborn* from English into Indonesian subtitles. The purpose of the study is to analyze the construction of humor through violations of Grice's maxims and to identify Newmark's translation strategies used to maintain the comedic effect. The method applied is qualitative descriptive with an analysis of 28 humorous dialogue quotations and their translations. The results show that humor is constructed primarily through violations of the maxims of Quality and Relation, creating irony and wordplay. In translation, the Communicative and Faithful strategies are most dominant, successfully preserving the humorous intent while adapting to Indonesian cultural norms. In conclusion, effective humor translation requires a balance between pragmatic recognition of maxim violations and strategic linguistic adaptation, contributing both theoretically and practically to the field of audiovisual translation.

Keywords: humor translation, *Johnny English Reborn*, maksim Grice, Newmark strategy.

INTRODUCTION

The widespread circulation of global audiovisual media has positioned subtitling as an essential medium for cross-cultural communication, especially in comedy films where humor is closely tied to language use and cultural context. Translating humour is one of the most complicated visions in Audiovisual Translation (AVT) because it is based on word play, culture specific elements and pragmatic referential gaps that can hardly have an equivalence in target language (Hassanvandi, 2016). Recent advances on Machine Translation tools notwithstanding, they often can not capture the contextual or emotional subtleties in humorous dialog and require human intervention.

In Indonesia, where audiences predominantly rely on subtitles to consume foreign-language films, the quality of humor translation directly impacts viewing experience and comedic reception (Luke, 2022). This is particularly evident in parody films such as *Johnny English Reborn* (2011), a British action-comedy that satirizes spy thriller conventions through verbal irony, sarcasm, and deliberate miscommunication. Translating such genre-specific humor requires strategies that balance

linguistic accuracy with cultural adaptability, ensuring the humorous intent remains accessible to the target audience (Triana et al., 2023; Renata & Rini, 2024).

Earlier research on humor translation tended to concentrate on overall analysis on translation techniques or types of humor, for example in children's animation (Renata & Rini, 2024; Siregar, 2023). There has not been a thorough analysis of miscommunication utilized in humor, specifically in adult-parody, and the connection between pragmatic theories and analysis in humor translation either. This research will supplement this lack with respect to the use of Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principles, particularly the use of violative conversational maxims, and Newmark's (1988) translation strategies in the analysis of humor and humor translation in "*Johnny English Reborn*".

The research is guided by two questions: (1) How is humor constructed in *Johnny English Reborn* through violations of Grice's Conversational Maxims? (2) What translation strategies, based on Newmark's classification, are used to render this humor into Indonesian subtitles, and how do these strategies affect the preservation of humorous meaning? By examining the interplay between pragmatic humor mechanisms and translation choices, this

study aims to contribute both theoretically and practically to the field of audiovisual translation, offering insights for translators and scholars working with culturally embedded humor.

METHODS

This study used a qualitative descriptive design to analyze the construction and translation of humor in the film *Johnny English Reborn*. The study was conducted from March to December 2025, with data analysis conducted at the English Language Education Study Program, University of Mataram. The Indonesian subtitles were sourced from Bilibili.tv, a platform hosting user-generated subtitle content. The use of this data is limited to non-commercial academic purposes. The study population comprised all humorous dialogue in the film. The sample was drawn using a purposive sampling technique (Creswell, 2014), with the criteria being dialogue that clearly violates Grice's maxims of conversation and contains humorous content. A total of 28 dialogue excerpts were selected as a representative sample sufficient for in-depth analysis.

The Indonesian subtitles were sourced from Bilibili.tv, a platform hosting user-generated subtitle content. The subtitles for *Johnny English Reborn* were translated and uploaded by a contributor under the username MasKantul, who has translated over 34 films including both *Johnny English Reborn* and *Johnny English Strikes Again* and has approximately 6.2K followers on the platform. Although these subtitles are not officially licensed, they represent a widely accessed and community-vetted translation, providing relevant insight into how humor is adapted for Indonesian audiences in informal subtitling contexts. The research procedure consisted of three systematic stages. First, data collection was conducted through repeated viewings of the film, dialogue transcription, and Indonesian subtitle collection. Second, humor was identified and categorized based on violations of Grice's four maxims of conversation (1975): Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Third, the translation strategy analysis used Newmark's (1988) classification, which includes six strategies: literal, faithful, semantic, communicative, idiomatic, and free.

The data analysis technique integrated pragmatic and translational approaches. Pragmatic analysis applied Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle theory to uncover the mechanisms of humor through maxim violations. Translation analysis used Newmark's (1988) framework to evaluate the effectiveness of humorous meaning transfer. Data were analyzed through paired comparisons between the source text and the translation, taking into account visual and cultural contexts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data validity was maintained through method triangulation, combining textual, contextual, and theoretical analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that humor in *Johnny English Reborn* is systematically constructed through violations of Grice's conversational maxims and strategically translated using Newmark's framework. The data consist of film dialogues and their Indonesian subtitles taken from Bilibili.tv, specifically from the contributor MasKantul, who has translated numerous comedy films including both *Johnny English Reborn* and *Johnny English Strikes Again*. While these subtitles are not official, they reflect common practices in fan-based translation and provide insight into how humor is localized for Indonesian viewers in digital spaces. The findings are presented in two subsections: (1) humor construction through maxim violations, and (2) translation strategies applied.

Findings

The analysis reveals that humor in *Johnny English Reborn* is systematically constructed through violations of Grice's conversational maxims and strategically translated using Newmark's framework. The findings are presented in two subsections: (1) humor construction through maxim violations, and (2) translation strategies applied.

Humor Construction and Translation through Violations of Grice's Conversational Maxims

Among the four maxims, violations of **Quality** and **Relation** were the most frequent sources of humor. Table 1 summarizes representative examples of each violation type.

Table 1. Examples of Humor through Violations of Grice’s Maxims

Maxim Violated	English Dialogue	Indonesian Subtitle	Humor Mechanism
Quality	“The President couldn’t be in safer hands.”	“Keamanan Presiden berada di tangan yang terbaik.”	Ironic false statement contradicted by visual context.
Relation	“There’s a mole and a vole?”	“Ada pengkhianat dan tikus?”	Mishearing creates irrelevant wordplay confusion.
Manner	“It’s not ‘Susan,’ it’s ‘Shoooshan.’”	“Itu bukan ‘Susan’, tapi ‘Shoooshan’.”	Mispronunciation generates phonetic humor.
Quantity	“Five years, three months and six days, or something.”	“5 Tahun, 3 bulan dan 6 hari, kira-kira.”	Excessive detail highlights Johnny’s pedantic incompetence.

Translation Strategies in Rendering Humor

Six of Newmark’s translation strategies were identified, with **Communicative**

Translation and **Faithful Translation** being the most dominant. Table 2 illustrates the application of each strategy.

Table 2. Translation Strategies Applied to Humorous Dialogues

Strategy	English Dialogue	Indonesian Subtitle	Effect on Humor
Literal	“Five years ago, he was our top agent.”	“Lima tahun lalu, dia adalah agen terbaik kita.”	Preserves factual irony without adaptation.
Faithful	“I’m a trained agent. I don’t leak.”	“Aku agen terlatih. Aku tidak ‘membocorkan’.”	Maintains structure and pun-based irony.
Communicative	“For electronic products, press one.”	“Untuk produk elektronik, tekan 1.”	Naturalizes instruction while keeping functional humor.
Semantic	“You murderous crone!”	“Kau nenek tua pembunuh!”	Conveys emotional intensity but reduces comic nuance.
Idiomatic	“We have a situation.”	“Kami punya masalah.”	Uses familiar idiom to retain urgency and tone.
Free	“Plump pillows.”	“Dada besar.”	Creatively adapts culturally opaque humor.

The data indicate a clear correlation between the type of maxim violation and the translation strategy chosen. Quality-based irony often required Faithful or Idiomatic translation to preserve contrast, while Relation-based wordplay frequently necessitated Free or Communicative adaptation to remain funny in Indonesian.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that humor in *Johnny English Reborn* operates through deliberate pragmatic transgressions, and its translation involves strategic choices that balance linguistic accuracy with cultural resonance. This

discussion interprets these findings through the integrated lenses of Grice’s pragmatics and Newmark’s translation theory, while situating them within existing scholarship on audiovisual humor translation.

The Pragmatic Architecture of Humor in *Johnny English Reborn*

The prevalence of **Quality** and **Relation** violations as primary humor triggers aligns with Attardo’s (1994) incongruity theory, where humor arises from a mismatch between expectation and reality. Johnny’s ironic claims (“The President couldn’t be in safer hands”) flout

the Maxim of Quality, creating a stark contrast between his verbal assurance and the visual peril, a mechanism that depends entirely on the audience's ability to infer the implicature (Dyrel, 2018). Similarly, violations of the Maxim of Relation, such as the "mole and vole" confusion, generate humor through irrelevant or misinterpreted responses, showcasing how linguistic ambiguity can be exploited for comedic effect. These findings affirm Grice's (1975) premise that maxim flouting is not a breakdown in communication but a calculated device to produce meaning beyond the literal, in this case, humor.

Translation as Pragmatic Recontextualization

The dominant use of **Communicative** and **Faithful** Translation strategies indicates that the subtitler prioritized both functional equivalence and structural fidelity. Communicative translation, evident in instructional dialogues like "For electronic products, press one," adapts the message to sound natural in Indonesian while preserving its utilitarian humor. This supports Newmark's (1988) assertion that communicative methods are optimal in audiovisual contexts where immediate comprehension is essential. Conversely, Faithful translation was effectively deployed for irony and wordplay ("I'm a trained agent. I don't leak"), where preserving the original syntactic and semantic structure was crucial to maintaining the humorous contrast. This strategic variation reflects what Chairina (2020) describes as the "dual necessity" in humor translation: adhering to the source text's intent while ensuring target-culture accessibility.

Cultural Adaptation in Humor Transfer

The application of **Idiomatic** and **Free Translation** for culturally embedded jokes highlights the role of cultural substitution in preserving comedic effect. The idiomatic rendering of "We have a situation" into the colloquial "Kami punya masalah" naturalizes the urgency for Indonesian viewers, while the free translation of "Plump pillows" into "*Dada besar*" creatively localizes a hypnotic suggestion that would otherwise be obscure. These approaches resonate with Siregar's (2023) finding that adaptation and modulation are often indispensable when translating puns and culture-specific humor. However, the study also reveals limitations: semantic translation of emotionally charged insults ("You murderous crone!")

sometimes diminished the humor, underscoring how emotional and cultural connotations can be lost even when semantic meaning is retained.

Theoretical and Practical Integration

Research at the intersection of pragmatics and translation studies is undertaken in this case in terms of how and when humor translation needs to be done in two stages: first, in understanding how the pragmatic work of humor takes place (violations of maxim), and second, in considering how the translation strategy might be chosen as if it were going to recreate the same pragmatic effect. Applied in this manner, this holistic model of humor translation builds on the current focus on translation strategy in earlier studies (Renata & Rini, 2024; Siregar, 2023) and goes further to explain not only how the translation strategy is executed, but how the strategy choice itself is arrived at, depending on the makeup of the pragmatic act of the humor.

Thus, in concluding, the process of humor translation in "Johnny English Reborn" is neither linguistic nor cultural, but pragmatic as well. The subtitling in "Johnny English Reborn" effectively uses Newmark's approach, implying that there is conceptual conformity with Grice's theory, whose aim is "not the translation of words, but the reproduction of the very process by which the original statement is found funny." Therefore, it can safely conclude pragmatic analysis and humor translation theory.

CONCLUSION

In light of the context presented above, the objective of the study is to investigate the process of humor construction and translation in the movie "Johnny English Reborn" using a holistic analysis of Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and Newmark's (1988) translation strategies. Based on an analysis of the humor in 28 pieces of dialogical excerpts, two key findings are presented in the study. Firstly, humor in the movie is created through a systematic violation of Quality and Relation in the conversational maxims, leading to creation of irony, absurdity, and verbal humor in the movie text. Secondly, there is an appropriate use of a variety of Newmark's (1988) translation strategies in the subtitles, which results in a good balance of semantic faithfulness and cultural adaptability. The study makes it clear that more than language transfer, a good translation of humor in

audiovisual media requires sensitivity and strategy in translation. Translators have to initially recognize the basis of the humor that lies in violations of the maxim and use a translation strategy appropriate for the reproduction of a similar inferential process in the target recipients. The results have reiterated that literal translation may be adequate for simple statements but may necessitate the use of idiomatic, free, or communicative translation for culturally complex or pragmatically intricate humor.

This paper theoretically contributes to translation and pragmatics in highlighting how Gricean maxims can be applied as an analytical tool in the deconstruction of humor, and also in how Newmark's framework offers some very practical routes through which it can be rendered. On a pragmatic note, it offers a framework for subtitlers and translation educators, resituating context, cultural resonance, and pragmatic intentionality at the heart of translating comedy. In relation to future research, it would be beneficial to investigate the concept of humor translation in different genres and cultural contexts and examine audience reception to determine its appropriateness. This study highlights that indeed, the process of humor translation is by no means a straightforward interplay of words and culture but rather an interplay of words, culture, and thought that demands analysis and creative thinking.

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