

## بازی با کلمات در بستر طنز دیداری شنیداری در محیط آموزشی:

### بررسی شیوه‌های ترازبانی در محیط دوزبانه دانشگاهی<sup>۱</sup>

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#### چکیده

این تحقیق با تمرکز ویژه بر بازی با کلمات در مطالعات ترجمه، به کاوش تلاقی ترازبانی، آموزش زبان و عناصر دیداری شنیداری می‌پردازد. با توجه به نقش مهمی که بازی با کلمات در تولید طنز در برنامه‌های تلویزیونی ایفا می‌کند، می‌تواند چالشی برای مترجمان برای انتقال طنز و تفاوت‌های فرهنگی متن اصلی ایجاد کند. این مطالعه در ابتدا راهبردهای مورد استفاده برای ترجمه بازی با کلمات در زیرنویس دو سریال «فرندز» و «سیمپسون‌ها» را شناسایی کرد. این پژوهش از رویکرد تحلیل محتوا برای دسته‌بندی استفاده کرد. نتایج نشان داد که رویکردهای واژگان نحوی-معنایی و «حذف بازی با کلمات» بسامد بالایی داشتند. با این حال، عدم موفقیت زیرنویس‌های ترجمه‌شده به دلیل انتقال ناقص بازی با کلمات مشاهده شد. متعاقباً، یافته‌های این مطالعه با ۱۵ نفر از دانشجویان آموزش زبان انگلیسی به عنوان یک زبان خارجی به اشتراک گذاشته شد که نمونه‌های مختلف بازی با کلمات به آنها آموزش داده شده بود. نتایج گروه کانونی، افزایش درک شرکت‌کنندگان نسبت به بازی با کلمات را نشان داد و ترازبانی به عنوان یک رویکرد انگیزشی برای یادگیری زبان شناسایی شد. برای ارزیابی طبیعی بودن معادل‌ها، دیدگاه‌های سه فارسی زبان در مورد معادل‌های منتخب پیکره این مطالعه بررسی شد. این تحقیق کاربردهای مهمی در محیط‌های چندزبانه و چندفرهنگی دارد.

**واژه‌های راهنما:** بازی با کلمات، ترازبانی، ترجمه بین‌نشانه‌ای، ترجمه دیداری شنیداری،

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## Playing with Words Across Audiovisual Humor: Exploring Translanguaging Practices in a Bilingual University Context<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This research focuses on the intersection of translanguaging, language instruction, and audiovisual materials, with a specific focus on wordplay in Translation Studies. Given the significant role, wordplay plays in generating humor in audiovisual materials, it can provide a challenge for translators to convey both the humor and cultural nuances of the original text. The study initially analyzed the strategies utilized in subtitling wordplay for two popular series, *Friends* and *The Simpsons*, translated into Persian. The research utilized a content analysis approach to categorize the diverse types of wordplay and identify the particular translation methods employed in the subtitle translations. The results indicated that lexical-semantic wordplay and "no wordplay" approaches were the most commonly utilized strategies. However, the failure of translated subtitles was observed due to inadequate transfer of English wordplay into Persian. Subsequently, the study's findings were shared with 15 EFL students. The focus group results demonstrated the participants' enhanced understanding of wordplay, with translanguaging identified as a motivating approach for language learning. To assess the naturalness of equivalents in the subtitled series, the study enlisted views from three Persian native speakers regarding selected equivalents in the corpus. This research has important implications for agencies in multilingual and multicultural spaces.

**Keywords:** Audiovisual Translation, Intersemiotic Translation, Subtitle, Translanguaging, Wordplay

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## Introduction

Wordplay is an intriguing topic for research and poses challenges for translators offering potential insights into translation and language (Lumerto, 2021). The accurate translation of wordplay is crucial in maintaining the overall quality of translation, especially in the context of audiovisual translation (AVT). AVT aims to improve the quality of translation through the transfer of aesthetic and linguistic features, including wordplay, in television and films to engage the audience and enhance their understanding of the source language's cultural and linguistic aspects.

Jokes and humorous elements associated with wordplay present difficulties in translation due to the cultural differences between the source language (SL) and target language (TL) (Abootorabi, Afsari, & Moeinzadeh, 2018). Jalali (2021) emphasizes that wordplay is a complex literary form, making its translation problematic for translators. Understanding different types of wordplay and approaches to handle them is essential in translation (Jalali, 2021).

Wordplay is commonly found in movie and TV show scripts within the comedy genre, serving as a linguistic device to enhance the comedic ambiance. Over the past decade, researchers have increasingly focused on wordplay translation in AVT, analyzing translation strategies and comparing different audiovisual materials, such as animated short films and sitcoms (Aljuied, 2021; Berzolin & Medeiros, 2021; Juntunen, 2019; Scholtes, 2016). Studies have also explored wordplay translation in subtitling, specifically in animated and live-action comedy series (Bertell, 2014; Berzolin & Medeiros, 2021; Hajji Zavareh, 2018; Schauffler, 2012).

Translating wordplay in audiovisual texts presents additional challenges due to the specific features of these mediums (Camilli, 2019). The significance of this issue is further highlighted by recent studies on dubbing and subtitling wordplay in translation studies (Berzolin & Medeiros, 2021; Hajji Zavareh, 2018). However,

there is a lack of research comparing wordplay translation in subtitling between animated and live-action comedy series.

This study aims to investigate the subtitling of wordplay in two distinct categories of series, namely animation and live-action comedy, translated from English to Persian. Additionally, it examines the interplay between wordplay analysis and translanguaging in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. Translanguaging can be a valuable approach in helping EFL students understand wordplay scenarios and their corresponding translations in AVT. The findings of this study contribute to the field of translation studies and EFL education as an interdisciplinary research study.

For this study, the following research questions were adopted:

RQ1: What are the strategies used in translating wordplay instances represented in two different types of real-life versus animated series in the comedy genre from English into Persian?

RQ2: What are the distinctions between the strategies utilized in the Persian subtitles of these two types of translated series?

RQ3: What are the perceptions of three native speakers regarding the naturalness of equivalents used by the translators of these series?

RQ4: What are the perceptions of Iranian EFL students after sharing the results of wordplay analysis through translanguaging with the aim of teaching wordplay to these students?

## **Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Considerations and Frameworks**

Wordplay is an integral facet of humor-driven productions and poses a significant challenge for translators attempting to retain the humor and cultural nuances of the original text. It is therefore crucial to identify instances of wordplay

as the first solid measure in translating such linguistic and cultural features. Delabastita (1996) categorized wordplay into four distinct groups; namely, homonymy which refers to words that are both identical in spelling and pronunciation, homophony which pertains to words that sound alike but have different spellings, homography which denotes words that have the same spelling as another word but a different sound, emphasis, and meaning, and paronymy which involves words with slight variations in sound and spelling. Delabastita also noted that wordplay is the overarching term for the diverse textual occurrences where the structural aspects of language(s) are cleverly utilized to create a meaningful juxtaposition between two or more linguistic structures that share similar forms but possess distinct meanings to varying degrees.

Gottlieb (1997) later expanded Delabastita's classification of homonymy by adding three subcategories, including (1) lexical homonymy (2) collocational homonymy, and (3) phrasal homonymy. Furthermore, Chuandao (2005) distinguished wordplay into five categories, which are (1) homonymic wordplay (2) lexical meaning wordplay (3) understanding wordplay (4) figurative wordplay, and (5) logic wordplay. More recently, Giorgadze (2014) classified wordplay into lexical-semantic wordplay, structural-syntactic wordplay, and structural-semantic wordplay.

### **Empirical Studies**

In recent years, the topic of wordplay translation in dubbing and subtitling has gained important scholarly attention, which is evidenced by studies such as those conducted by Brezolin and Medeiros (2021) and Hajji Zavareh (2018). The bulk of literature on wordplay translation in dubbing and subtitling has examined translation strategies used to address wordplay issues in different genres such as animated short films, TV shows, sitcoms, and television series. Similarly, scholars like Bertell (2014), Berzolin and Medeiros (2021), Hajjizavareh (2018), and

Schauffler (2012) have focused on comparing various wordplay translation strategies used in different contexts to identify the impact of linguistic and cultural differences on the translation process.

Few studies, thus far, have analyzed wordplay translation in subtitling animated series versus real-life series in the comedy genre. Thus, this inspired the researchers to focus on subtitling wordplay in two types of series, i.e. animation versus real-life series on the comedy genre from English into Persian. Most studies, such as the ones noted earlier in the field of translation studies, examined different genres or movies but few (if any) studies have investigated wordplay translation with a comparison of series in one main genre.

## **Method**

### **Design**

The present research is a case study that utilized a qualitative descriptive design. To collect data, content analysis was employed as the chosen method. This research is qualitative in nature as it focuses on analyzing words and sentences using the frameworks adopted for this study. Additionally, a descriptive research approach was utilized to identify frequencies and recurring themes.

### **Framework**

The categorization of wordplay described by Giorgadze (2014) served as the basis for the analysis of wordplay in the English scripts of the translated series. Furthermore, the strategies employed by subtitle translators were identified, focusing on examining the Persian equivalents based on Delabastita's (1996) model. The frequency and percentage of each strategy utilized by the translators were calculated and tabulated, enabling a more comprehensive analysis and comparison between the two series types.

### **Corpus**

The corpus of this study comprised two live-action and animation series. *Friends* and *The Simpsons* were chosen for analysis due to the unique challenge

they present, with their abundance of wordplay and the need to maintain comedic elements. Translations of the subtitled wordplay in these series, done by Iranian translators with degrees in language teaching, translation, or linguistics, were selected for analysis. This was to ensure that the translations were carried out by professionals with the necessary knowledge and skills, which is crucial when it comes to the quality of subtitle translation, especially for complex tasks such as translating wordplay.

### **Instruments**

In this study, a questionnaire was used to investigate the views of three native Persian speakers towards the naturalness of equivalents used for the translation of wordplays in the analyzed series. Focus group discussions were also used to identify the perceptions of Iranian EFL students after sharing the employed equivalents of wordplay in these series and using translanguaging with the aim to teach wordplay to these students.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The procedure consisted of several stages. In the initial phase, a university lecturer with a Ph.D. in English literature was consulted to identify instances of wordplay in the selected series. This consultation aimed to seek the expert's opinion and enhance the validity of the analysis. The expert's opinions and examples were integrated into the analysis process. Fifty instances of wordplay were chosen from each series for analysis, the expert and researchers also collaborated in sharing their findings and analysis in each phase, boosting the credibility of the qualitative analysis.

In the second phase of the study, the results of the wordplay analysis were shared and taught through translanguaging to raise students' awareness and deepen their understanding of this literary device in audiovisual materials, specifically in the comedy genre. Data were collected using a qualitative research

approach, with participants sharing their perceptions of wordplay teaching through focus group discussions. The data collected were then analyzed to identify overarching themes and patterns emerging from the students' perceptions. Furthermore, the naturalness of the equivalents was also determined through a questionnaire answered by three native Persian speakers, in accordance with Nida's (1964) distinction of equivalence as formal and dynamic.

## Results

The first research question was concerned about the strategies used in translating wordplay instances in two different types of real-life versus animated series in the comedy genre from English into Persian. To address this research question, after analyzing the series, 50 randomly selected wordplay instances from each series were categorized. The findings of this categorization, including the different types of wordplay identified in Friends series, are presented in Table 1.

*Table 1. Types of wordplay in Friends series*

Type of Wordplay	Frequency
Lexical-semantic	39
Structural-syntactic	6
Structural-semantic	5
Total	50

According to Table 1, it can be observed that the most prevalent form of wordplay identified in the analyzed corpus of Friends series episodes from seasons 1 and 2 was categorized as lexical-semantic, accounting for a total of 39 occurrences. The subsequent category in terms of frequency was the structural-syntactic type, which encompasses 6 instances. In contrast, the structural-semantic category exhibited the smallest number of instances, with a mere five occurrences.



Table 2. Types of wordplay in *The Simpsons* series

Type of Wordplay	Numbers
Lexical-semantic	42
Structural-syntactic	5
Structural-semantic	3
Total	50

Based on the study conducted on *The Simpsons* series and according to Table 2, it was found that in seasons 15, 18, 25, and 29, the most frequent type of wordplay, with 42 instances, was the lexical-semantic category. The second most frequent category was the structural-syntactic category, which included five items. The least frequent category was the structural-semantic one, which included only three items.

### Samples for the Different Categories of Wordplay in the Analyzed Corpus

#### *A: Lexical-Semantic Wordplay*

In the category of lexical-semantic wordplay, words can exhibit homophony or homography, where they are either pronounced or spelled the same, but carry different meanings. In the following examples, there is an instance of such wordplay in *Friends* series.

Sample A:

*Friends* series (Season 1 Episode 2)- Hellen: Hello? It's not gonna be Helen Geller.

Translation:

-قرار نیست اسمش "هلن گلر" بشه

Back translation-Her name is not supposed to be Helen Geller.

Breakout of the wordplay: In the sample scene, when Ross and his partner are choosing a name for their baby, his partner uses the name "Helen Geller". The scriptwriter twisted language using Hellen Geller for Helen Keller with the g sound conjuring up the word girl.

### ***B: Structural-Syntactic Wordplay***

In the realm of structural-syntactic wordplay, a sentence or phrase that is complex in nature can be analyzed and understood in multiple ways, due to the intricacies of its structural and syntactic components. The following sample is considered as structural-syntactic wordplay instance in Friends series.

Sample A:

Friends series (Season 1 Episode 19)-Monica: Wow! She is pretty...Lucky...

Translation:

-وای! چه فوق العاده... خوش شانسه...

Back translation- Wow! How wonderful ... Lucky...

In the example of Friends series, the word "pretty" can be used as an adjective, which means beautiful, or it can be used as an adverb, which means almost.

### ***C: Structural-Semantic Wordplay***

Structural-semantic wordplay is a linguistic phenomenon in which words operate on multiple levels to create layers of meaning. Such wordplay can take on a literal sense that contains more than one connotation. A clear example of this is evident in the phrase *Lost your spine, huh?* which can be interpreted in two distinct ways: as an insinuation of cowardice and weakness, or as an actual loss of spinal support. In the context of the series under analysis, structural-semantic wordplay is a prevalent phenomenon, as showcased by the example provided below, which demonstrates how this linguistic construct operates within the framework of the respective series.

Sample A:

The Simpsons series (Season 15 Episode 1) - Homer: Okay. Who am I giving the finger to today?

Translation:

-خیلی خب، امروز کی رو باید بُکشم؟

Back translation-Well, who should I kill today?



Figure 1 Caption: Sample of structural-semantic wordplay in The Simpsons series

Figure 1 Alt Text: A capture from The Simpsons TV series in which one of the primary characters is donning a black hoodie. He is holding a scroll in his right hand while gripping a polearm with his left hand in a way that conveys a sense of terror to the viewers

In the depicted sequence of The Simpsons, the character of Homer Simpson is shown in the long black clothes that also cover his head carrying a large scythe, colloquially known as *the grim reaper*. As he indicates individuals with his finger, they subsequently experience demise. The commonly utilized phrase *give the finger* to has a dual meaning, signifying both the act of taking an individual's life and the act of verbally or gesturally offending them.

### Translation Strategies Adopted for Conveying Wordplay Instances

In order to effectively convey wordplay occurrences in audiovisual media, various translation strategies have been implemented. This research study examined the strategies utilized by Persian subtitle translators to translate wordplay in two popular American television series, *Friends* and *The Simpsons*. Delabastita's model was employed to analyze the translation strategies employed in these series.

#### *A: Delabastita's Wordplay Strategies in Translation*

The classification proposed by Delabastita encompasses eight different strategies that can be utilized in the translation of wordplay occurrences. As the first research question in this study is about the adopted strategies, it is important to note that while all strategies were provided, not all of them were implemented within the translation process of the analyzed series. The subsequent tables presented in this section indicate the percentages and frequency distribution of each strategy utilized for the translation of wordplay in both *Friends* and *The Simpsons*.

*Table 3. Delabastita's wordplay translation strategies in Friends series*

Delabastita's Wordplay Translation Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Wordplay → Wordplay	9	18%
Wordplay → Non- wordplay	33	66%
Wordplay → Related rhetorical devices	3	6%
Wordplay → Zero	3	6%
Wordplay ST → Wordplay TT	0	0%
Non- wordplay → Wordplay	0	0%
Zero → Wordplay	0	0%
Editorial Techniques	2	4%
Total	50	100%

According to Table 3, in the selected seasons of *Friends* series, the most frequent strategy was wordplay to non-wordplay as the subtitle translators were not

able to convey form-based translation in Persian. Furthermore, the least frequent strategies were non-wordplay to wordplay and zero to wordplay in seasons 1 and 2 of Friends series.

*Table 4. Delabastita's wordplay translation strategies in The Simpsons series*

Delabastita's Wordplay Translation Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Wordplay → Wordplay	9	18%
Wordplay → Non- wordplay	33	66%
Wordplay → Related rhetorical devices	0	0%
Wordplay → Zero	1	2%
Wordplay ST → Wordplay TT	0	0%
Non- wordplay → Wordplay	0	0%
Zero → Wordplay	0	0%
Editorial Techniques	7	14%
Total	50	100%

According to Table 4, the most frequent strategy in seasons 15, 18, 25, and 29 of the Simpsons series was wordplay to non-wordplay and the least frequent strategies were wordplay source text to wordplay target text, related rhetorical devices, non-wordplay to wordplay, and zero to wordplay.

### ***B: A Sample for Translating Wordplay to Wordplay***

Based on the wordplay to wordplay strategy, the wordplay of the source text is translated by a wordplay in the target text. A sample is shown in Table 5:

*Table 5. Sample of wordplay → wordplay strategy in The Simpsons series*

Series	Time	Instance	Type of Wordplay	Sense	Translation	Back Translation
Simpsons S29-E4	00:00:16,857 --> 00:00:21,927	Even boxes of stale raisins go before you,	Lexical- semantic	- Butterfinger -barter finger	- حتی جعبه‌ای کشمش خشک هم قبل از تو یره □	-Even the box of dry raisins goes before you, Butterfinger. I

		Butterfinger. I mean, Barterfinger.			باترفینگر □ نظورم بارترفینگر بود	meant Barterfinger.
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Figure 2 Caption: Sample of wordplay to wordplay strategy in the Simpsons series



Figure 2 Alt Text: A capture from The Simpsons TV series showing the characters as renowned candy brands, with bulging eyes gazing in varying directions.

In the Simpsons series, a scene features a bowl of chocolates meant for Halloween. Interestingly, the candies and chocolates themselves play the main characters and are designed with the likeness of well-known confectionery brands. In the sample scene a candy named after the Barterfinger brand is subjected to playful mockery by another candy known as Oh Homer. The latter employs a subtle wordplay on the name Barterfinger, cleverly altering it to Butterfinger, which carries a negative connotation of clumsiness. This lexical pun is further observed within its Persian transliteration but may require some editorial finessing to be fully comprehended.

Given that the second research question concerns a comparison between different types of strategies used in each of the analyzed series, five strategies of Delabastita's wordplay translation strategies (Wordplay → Wordplay, Wordplay

→Non- wordplay, Wordplay →Related rhetorical devices, Wordplay → Zero and Editorial Techniques) were identified in the translation of Friends series. Four strategies used in The Simpsons series also included Wordplay → Wordplay, Wordplay →Non-wordplay, Wordplay → Zero and Editorial Techniques.

### ***Native Speakers' Perceptions***

As the third research question in this study sought to determine the native speakers' perceptions towards the translation of wordplay cases in the analyzed corpus, three native Persian speakers were asked to analyze such instances according to formal or dynamic equivalence. A questionnaire with 50 questions was sent via email to each participant in which each prompt contained a wordplay in English with a Persian equivalent used by translators of the analyzed series. The three Persian native speakers- one male and two females- held an M.A. in Translation Studies and had the experience of teaching translation in Iranian universities. In the following table, the percentage and frequency of natural equivalents for both series analyzed by the native speakers are provided.

*Table 6. Native speakers' perceptions based on Nida's(1964) model*

Native Speakers	Series name	Formal Equivalence Frequency	Formal Equivalence Percentage	Dynamic Equivalence Frequency	Dynamic Equivalence Percentage	Total
Native speaker 1	Friends	25	50%	25	50%	50
	Simpsons	32	64%	18	36%	50
Native speaker 2	Friends	18	36%	32	64%	50
	Simpsons	11	22%	39	78%	50
Native speaker 3	Friends	16	32%	34	68%	50
	Simpsons	13	26%	37	74%	50

<b>Total</b>	Friends and Simpsons	115	38.33%	185	61.67%	300
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### Focus Group's Perception

To address the fourth research question of the study, 15 Iranian EFL students were asked about their experiences and perceptions of learning wordplay through sharing the translated English series *The Simpsons* and *Friends* and explaining about wordplay translation. They produced the following overarching themes:

1. Increased engagement, interest, and motivation in English language learning
2. Improved understanding and retention of new vocabulary
3. Enhanced critical thinking and analytical skills
4. Expanded cultural awareness and exposure to colloquial language
5. Enjoyment of learning through pop culture references

### Discussion

Based on Giorgadze's (2014) classification, the study aimed to explore different categories of wordplay in both live-action and animated series. The results revealed that the lexical-semantic category was the most frequently used in both types of series, indicating the importance for translators to pay special attention to this type of wordplay during translation. Furthermore, the structural-semantic and structural-syntactic categories were more prevalent in the comedy series, "Friends" and "The Simpsons," suggesting the frequent use of humorous expressions and jokes in these shows due to their genre.

As the first question dealt with the strategies adopted, the study also found that wordplay occurrences were relatively equal in both live-action and animated series, challenging the assumption that animated series are exclusively targeted toward children. Translators should therefore be mindful of this when translating for specific audiences. As for the second research question, the distinction between the adopted strategies in both series showed a higher percentage of editorial explanations in "The Simpsons". This can be attributed to the satirical nature of the series, requiring the provision of equivalents and explanations during translation .



The related rhetorical devices were adopted in Friends series; however, such devices were not used in the Simpsons series. This indicates the translators of the analyzed Friends series conveyed form along with meaning at the above-word level.

The high frequency of wordplay to non-wordplay strategies in the target language also indicated the inability to transfer wordplay from English to Persian successfully. Different translation strategies were used, with the wordplay-to-non-wordplay strategy being more common than others, contrary to Lumerto's (2021) study that suggested the pun-to-pun strategy as the most frequently used. Bertell's (2014) study emphasized the use of retention as a strategy to translate wordplay.

To answer the third research question, the results showed the three native speakers believed that the formal equivalents were almost frequent in the case of translated wordplay instances. The fourth research question dealt with the perceptions of Iranian EFL students after sharing the results of the analysis on the translated wordplay cases. The findings showed the wordplay samples were effective in engaging students in learning and encouraging them to think critically about translation of audiovisual materials and language teaching through translanguaging. In an Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, the incorporation of translanguaging practices can enhance the effectiveness of teaching English and facilitate intercultural communication. One area that can benefit from translanguaging is visual humor which often relies on wordplay and cultural references that can be challenging to translate accurately. However, the use of translanguaging allows the inclusion of both languages in the translation process, resulting in a more nuanced and culturally sensitive interpretation. Visual humor, in particular, can be effectively translated through intersemiotic translation, which involves the translation of one form of communication to another (e.g., from visual to verbal). This approach allows for the incorporation of elements from both languages, creating a more comprehensive and culturally relevant interpretation. Furthermore, in a globalized world, the ability to communicate effectively across linguistic and cultural boundaries is becoming increasingly important. The use of

translanguaging can help with breaking down these barriers, fostering greater understanding and cooperation across different cultures.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the study illustrated the challenges of translating wordplay in audiovisual materials, particularly in the case of live-action and animated series. The form of wordplay, being above the word level, presents additional difficulties compared to written source texts. However, the study suggested that the use of subtitles and good editorial explanations can aid in translating wordplay effectively. The findings also revealed the potential benefits of using translanguaging techniques to teach wordplay in English language courses, incorporating students' first language for better understanding and retention of new vocabulary and concepts.

While this study contributed to the field of Translation Studies by analyzing language and visual humor in animated and live-action series, its findings were limited to a small sample. Further research involving a wider range of wordplay instances, episodes, and different models is necessary to propose new strategies for translating wordplay in inter-semiotic translation. Additionally, exploring the perspectives of subtitle translators and conducting parallel studies on humor in translation can further enrich our understanding of wordplay and humor in animated series across different time frames. These efforts will ultimately lead to more effective translation strategies that capture the subtleties of wordplay and preserve the humor and wit of the original text in translation.

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