



Translator's subjectivity reflected in the Indonesian subtitle of *Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head*

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Abstract

Humor translation—based on the inherent incongruity of the language and cultural aspects specific to the source language (SL)—has always presented significant challenges, but subtitling humorous content adds a level of difficulty that requires exceptional care to detail. To produce high-quality subtitling, translators/subtitlers must set the correct steps that also unconsciously reflect their subjectivity. This study elaborated on the translator's subjectivity portrayed in the Indonesian subtitle of the Netflix Comedy Special "Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head" by determining the translator's approaches in translating/subtitling verbal humor, particularly in the ethnic jokes contained in the show, using Gottlieb's (1992) Subtitling strategy. Relevance theory, proposed by Sperber & Wilson (1995), was also employed to look into the translator's cognitive process amid the translation process. The result shows that the subtitling strategies, particularly paraphrasing and deletion, used in subtitling the ethnic jokes in the show reflected the translator's subjectivity by conforming to the linguistic and cultural norms of the target audience, which is supported by the claim of Relevance Theory that maximizes interpretative relevance rather than the literal one. Regrettably, the translator's subjectivity can also be a drawback, as it can lead to the loss of meaning, in this case, a humorous intent in the expression.

Keywords

translator's subjectivity, subtitles, ethnic humor

Introduction

Intergroup communication with linguistic and cultural differences encourages translation as a 'door' to acquire much information that could not possibly be accessed without knowledge of other languages (Bassnett, 2014). Accurate translation is crucial for delivering the intended message and meaning in the target language, which can be achieved by preserving the cultural nuances and linguistic complexity of the source text. However, with many steps and limitations that need to be taken into account, translation can be challenging, which is particularly evident in humor translation. In general, humor is associated with a form of communication that evokes the amusement and possibly laughter of the interlocutors (Koestler, 2024). Nonetheless, humor perception per individual is subjective. Each person has a different humor perception that is driven by the incongruity of linguistic and cultural features attached to the (verbal) humor and each person's cognitive processes (Baldwin, 2007). Hence, in translating humor, it is necessary to pay attention to these aspects to convey the same nuance of humor from the source language (SL) joke to the target language (TL) (Chiaro, 2017). In addition, the challenge, once again, increases when trying to translate humor presented in audiovisual media. Subtitling, as one of the techniques of audiovisual translation, requires condensing the dialogue and important details shown in the media into short texts that are bound by character (alphabetical) restrictions and must remain consistent with their appearance underneath the screen (Cintas, 2009; Gottlieb, 1992)

Translators/subtitlers must determine an appropriate and efficient approach to producing an accurate translation to overcome these challenges. Formulating strategies in the translation process is considered important in overcoming problems and producing high-quality translations (Ghassemiazghandi & Tengku-Sepora, 2020; Mulyati & Nugroho, 2023). Therefore, the translation will be easily understood by the target audience, especially if it is done by paying attention to the cultural context of the source and target languages and maintaining the humorous effect of the translated joke (Dhyaningrum et al., 2016; Molina & Albir, 2002). Correspondingly, the translator's decisions concerning subtitling constraints, including their takes on the strategy used in the translation process, reflect their cognitive processes in producing a high-quality translation. These decisions are constantly connected to and influenced by the translator's subjectivity, which includes their background knowledge and personal perspective—social and ideological views, target audience awareness, aesthetic tendency, etc.—are shaped by their linguistic competency and the cultural context in which they live (Xiaohan & Moindjie, 2022). For example, Rasouli and Rahimi (2015) explored how incorporating Islam into the life of the target audience, particularly Persian speakers, can affect translators' choices in translating English Christian short stories. Another aspect, such as humor comprehension, could also affect the steps taken in creating translation products. Translators who are fluent in multiple languages may struggle to grasp humor written in their non-dominant language (Ezrina & Valian, 2023).

As it is heavily linked with the translators' cognitive process, the translator's subjectivity could also be decoded through the lens of cognitive linguistics, particularly the relevance theory. Proposed by Sperber & Wilson (1996), this communication theory highlights the

importance of ostensive-inferential communication, relevance, and inference (Evans & Green, 2015). This theory is consistent with the translator's subjective role, emphasizing that people's cognitive environments are shaped by their physical surroundings and cognitive ability which leads to the translator's decision to ensure the final products are understandable to the target audiences, allowing them to obtain the most relevant information embedded within the text and aligned with the common context (Chen, 2023).

This matter drew the writer's attention to researching a similar topic. Most of the previous studies conducted focus on the translator's subjectivity in the translation of literary works and subtitles without mentioning humor as their focal point. Therefore, this study delves into the process of verbal humor translation and the translator's subjectivity portrayed in the Indonesian subtitle of *Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head*, the newest Netflix stand-up comedy special performed by Hasan Minhaj, by focusing on these objectives: 1) identifying the ethnic humor and the subtitling strategies done by the translator, 2) unveiling the subjectivity reflected in the subtitle strategies done by the translator.

Method

This research employed a qualitative approach, which is based on many forms of text and image data that encourage the researcher's natural revelation and help them become deeply involved in the experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). *Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head* was observed to collect the data for this research. Released in 2024, this Netflix Comedy Special tells about Hasan Minhaj's perspective on midlife identity struggles, race relations, and political divides, which comprises an hour-long episode of stand-up comedy performance (Netflix, 2024). This show was chosen as Hasan Minhaj, a comic who is also the host of the show, often incorporates his personal life as a son of a Muslim-Indian family in the United States, who is vulnerable to discrimination (Malone, 2023). The research data consists of the ethnic humor found in the show, which was retrieved from the show's official English closed captions and Indonesian subtitles directly extracted from the show's Netflix platform. To elaborate on the results and findings, the data were analyzed by identifying the ethnic jokes uttered/mentioned in the show. The elaboration strategy employed in composing the show's Indonesian subtitles, based on Gottlieb's (1992) theory of subtitling strategy, aided in defining the translation quality through data analysis, by dividing the data into three sections: source language (SL), subtitle (ST), and back translation (BT). Then, the implication of the translator's subjectivity was drawn from the analysis of the subtitling strategy with an in-depth explanation through the scope of cognitive pragmatics using the Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber & Wilson (1996).

Results and Discussion

After conducting data collection, it was discovered that *Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head* contains 105 jokes, 43 of which are considered ethnic jokes. As mentioned in the previous chapter of this article, ethnic jokes or humor refer to humor based on ethnicity or race,

commonly containing the generalization of a certain ethnicity being targeted. Below is a more in-depth explanation of the subtitling strategies of the ethnic jokes and how they reflect the translator's subjectivity.

The Subtitling Strategies Employed in the Indonesian Subtitle of Ethnic Jokes Mentioned in *Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head*

The Indonesian subtitle of *Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head* has 1,173 subtitle units, of which 504 units are derived from ethnic jokes featured in the show. Certainly, these subtitle units were composed using a certain strategy for it to accurately deliver the initial message while complying with the constraints of subtitling and preserving the humorous effect in the target language, in this case, Indonesian. The table below shows the strategy conducted by the translator in the making of *Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head's* Indonesian subtitle.

Table 1. Subtitling Strategies Employed in Ethnic Jokes Mentioned in *Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head*

No	Kinds	Occurrences	Percentage
1	Expansion	8	1.54%
2	Paraphrase	105	20.27%
3	Transfer	216	41.69%
4	Imitation	84	16.21%
5	Transcription	1	0.19%
6	Dislocation	0	0%
7	Condensation	23	4.44%
8	Decimation	6	1.15%
9	Deletion	59	11.38%
10	Resignation	16	3.08%
Total		518	100%

From 504 subtitling units, there are 518 occurrences recorded of the translator utilizing the subtitling strategy in the show. Transferring is the most utilized strategy, taking up 20.27% occurrences recorded. It is followed by paraphrasing, imitation, and deletion, with 105, 84, and 59 out of 518 occurrences, respectively. The rest of the subtitling strategy—condensation, deletion, expansion, decimation, transcription—takes up under five percent of the recorded occurrences each. Nonetheless, there are no recorded occurrences of the translator utilizing the dislocation strategy in composing the Indonesian subtitle of the show.

Expansion

In short, expansion is done by adding some information to the subtitle for a more accurate meaning delivery (Gottlieb, 1992). In this case, expansion is one of the least-used subtitling strategies, with only eight occurrences recorded. To give more insight into this strategy, below is an example of expansion.

- SL: Zero to eighteen, you get to live at home.
 ST: **Usia** nol hingga delapan belas,
 kau bisa tinggal di rumah.
 BT: **(In the)** Age of zero to eighteen,
 you get to live at home.

(Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head, 00:41:28)

This example was taken when Minhaj joked about the stereotype between American and Beige-istan parents. The Beige-istan is a term coined by Minhaj to group the races outside the White and Black, who are usually a beige-color skinned, for instance, Asian, Latin, etc. Minhaj explained that the Beige-istan parents usually do not send their children out of the house after they turn adolescent, whereas the American parents do otherwise. In the example, Minhaj mentioned “zero to eighteen,” which was changed to ‘usia nol hingga delapan belas,’ adding usia (age) to the subtitle. This is believed to add more context for a clearer meaning delivery to the target audience.

Paraphrase

Taking up 20.27% of recorded occurrences, paraphrasing became the second most utilized strategy that the translator opted to use in making the Indonesian subtitle of the show. Gottlieb (1992) stated that paraphrasing is altering the arrangement of the words or the sentence structure of the SL to the TL, adapting it to the target audience's preferences. Below is an example of paraphrasing found in the show.

- SL: The day you turn 18...
 ST: **Saat kau berusia 18 tahun...**
 BT: When you are in the age of 18.../
 When you are 18 years old...

(Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head, 00:41:31)

Still in the same joke, this is the continuation of the previous example where Minhaj brought the differences in the American and Beige-istan parents' treatment toward their children. The paraphrasing strategy can be seen in the whole expression. This strategy is most likely suitable to be done for this line because if this line were translated accordingly, word by word, the subtitle would sound unnatural, which might lead to the loss of meaning.

Transfer

In general, transfer is a subtitling strategy that is what the public thinks about the translation process. Transferring is considered the most straightforward subtitling strategy because it is done by translating the SL accordingly without any alteration added to the final result, making this strategy the most utilized strategy in this show, with

41.69% of all recorded occurrences. One of the examples of transfer from the ethnic jokes found in this show is presented below.

- SL: I used to make fun of my Chinese friends
for having two names.
ST: Aku dulu suka mengolok-olok
kawan Tionghoaku,
karena punya dua nama.
BT: I used to make fun
of my Chinese friends
for having two names

(Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head, 00:28:02)

This example was taken when Minhaj told the audience his 'dark side' about ridiculing his fellow Asian friends, especially the East Asian Chinese, for having two names. Then, Minhaj continued to tell his experience of being criticized by one of the audience members because the jokes he performed were inspired by this mockery. This would be a good example of transfer, as there are not many changes made in the Indonesian subtitle.

Imitation

There are 84 occurrences of imitation recorded in the subtitling of the ethnic jokes performed in the show. Imitation is retaining some part of the source in the subtitle, especially a name of an individual or a place, as it is usually untranslatable, or if it is translatable, there would be an alteration of the meaning. The example of imitation is shown below.

- SL: Because she's **Ellen**. She's a 65-year-old white billionaire
who lives in **Montecito**.
ST: Karena dia **Ellen**.
Dia miliarder kulit putih berusia 65 tahun
yang tinggal di **Montecito**.
BT: Because she is Ellen. She's a white billionaire in the age
of 65 who lives in Montecito.

(Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head, 00:26:45)

In this example, Minhaj told the audience his embarrassing past moment when he was trying to correct Ellen DeGeneres on the correct pronunciation of his name. This ended up unsuccessful because it would be difficult for someone to pronounce certain words or names that come from a foreign language and culture. In terms of the subtitling strategy, there are several words in this example that were imitated: Ellen and Montecito. Ellen comes from the name of an American comedian and a talk show host, with her name, The Ellen DeGeneres Show, and Montecito is the name of an area in the US

(Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025). Hence, imitation is the most suitable subtitling strategy for this.

Transcription

There is only one occurrence of transcription recorded in the making of subtitles of the ethnic joke, even in the whole episode of *Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head*. Transcription is a subtitling strategy where the source is translated according to how it would be represented in the target language (Gottlieb, 1992). Here is an example of transcription done in the show.

- SL: And I'm not gonna say her ethnicity... but her name was **Ashleigh**.
 ST: Aku takkan menyebutkan etnisnya... tapi namanya **Ashley**.
 BT: I'm not going to mention her ethnicity... but her name was Ashley.

(Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head, 00:29:39)

In this example, Minhaj told the audience his experience in being called out after doing a joke about making fun of Chinese people for having two names. The woman, who was revealed to be named Ashleigh, criticized Minhaj for choosing such a topic to make a joke that could offend other races. Minhaj continued to implicitly challenge the audience to guess Ashleigh's ethnicity through her behavior and her name. Look closer at the subtitle of this example, the name 'Ashleigh' is changed into 'Ashley', which this alteration is closer to how others would pronounce the name 'Ashleigh.' Therefore, transcription is suitable for this case.

Condensation

Condensation is used when the translator decides to shorten and summarize the subtitle while still retaining the core meaning and context of the source expression (Gottlieb, 1992). In translating the ethnic jokes that appeared in the show, the translator had employed a condensation strategy 23 times. One of the examples found is shown below.

- SL: I'm like, "All right, Dad, sit down. This is important. Let me just explain this to you."
 ST: Aku bilang, "Ayah, duduk."
 Ini penting. Biar kujelaskan.
 BT: I said, "Dad, sit. This is important. Let me explain (this)."

(Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head, 00:35:04)

This is taken from when Minhaj told the audience his experience in trying to tell his dad about the George Floyd incident, which then inspired the Black Lives Matter movement.

This is considered condensation as the translator decided to shorten the “All right, Dad, sit down” and “Let me just explain this to you” parts into “*Ayah, duduk*” and “*Biar kujelaskan.*” Although both are shortened, the translated parts still maintain the context of the joke, which is a characteristic of condensation.

Decimation

Similar to condensation, decimation is a subtitling strategy where some part of the source is reduced to an extent that it often loses some of the context (Gottlieb, 1992). For the ethnic jokes in the show, decimation only happened in six occurrences. One of the examples is shown below.

- SL: You know what you did. **God knows what you did, right?**
ST: Kalian tahu apa yang kalian lakukan.
Tuhan tau.
BT: You know what you did. **God knows.**

(Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head, 00:51:16)

This is where Minhaj made a joke that stems from the white guilt, a collective responsibility of Caucasians for their wrongdoing of imperialism and racism (Kimball, 2013). In this subtitle line, the translator shortened the second sentence, changing it into “Tuhan tau.” (God knows in English). The act of shortening here changes the context where Minhaj initially asked the audience for approval, but it changes into a statement in the subtitle. Hence, this would be suitable to consider as decimation.

Deletion

Deletion is quite utilized in the Indonesian subtitling of ethnic jokes performed in *Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head*. 59 out of 518 occurrences had been recorded. Deletion is also quite similar to condensation and decimation, with differences in erasing the unnecessary part of the expression (Gottlieb, 1992). Below is an example of deletion taken from the show.

- SL: Indians, Latinos, Filipinos, **wherever the fuck** Bruno Mars is from. Beige-istan.
ST: India, Latin, Filipina,
dari mana pun Bruno Mars berasal.
Beige-istan.
BT: Indians, Latinos, Filipinos, wherever Bruno Mars is from.
Beige-istan.

(Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head, 00:13:37)

This is a snippet of a Beige-istan explanation uttered by Minhaj. He explained that other races besides the blacks and whites are considered Beige-istan. The deletion is done by

erasing the expletives in the expression, as it is deemed unnecessary, meaning that whether it is included or not, the meaning of the initial expression would not be much altered.

Resignation

Topping transferring, resignation is the simplest subtitling strategy out of all those mentioned above. Resignation is done by not translating any word from the source, not generating any subtitles at all (Gottlieb, 1992).

SL: Cambodia, Korea, Vietnam, Japan.

[scats "The Imperial March - Darth Vader's Theme"]

[imitates explosion then screams]

ST: Kamboja, Korea, Vietnam, Jepang.

BT: Cambodia, Korea, Vietnam, Japan.

(Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head, 00:16:01)

This example was taken when Minhaj performed a joke about the guilt of Beige-istan and pictured it as the universe of Star Wars. As it is a reenactment of a scene in Star Wars, Minhaj incorporated a mimicry of the soundtrack and sound effects of the movie. The resignation strategy was used in this subtitle line because the translator decided not to translate or add the sound effects Minhaj made in the joke.

The Translator's Subjectivity Reflected in the Indonesian Subtitle of *Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head*

The translators' choices in utilizing certain translation strategies could reflect their subjectivity in doing their work. In the case of subtitling the ethnic jokes that appeared in *Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head* into Indonesian, some of the strategies used by the translator could give a picture of it, for instance, the paraphrase and deletion subtitling strategy.

As it is mentioned before, paraphrasing is a strategy where the translator decides to change the words or rearrange the structure of the expression. In conducting this, the translator is aware of the difference in certain cultural expressions and grammatical structures exclusive to each language. For instance, when a slang word was mentioned in the joke, the translator decided to translate it indirectly, changing the structure and words to accommodate the audience. The concrete example taken from the show is when Minhaj joked about Ronny Chieng being an 'Asian sellout' for having two names, the translator chose to translate it into '*pengkhianat Asia*' (Asian betrayer in English), which is contextually more appropriate for the audience rather than directly translating the term.

In addition, the translator's subjectivity is also influenced by their linguistic and cultural background, which affects the choice of strategies utilized in the translation/subtitling

process (Chen, 2023; Xiaohan & Moindjie, 2022). From translating the ethnic jokes that appeared in the show, the deletions subtitling strategy used by the translator mostly involves erasing the expletives, retaining the final product to a neutral tone. This gives the idea that the translator could have adjusted this to the culture of the target audience, Indonesians, who are not accustomed to using expletives to emphasize expression, as expletives can be seen as rude in the society (Anwar et al., 2021; Cultural Atlas Editor, 2016). This idea would not appear if the translator were not exposed to this information, which is in line with the perspective of Relevance Theory that translation is not about literal equivalence but creating an “interpretive resemblance” between the source and the final product, making the relayed message intelligible and relevant to the target audience (Iłjinska et al., 2019).

Furthermore, it is also mentioned in the introduction that the translator’s subjectivity could affect the quality of the translation product, in this case, the subtitle. This is mainly influenced by the translator’s pragmatic comprehension, which later on can contribute to the quality of the final product, in this case, subtitles (Jegade, 2025). On one hand, it could affect positively, in a similar manner to the example above, where the translator adjusted the tone of the expression in the translation based on the linguistic and cultural manner of the target audience. For instance, Minhaj heavily used sarcasm and satire in his performance, which are examples of impoliteness. Although the translator decided to employ deletion in some occurrences, e.g., deleting profanities in the joke, the function of the impoliteness, relating to the humorous effect of the joke, is still preserved, well-perceived, and entertaining for the target audience (Kaulika et al., 2024). On the other hand, this subjectivity affects the quality of the subtitle negatively, resulting in an inappropriate translation. Looking at this example from the occurrences found in the show, Minhaj had thrown some jokes that mentioned the ‘green card.’ This green card is a common term for the permanent resident card issued by the USCIS (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2025). For audiences who live outside the United States, there is a probability that they are not familiar with what it means by the ‘green card’ which the translator can aid them by giving a proper and adapted translation, hence the initial message and the humorous effect can still be delivered to the audiences. Unfortunately, the translator for the Indonesian subtitles of *Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head* decided to transfer/directly translate ‘green card’ to ‘*kartu hijau*’ (green card in English), which might lead to the loss of the humorous effect. From the perspective of Relevance Theory, the loss of humor effect occurs because the audience is unable to find any relevance of ‘*kartu hijau*’ in their brain, as Relevance Theory explains that the human brain is built to maximize relevance in every information it receives, balancing their interest and mental effort in interpreting messages (Yus, 2017). Therefore, when they are exposed to something they are unaware of, the audience will find it difficult to process the joke; hence, the amusement caused by the joke will be lost.

Conclusion

The subtitling strategies chosen, for instance, paraphrase and deletion, in subtitling the ethnic jokes into Indonesian in *Hasan Minhaj: Off with His Head*, reflected the subjectivity of the translator. This is evident in how paraphrasing and deletion indicate a linguistic

and cultural adaptation to the target audience, for instance, in the case of paraphrasing 'Asian sellout' into '*pengkhianat Asia*', which is a more suitable contextual translation rather than a direct one. Likewise, most of the deletions made in the show are to omit profanities mentioned in the joke, which are inappropriate and do not align with the cultural nature of Indonesians, who value manners and politeness. This is supported by the Relevance Theory, which seeks to increase interpretative resemblance rather than a literal equivalence. Regardless, this subjectivity could also lead to the loss of the initial message and meaning, as depicted in the subtitling of 'green card' into '*kartu hijau*' that hinders the humorous effect due to an absence of cultural relevance.

Surely, there are some limitations in this research. Limiting it to only ethnic humor found in a one-hour-long show results in a small review of the translator's subjectivity observed in the show. For further similar research, selecting various humor shows/series could help explore more on this matter. Getting to know the translator and/or doing an interview with the translator also gives further justification and understanding to the research of the translator's subjectivity.

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