

A PRAGMATIC AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF HUMOR IN THE CAPTION TRANSLATION OF *JOHNNY ENGLISH*

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Abstract

This study examines how captions translate humor in *Johnny English*, drawing on Mona Baker's equivalence framework—particularly its textual and pragmatic dimensions. Through analysis of selected scenes, the research shows that captions convey meaning not only through linguistic transfer but also by integrating visual cues, sound effects, and comedic timing. Textual equivalence is analyzed in terms of cohesion, coherence, and dialogue sequencing, while pragmatic equivalence addresses implicit meaning, cultural references, and humor reception. The findings reveal that captioning often departs from literal translation to apply pragmatic adjustments, ensuring that irony, slapstick, and parody remain effective for target audiences. Textual strategies such as omission, condensation, and sequencing help preserve narrative flow and comedic rhythm. Overall, the study underscores captions as sites of creative negotiation between fidelity and functionality, reaffirming the relevance of Baker's equivalence model in audiovisual translation.

Keywords: *Audiovisual Translation; Captioning; Humor Translation; Textual and Pragmatic Equivalence*

1. Introduction

Humor is one of the most challenging aspects of translation, particularly when it moves across languages and modes of communication. Unlike technical texts, where accuracy may be measured in terms of terminological consistency, humor relies heavily on timing, cultural context, and shared inference. When translated in audiovisual settings, humor must not only be carried through words but also aligned with images, sounds, and gestures. Captions therefore occupy a unique position: they are expected to condense spoken or implied meaning into concise written text while keeping pace with the rhythm of action. In doing so, captions can be seen as a form of translation that negotiates between language and performance.

The film *Johnny English* provides fertile ground for exploring this phenomenon. As a parody of the spy genre, it relies extensively on slapstick comedy, verbal irony, and cultural stereotypes. Much of its humor is not embedded in witty dialogue alone but in the contrast between what is said and what is done. Johnny's exaggerated confidence, often undermined by his clumsy actions, generates laughter that depends on both visual cues and verbal delivery. Translating this interplay into captions requires more than literal substitution; it demands strategies that capture the comic effect as it unfolds on screen.

To frame this investigation, the present study adopts Mona Baker's theory of equivalence, with particular emphasis on textual and pragmatic dimensions. Textual equivalence is crucial for maintaining cohesion and coherence between captions and the unfolding sequence of events, while pragmatic equivalence addresses implicature, irony, and cultural resonance. Together these categories capture the dual task of captions: to preserve the narrative structure of humor and to transmit the intended comic effect to the audience.

This research builds upon a growing body of scholarship that has examined translation strategies, pragmatic considerations, and equivalence in both written and audiovisual contexts. Sanatifar and Kenevisi (2017) explored the application of Gricean maxims in translation, showing how pragmatic principles can guide translators in rendering meaning beyond the literal. Their findings highlight the role of implicatures and cultural inferences—issues that this study extends by combining Baker's equivalence model with pragmatic strategies in the analysis of captions.

Anisah and Basri (2023) emphasize the importance of culturally appropriate equivalents, especially for idioms and humor, arguing that literal translation often diminishes comic effect. This insight is particularly relevant for subtitling, where brevity and timing already place pressure on translators. The present study builds on this by showing how pragmatic equivalence helps captions preserve humor rooted in cultural references and social context.

Gebbia (2023) focuses on how translator trainees handle metaphors, stressing that ignoring local nuance can weaken a text's persuasive or emotive impact. This is directly parallel to humor in *Johnny English*, where local cultural cues are central to the comedy. Captions must preserve these cues without overwhelming the audience, a balance that this study explores in depth.

From a more technical perspective, Nugraha et al. (2019) survey strategies such as addition, reduction, and modulation, which resonate with subtitling techniques like omission, condensation, and sequencing. These mechanisms are crucial for ensuring that captions remain both legible and effective in sustaining humor.

Finally, Rad (2022) underlines the difficulty of balancing verbal and functional equivalence, a challenge faced acutely in comedy translation where fidelity to words may clash with the need to preserve timing and laughter. This perspective helps situate the present study, which examines precisely this negotiation in the subtitling of *Johnny English*.

Although the studies reviewed provide valuable insights into equivalence, pragmatics, and subtitling strategies, several limitations in the existing scholarship remain. Much of the prior work has tended to examine either textual cohesion or pragmatic inference in isolation. Sanatifar and Kenevisi (2017), for instance, focused on Gricean maxims as a pragmatic framework, while Nugraha et al. (2019) catalogued textual strategies such as omission and modulation. What is still underexplored is how these dimensions interact in real practice—particularly in humor, where timing (a textual issue) and irony (a pragmatic issue) often work together to create laughter. This study addresses that gap by applying Baker's categories of textual and pragmatic equivalence side by side, showing how captions negotiate meaning across modes rather than within a single linguistic level.

A second limitation concerns the scope of audiovisual translation research. Many studies of humor in AVT have concentrated on dubbing, where translators can adjust timing, voice delivery, and performance to match comedic rhythm (Chiaro,

2009). Subtitling, however, poses a different set of constraints: captions cannot change delivery or facial expression; they must instead work within strict limits of space and display time. The challenge of sustaining humor when bound to a maximum of two lines on screen and a few seconds of reading time has received comparatively little systematic attention. By analyzing *Johnny English* through captions, this study contributes to filling that gap, demonstrating how subtitling alone can preserve humor despite its constraints.

Finally, a growing body of research has examined fansubbing and machine-generated captions, often highlighting issues of quality, inconsistency, or the struggle to handle idiomatic and humorous language (Szarkowska et al., 2020; Agarwal et al., 2023). While these studies are valuable, they tend to emphasize technical efficiency or stakeholder perceptions rather than detailed theoretical analysis of equivalence. Very few have explicitly applied Baker's framework to examine humor translation in a multimodal context. This project responds directly to that absence by combining empirical scene analysis with Baker's equivalence model, showing how textual and pragmatic strategies work together to sustain laughter across cultural boundaries.

This study is therefore guided by two central questions. The first asks how textual and pragmatic equivalence interact in the subtitling of *Johnny English*. It explores not only how captions encapsulate humor from the original dialogue, but also how they convey situational context, character intention, and comic effect to the audience (Nida, 1964; Baker, 1992; Chiaro, 2009). The second question turns to the challenges of translating cultural and situational humor. It examines how strategies such as localization, adaptation, or omission affect the preservation of comic timing and irony. Supported by work on humor translation (Baker, 1992; Liu, 2015), this question considers how such strategies shape audience perception and enjoyment. Together, the two questions provide a clear framework for investigating captions as mediators of humor in audiovisual translation.

2. Literature Review

The field of audiovisual translation (AVT), and subtitling in particular, has become a central area of inquiry in translation studies. Scholars have increasingly recognized that subtitling is not merely a technical activity but a complex form of intercultural mediation that demands sensitivity to language, culture, and medium-specific constraints. The challenges are particularly acute when dealing with humor, which relies heavily on timing, irony, and cultural allusion. This review synthesizes relevant research on subtitle processing, cultural references, translation strategies, and humor translation, situating the present study within ongoing debates.

4.1 Cognitive Processing and Viewer Reception

Early concerns about subtitling often focused on whether reading subtitles would hinder viewers' comprehension or enjoyment of films. Research over the past two decades has largely dispelled these fears. Perego, Missier, and Bottiroli (2014) found that both younger and older adults could comfortably process subtitled films, even reporting enhanced engagement because subtitles provided linguistic access without detracting from visual attention. A later cross-national study by Perego et al. (2016) reinforced this finding, showing that comprehension levels remained consistently high across diverse demographic groups. These results align with Szarkowska and Gerber-Morón's (2018) eye-tracking research, which demonstrated that viewers are capable of

processing rapid subtitles without significant loss of comprehension. For comedy, where humor often depends on fast-paced delivery, this capacity is critical. Rapid subtitles, when synchronized with action and timing, can enhance rather than inhibit comic effect.

The viewer's cognitive response is also linked to subtitle design. Line length, segmentation, and condensation influence how easily audiences can follow the subtitles while attending to visual cues. Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2007) emphasize that subtitling must balance readability with brevity, a principle especially relevant in comedy, where punchlines are often short and sharply timed. Thus, subtitle processing research underscores that cognitive load is not inherently problematic; instead, poor subtitle design or mistimed captions are the greater risks.

4.2 Cultural References and the Translation of Humor

The translation of humor has long been recognized as a particularly demanding task because humor is frequently culture-specific. Chiaro (2009) notes that humor often relies on linguistic play, cultural references, and social knowledge, all of which may resist direct transfer. In subtitling, this challenge is magnified by spatial and temporal constraints. Sanatifar and Ayob (2022), studying Iranian films subtitled for international audiences, show how cultural references are either localized to resonate with viewers or left foreign to preserve authenticity. Both strategies have implications: localization can risk oversimplification, while foreignization may hinder comprehension.

Zhang, Mahfoodh, and Lin (2024) further explore the treatment of cultural references, comparing fansubbing and official subtitling in English–Mandarin contexts. Their findings suggest that official subtitlers tend to prioritize clarity and accessibility, while fansubbers often aim for fidelity to source culture, even if it challenges comprehension. These contrasting practices highlight the tension between audience accessibility and cultural authenticity, a tension that subtitlers of comedy must constantly negotiate.

In *Johnny English*, cultural stereotypes and parodic references are central to the humor, such as mockery of French sophistication or exaggerated portrayals of Japanese customs. Translating such humor requires more than literal transfer; it requires strategic decision-making about whether to domesticate the reference for target viewers or retain its foreign flavor for authenticity. This tension resonates with Venuti's (1995) domestication–foreignization debate, which remains relevant in evaluating how humor travels across cultures.

4.3 Translation Strategies in Subtitling

Beyond cultural references, scholars have examined specific strategies employed in subtitling to address constraints of space and time. Gottlieb (1992) identifies key strategies such as condensation, deletion, and paraphrase, each of which may be applied to fit captions within screen limits while preserving meaning. Szarkowska et al. (2016) emphasize that condensation is not necessarily a loss but can be a creative adaptation, ensuring readability while maintaining the essence of the dialogue. This is particularly important in comedy, where brevity and timing are integral to the joke.

Nan (2023) argues from a Skopos perspective that subtitling strategies must align with the purpose of the translation. For comedies, the overriding goal is not strict fidelity but the preservation of humor and entertainment value. Thus, strategies such as omission, adaptation, or reformulation may be justified if they preserve laughter. This

insight supports Baker's (1992) argument that equivalence is functional rather than absolute. In comedic contexts, functional equivalence may mean preserving the comic effect even at the expense of lexical accuracy.

4.4 Humor in Translation Studies

The study of humor in translation has expanded beyond AVT into broader theoretical debates. Delabastita (1996) examines wordplay, noting that puns often resist straightforward translation because they exploit the unique features of a language. Vandaele (2002) frames humor as a cognitive effect, emphasizing that it depends on audience recognition of incongruity or irony. These perspectives are crucial for subtitling, where humor must be re-created within severe temporal constraints.

In film translation, Chiaro (2009) underscores the centrality of context: a line may seem unfunny in isolation but becomes humorous when paired with visual action or situational irony. This is especially relevant in *Johnny English*, where much of the comedy arises from the clash between Johnny's self-perception as a competent spy and the reality of his incompetence. Translators must therefore capture not just the dialogue but the situational context that generates humor. Pragmatic strategies, such as highlighting irony or exaggeration, often become more important than textual fidelity.

4.5 Subtitling, Technology, and Evolving Practices

The rise of fansubbing and machine-assisted subtitling has also reshaped discussions of quality and reception. Szarkowska, Cintas, and Gerber-Morón (2020) note that viewers are increasingly discerning, expecting both linguistic accuracy and cultural nuance. Fansubbing communities often innovate in their treatment of humor, using notes, annotations, or creative renderings that exceed the conventions of professional subtitling. While such practices highlight audience demand for cultural richness, they also raise questions about consistency and readability.

At the same time, advances in machine translation pose new challenges. Neural machine translation can produce captions rapidly, but often struggles with idiomatic or humorous content (Agarwal et al., 2023). Post-editing by human translators remains essential, particularly when humor depends on irony, double meanings, or cultural cues. This intersection of technology and human creativity underscores the continuing relevance of theories like Baker's, which emphasize that equivalence involves judgment and negotiation rather than mechanical transfer.

4.6 Analytical Framework

This study is anchored in Mona Baker's (1992) theory of equivalence, a model that continues to inform translation studies more than three decades after its formulation. Baker proposed multiple levels of equivalence—word, above word, grammatical, textual, and pragmatic—each offering a way of understanding how meaning is carried across languages. For the purposes of this study, the textual and pragmatic dimensions are most relevant, since captions must both maintain cohesion with the unfolding visual narrative and preserve the humor that is often implied rather than directly stated.

4.6.1 Textual Equivalence: Cohesion, Coherence, and Comic Rhythm

Textual equivalence, in Baker's framework, refers to the way translated texts sustain cohesion and coherence. Cohesion is realized through linguistic devices such as

reference, conjunctions, ellipsis, and lexical ties (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). For example, when Johnny repeatedly refers to “the man” in the scene where he pretends to fight an invisible criminal, captions must preserve that cohesive thread to ensure that viewers can follow the narrative. Without such ties, the sequence of crashes and exclamations would appear chaotic rather than comic.

Coherence, by contrast, is not purely linguistic but interpretive: it depends on whether the audience can connect captions with the broader situational context (Nisa et al., 2017). In *Johnny English*, coherence requires captions to align with gestures, pauses, and visual punchlines. When Johnny hurls insults at the French and then turns to find Pascal Sauvage standing before him, the humor hinges on sequencing. The caption must be placed so that the insult precedes the reveal, allowing viewers to process the irony at the exact moment intended by the filmmakers.

Another vital aspect of textual equivalence in subtitling is rhythm. Szarkowska and Gerber-Morón (2018) demonstrate that viewers can read subtitles at high speed, provided that timing aligns with the rhythm of speech and action. In comedies, rhythm is inseparable from humor: punchlines lose their impact if captions appear too early or linger too long. Thus, subtitlers often adjust display times to synchronize captions with comic timing. In the sushi scene, Johnny’s mangled Japanese toast must appear just as the audience sees the confused reaction of his hosts; otherwise, the mismatch would undermine the humor. Timing here is not a technical afterthought but an integral part of textual equivalence.

Condensation techniques also play a role. Because subtitles are limited to two lines of text and must remain on screen for only a few seconds, translators often abbreviate dialogue. In Baker’s terms, this is not a loss but a strategic means of preserving equivalence by ensuring readability. Szarkowska et al. (2016) emphasize that condensation, when well executed, allows humor to survive by stripping away non-essential words while retaining comic essence. In *Johnny English*, lines such as “I’m always careful” remain intact while longer explanatory sentences are shortened, enabling the humor to coexist with the visual gag of Johnny hitting his head.

4.6.2 Pragmatic Equivalence: Implicature, Irony, and Cultural Resonance

Pragmatic equivalence shifts the focus from textual cohesion to context and inference. Grice’s (1975) theory of implicature is central here. According to Grice, speakers often flout conversational maxims—of quality, quantity, relation, or manner—not to confuse but to generate meaning beyond the literal. In comedy, such flouting is routine. When Johnny insists “I’m always careful” moments before injuring himself, the caption carries an implicature that contradicts the spoken claim. The humor arises not from the words themselves but from their pragmatic clash with the visual action.

Irony provides another layer of pragmatic equivalence. Szarkowska and Gerber-Morón (2018) argue that irony works by creating a gap between what is said and what is meant, a gap that audiences must recognize and bridge. For subtitlers, the challenge is to preserve this gap within the confines of short captions. In the scene where Pascal Sauvage remarks that the French are “the best waiters in the world,” the caption must signal sarcasm rather than sincerity. A literal rendering would flatten the line, while a pragmatic translation preserves the ironic tone, allowing audiences to perceive the intended humor.

Cultural references also fall under pragmatic equivalence. As Lu (2025) notes, humor often draws on culturally specific knowledge that may not be shared by all

audiences. In *Johnny English*, exaggerated portrayals of national stereotypes—the French as arrogant, the Japanese as inscrutable—must be negotiated carefully. Subtitlers face a choice: adapt these references to make them accessible (domestication) or retain their foreign character (foreignization). Either strategy involves pragmatic decisions about what target audiences will find humorous, echoing Venuti's (1995) broader debate on translation ethics.

Pragmatic equivalence also involves managing communicative breakdowns, which are themselves sources of humor. The sushi scene illustrates this vividly. Johnny's garbled toast is humorous precisely because it fails to communicate; his hosts are shocked not by what he intends but by what he inadvertently says. Translating this requires a caption that preserves the pragmatic failure rather than correcting it. If the line were sanitized into polite Japanese, the humor would evaporate. By foregrounding the miscommunication, the caption preserves the comic effect for the target audience.

4.6.3 Interplay of Textual and Pragmatic Strategies

Although Baker separates textual and pragmatic equivalence for analytical clarity, in practice they often converge. In *Johnny English*, many captions achieve their effect by combining the two. The truncated caption “flo– or,” for instance, exemplifies textual equivalence by mirroring Johnny's fall in its broken form, while simultaneously achieving pragmatic irony by undercutting his attempt at authority. This layered strategy ensures that the humor is experienced both structurally and contextually.

The interaction of textual and pragmatic equivalence also highlights the multimodal nature of subtitles. Captions are not independent texts but parts of a larger semiotic system that includes image, sound, and gesture. Their effectiveness depends on aligning linguistic choices with visual and auditory cues. As Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2007) observe, subtitling is always multimodal, requiring translators to think across modes. Baker's categories, when applied in this context, illuminate how equivalence is negotiated not only between source and target languages but between semiotic systems.

3. Research Method

4.1 Research Design and Rationale

This study adopts a qualitative, film-text case study of *Johnny English*, focusing on how captions translate humor through Mona Baker's textual and pragmatic equivalence. A qualitative design is appropriate because the object of inquiry is not frequency but function—how cohesion, rhythm, implicature, irony, and cultural allusion are negotiated so that the target audience can still “get the joke.” The design privileges close reading of scenes in their multimodal setting (image, dialogue, sound effects, on-screen timing).

The corpus comprises thirty-five captioned sequences sampled across the film. Scenes were selected if (a) the humor depended on timing or sequencing, (b) the humor relied on irony/implicature or cultural reference, or (c) the caption track included descriptive cues (e.g., sound effects) that helped stage the gag. Sequences whose humor was purely visual (with no captioned contribution) were excluded unless the caption track supplied essential cues that shaped interpretation (e.g., “(toilet flushes)”, “(coughs)”). The unit of analysis is a scene-bound “micro-event”: the moment in which the comic trigger is set up and released (setup → cue → punchline), aligned to the relevant caption(s).

4.2 Data Collection and Preparation

The process of collecting data for this study was carefully designed to capture how captions mediate humor in *Johnny English*. The first step involved extracting the official caption track from the film and aligning it with precise timecodes. This allowed the analysis to preserve details such as speaker changes, interruptions, ellipses, and even non-speech cues like laughter or crashing sounds, which often play a role in comic delivery.

Once the captions were aligned, the film was segmented into what is called “micro-events.” These were moments where a comic sequence is set up and resolved—whether through a punchline, a gag, or an ironic twist. Segmentation was guided both by technical boundaries (camera cuts, changes of speaker) and by humor beats (setup and release). For each micro-event, still images and timecodes were noted, creating anchors that made it easier to revisit the scene during analysis.

The next stage was contextual transcription. Each micro-event was transcribed in two layers: the original spoken dialogue (verbatim, including false starts, hesitations, or stumbles) and the corresponding captions as they appeared on screen. To provide context, a short description of the accompanying action or sound effects was also included. This step ensured that the analysis did not isolate captions from their multimodal environment. All of this material was organized into a structured log sheet. For every entry, the log recorded the scene ID, timecodes, original line, caption, action/sound description, a preliminary note on the type of equivalence involved, and early observations about the comic effect.

4.3 Instruments and Materials

Several instruments and resources supported the analysis. The film itself served as the audiovisual reference point, while the caption provides the textual material under investigation. An annotation workspace, consisting of spreadsheets and qualitative memoing tools, was used to log entries, track coding decisions, and refine observations. Finally, a bunch of text recorded was developed and categorized during the process. This contained operational definitions and decision rules for identifying cohesion devices, rhythm and timing features, implicature types, irony and sarcasm cues, handling of cultural references, as well as strategies like condensation or omission.

4.4 Coding and Categorizing Development

The coding scheme drew on Baker’s model, with the primary focus on textual and pragmatic equivalence. Textual equivalence was operationalized through observable linguistic features such as reference chains (“this,” “that”), conjunctions and sequencing, ellipsis or truncation, lexical repetition, and, importantly for comedy, the timing of caption appearance and disappearance. Pragmatic equivalence was coded through categories of Gricean implicature—quality, quantity, relation, and manner—along with irony and sarcasm markers, cultural allusions, euphemism and dysphemism, and instances of communicative failure such as mispronunciation or malapropism.

The categorization was piloted on a small subset of eight scenes to test clarity and consistency. Based on this pilot, revisions were made, particularly regarding when to classify a case as “textual + pragmatic” rather than forcing it into one or the other. Ambiguous cases were always accompanied by analytic memos explaining the decision, which created an audit trail of reasoning. Once refined, the codebook was applied to the full corpus.

4.5 Analytical Steps

The analysis proceeded in seven broad stages. First, segmentation and alignment confirmed the boundaries of each micro-event and checked caption timing against the visual beat of the gag. Second, dual transcription captured both source dialogue and the caption rendering, while also noting descriptive cues such as “(gasps)” or “(vase crashes).” Third, a first cycle of coding labeled each case as textual, pragmatic, or a combination, with short supporting notes. Fourth, analytic memos were written to explain how the caption contributed to sustaining humor—for instance, “truncation mirrors fall; irony undermines authority.”

The fifth stage involved patterning, where coded cases were grouped into clusters: pure sequencing, sequencing with irony, cultural allusion, communicative failure, and physical comedy supported by descriptive captions. Sixth, scene-level synthesis involved writing narrative accounts of how captions mediated humor in each cluster. Finally, these narratives were integrated with Baker’s theoretical categories and mapped back to the two research questions, allowing the findings to be framed in relation to both theory and empirical data.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The analysis demonstrates that captions in *Johnny English* rely on a dynamic combination of textual and pragmatic strategies to maintain humor across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Out of the thirty-five sequences examined, textual equivalence was particularly significant in ensuring cohesion, sequencing, and narrative rhythm, while pragmatic equivalence played a central role in preserving implicature, irony, and cultural resonance. To capture the range of strategies, eight representative examples are highlighted in Table 1.

Scene	Source Dialogue/Action	Caption (Target)	Type of Equivalence	Effect/Observation
12	Johnny insults the French, then turns to face Pascal Sauvage	“Sorry, can I help?” / “Jumped-up Frenchman.”	Textual	Sequencing of insult → pause → recognition preserves timing-based irony.
15	Johnny pretends to fight a criminal behind closed doors; loud crashes and shouts are heard	“The man’s a maniac!” / (Vase crashes)	Textual + Pragmatic	Textual sequencing sustains narrative; pragmatic irony reveals false bravado.
25	Johnny mispronounces Japanese toast in an obscene way	“May all your daughters be born with three bottoms.”	Pragmatic	Humor relies on failed communication and absurd mistranslation, not literal accuracy.
30	Johnny declares “I’m always careful” before hitting his head	“I’m always careful.” / (Hits head on pipe)	Pragmatic	Captions convey verbal irony contradicted by physical action.
19	Johnny explains suspects didn’t enter through the floor but falls mid-sentence	“They didn’t come in through the floor.”	Textual + Pragmatic	Truncated caption mirrors his fall (textual), undermining his authority (pragmatic irony).
13	Pascal Sauvage sarcastically remarks about his country	“The French are, after all, fantastic waiters, the best in the world.”	Pragmatic	Sarcasm conveyed through pragmatic equivalence; literal rendering would flatten the humor.

Scene	Source Dialogue/Action	Caption (Target)	Type of Equivalence	Effect/Observation
35	Johnny and Lorna almost kiss, but Johnny presses the eject button and she is launched out of the car	“Johnny!” (screams)	Textual + Pragmatic	Textual sequencing of romance → chaos; pragmatic irony subverts audience expectation.
31	Johnny stuck in a sewer, toilet flushes above, sewage falls on him	(Disgusted coughs; sewerage falls)	Pragmatic	Physical comedy conveyed visually; captions reinforce irony of situation.

Table 1. Representative examples of textual and pragmatic equivalence in captions from *Johnny English*

4.1.1 Purely Textual Equivalence

Scene 12 provides the clearest example of humor preserved solely through textual equivalence. The comic effect rests entirely on sequencing: Johnny, full of self-importance, delivers a scathing insult about the French, only to pause and turn around to find Pascal Sauvage standing directly behind him. The audience laughs because of the ordering of the events—insult, pause, recognition, embarrassment. The captions reproduce this sequence faithfully, ensuring that viewers in the target language receive the humor at the exact intended moment. There is no need for additional cultural explanation or implied meaning; the humor is self-contained within the textual arrangement. This shows how captions can achieve comic equivalence by maintaining cohesion and coherence, aligning with Baker’s view of textual equivalence as the management of ties that hold discourse together.

4.1.2 Hybrid Cases: Textual + Pragmatic Equivalence

Other scenes demonstrate how textual and pragmatic equivalence often work together. Scene 15, for instance, is built on Johnny’s false bravado. He strides into a room, insisting that his assistant guard the door while he deals with a supposed criminal. The audience hears loud crashes and breaking objects from behind the closed door. The captions reinforce this by transcribing the sequence of noise (“(crashes)”) followed by Johnny’s exclamation, “The man’s a maniac!” This maintains textual cohesion by matching the order of events with the order of captions, while the pragmatic irony emerges when Johnny stumbles out, disheveled, pretending he has triumphed. The captions thus preserve the humor by balancing narrative order with implicature, allowing viewers to see through Johnny’s pretensions.

Scene 19 is another striking example. Johnny begins a deduction in a serious tone, declaring, “They didn’t come in through the flo—,” only to fall before completing the word. The caption mirrors this break with a truncated form, “flo— or,” preserving textual equivalence by reproducing the disruption in speech. Yet the real humor lies in pragmatic irony: Johnny’s fall undermines his attempt to appear intelligent, and the caption signals this collapse to the audience. The combination of textual form and pragmatic content demonstrates how captions can preserve both structure and irony in one stroke.

Scene 35 also blends textual and pragmatic strategies. In this romantic setup, Johnny leans toward Lorna for a kiss, and the audience anticipates a tender moment. At the precise climax, however, Johnny accidentally presses the eject button, sending Lorna flying into the air. The caption “Johnny!” —her scream— anchors the action linguistically, while the sequencing of “romance → chaos” sustains textual equivalence.

Pragmatically, the humor lies in the subversion of audience expectation: a moment that should confirm romance instead collapses into slapstick disaster. The interplay of sequencing and irony makes the scene one of the most memorable examples of humor mediated by captions.

4.1.3 Pragmatic Equivalence as the Driver of Humor

Several scenes demonstrate that pragmatic equivalence alone is sufficient to carry humor across languages. Scene 25 illustrates this clearly. Johnny attempts a Japanese toast, intending to impress his company with cultural sophistication, but instead mangles the phrase into an obscene and absurd sentence: “May all your daughters be born with three bottoms.” The caption deliberately preserves this bizarre miscommunication, emphasizing the failure of communication rather than correcting it. Pragmatic equivalence here ensures that the target audience laughs at Johnny’s incompetence, even if they do not understand the original Japanese words.

Scene 30 is similar in its reliance on irony. Johnny declares with confidence, “I’m always careful,” just before hitting his head on a pipe. The caption faithfully records his words, but the humor arises from the contradiction between the statement and the visual action. Pragmatic equivalence allows the audience to process this irony: what Johnny says and what actually happens are diametrically opposed, and that dissonance is the essence of the joke.

Scene 13 depends on pragmatic choices to preserve sarcasm. When Pascal Sauvage remarks, “The French are, after all, fantastic waiters, the best in the world,” the literal words would, if translated plainly, sound like genuine praise. The humor, however, comes from the sarcastic undertone, which must be conveyed in the caption to avoid misinterpretation. Pragmatic equivalence ensures that viewers recognize the intended irony rather than taking the line at face value.

Scene 31 represents physical comedy where captions reinforce the visual gag. Johnny is trapped in a sewer, coughing and gagging, when a toilet flushes above and sewage pours down on him. Although the humor is primarily slapstick, captions such as “(coughs)” and “(toilet flushes)” provide pragmatic equivalence by anchoring the scene for viewers who may be processing quickly between text and image. These small cues ensure that the irony of Johnny’s humiliation is accessible, even to viewers unfamiliar with the visual conventions of slapstick.

By considering these examples together, it becomes evident that captions in *Johnny English* operate across a spectrum: sometimes relying purely on textual equivalence (as in Scene 12), sometimes dominated by pragmatic strategies (Scenes 25, 30, 13, 31), and often blending the two (Scenes 15, 19, 35). This distribution underscores the flexibility of captions as tools of translation. They do not merely reproduce dialogue but actively orchestrate timing, implicature, and cultural nuance. Textual strategies guarantee that the comic structure remains coherent and rhythmically aligned, while pragmatic strategies ensure that the humor embedded in irony, sarcasm, and failure of communication is preserved. Together, they allow the film’s comedy to travel across languages without losing its punch.

4.2 Discussion

The results of this study shed light on the central questions guiding the research, namely the interplay of textual and pragmatic equivalence in humorous subtitling, and the challenges of translating cultural and situational humor in *Johnny English*. By

examining representative scenes, the findings illustrate not only how captions convey humor across languages, but also how subtitlers negotiate between fidelity to source dialogue and the functional demands of comic timing, irony, and audience reception.

4.2.1 The Interplay of Textual and Pragmatic Equivalence

The first research question asked how textual and pragmatic equivalence interact in the subtitle translation of humor and what this means for audience comprehension and enjoyment. The findings suggest that textual and pragmatic strategies rarely operate in isolation; instead, they frequently overlap, producing layered captions that both preserve narrative structure and transmit implicit meaning. Scene 12 provided one of the rare instances of pure textual equivalence. Here, the humor depended entirely on sequencing—the insult, the pause, and the sudden recognition of Pascal Sauvage. No cultural knowledge or implied meaning was required; the joke worked because the captions faithfully preserved the order of events. This confirms Baker’s (1992) description of textual equivalence as the maintenance of cohesion and coherence across translation. In this case, timing itself was the comic trigger, and captions ensured the timing was preserved.

Most other examples, however, showed a fusion of textual and pragmatic strategies. Scene 19, for example, where Johnny’s speech is cut off mid-word as he falls, demonstrates this interplay vividly. Textually, the truncated caption “flo– or” reproduces the disruption in speech, maintaining cohesion between spoken words and visual action. Pragmatically, the humor arises because Johnny’s attempt at intelligence is undercut by his physical clumsiness. This illustrates Chiaro’s (2009) observation that humor often depends on context and incongruity, and captions must be sensitive to both. The textual form gives the audience the broken word, while pragmatic equivalence signals the irony of his failed authority.

This convergence underscores a broader point: equivalence in subtitling humor is not a matter of choosing between textual or pragmatic categories, but of negotiating their overlap. Humor in *Johnny English* often arises from the tension between what is said and what is shown, and captions must mediate that multimodal relationship. By combining textual sequencing with pragmatic implicature, captions allow viewers to both follow the narrative and perceive the irony embedded within it.

These findings resonate with Nida’s (1964) notion of dynamic equivalence, which emphasizes the effect of translation on the audience rather than literal fidelity. In the case of humorous captions, the ultimate test is not whether the words match but whether the audience laughs. Captions that preserve comic timing and irony succeed because they achieve functional equivalence at the level of audience response. Baker’s categories help explain how this is done: textual strategies align events coherently, while pragmatic strategies carry the ironies that spark laughter.

4.2.2 Cultural and Situational Challenges

The second research question explored the difficulties subtitlers face in rendering cultural and situational humor, and the impact of different strategies on comedic effect. The analysis revealed several recurring challenges. One major difficulty is cultural reference, which often has no direct equivalent in the target language. In Scene 13, Pascal Sauvage remarks sarcastically that the French are “the best waiters in the world.” A literal translation might suggest genuine admiration, completely missing the sarcasm. Pragmatic equivalence requires that the caption communicate tone as much

as content, signaling to the audience that the remark is ironic. This reflects Delabastita's (1996) argument that humor, especially wordplay and irony, is highly context-dependent and cannot be reduced to surface meaning. Captions therefore must sometimes depart from literal wording to preserve pragmatic force.

Another challenge is communicative failure as humor, vividly illustrated in Scene 25 when Johnny mangles a Japanese toast into the absurd phrase "May all your daughters be born with three bottoms." The humor lies in the failed attempt at cultural sophistication, and any attempt to "fix" or normalize the line would destroy the joke. Here, captions must deliberately foreground the error. This is a case where Venuti's (1995) notion of foreignization intersects with pragmatic equivalence: rather than smoothing over the cultural misstep, the caption highlights it, preserving the incongruity that makes the moment funny.

Situational humor also poses difficulties. In Scene 30, Johnny asserts that he is "always careful" just before hitting his head. The humor arises from irony through contradiction, which relies on the audience perceiving the gap between his confident statement and his clumsy action. Pragmatic equivalence ensures that this irony is legible: the caption faithfully transcribes his words, trusting the visual action to supply the contradiction. As Vandaele (2002) notes, humor is often a cognitive effect based on incongruity, and captions succeed here by giving the audience just enough linguistic material to recognize the mismatch.

Physical comedy presents another layer of challenge. In Scene 31, where Johnny is drenched by sewage, the humor is largely visual, but captions such as "(toilet flushes)" and "(coughs)" add pragmatic cues that reinforce the gag. Without these, some audience members might miss details in the rapid action. Pragmatic equivalence here ensures that the audience not only sees but interprets the scene as humorous. This supports Díaz-Cintas and Remael's (2007) view that captions are not supplementary but integral to the multimodal construction of meaning.

4.2.3 Implications for Translation Theory and Practice

Taken together, the findings suggest several broader implications. Theoretically, they affirm the continuing relevance of Baker's model. Textual and pragmatic equivalence, though conceptualized separately, are best understood as interactive and overlapping in audiovisual contexts. This expands Baker's framework beyond print texts, demonstrating its applicability to multimodal humor where timing, gesture, and sound intersect with language. The study also reinforces Nida's and Chiaro's insights that the audience's response—laughter—is the ultimate measure of equivalence in humor translation.

Practically, the analysis highlights the need for subtitlers to embrace creative freedom within the constraints of time and space. Strategies such as condensation, omission, and adaptation are not shortcomings but necessary tools for preserving humor. When Johnny's Japanese toast is rendered as an absurd mistranslation, or when sarcasm is carefully signaled in Pascal's remark, the subtitler prioritizes effect over literalness. This aligns with Skopos theory, which emphasizes that translation choices must serve the purpose of the text—in this case, to make the audience laugh.

The findings also emphasize the centrality of the audience. Humor succeeds only if the audience recognizes it, meaning captions must anticipate how viewers will interpret implicatures and cultural cues. Subtitlers must therefore act as cultural mediators, ensuring that irony and parody are accessible without oversimplification.

This echoes Venuti's reminder that translation is never neutral but always involves ethical and cultural decisions.

Finally, the analysis has pedagogical implications. Training subtitlers should not focus solely on technical accuracy but also on developing sensitivity to timing, irony, and cultural nuance. Subtitlers must learn to see captions not as mechanical transcriptions but as creative translations that bridge languages, cultures, and modes.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how captions in *Johnny English* translate humor through the dual lenses of textual and pragmatic equivalence as outlined by Mona Baker. Analysis of thirty-five sequences revealed that captions function not as passive transcriptions but as active translations that negotiate between dialogue, image, and audience response. Humor was preserved not through literal replication but through the alignment of textual cohesion and pragmatic nuance, ensuring that laughter crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Theoretically, the study reaffirms the continuing relevance of Baker's equivalence model within the multimodal landscape of audiovisual translation. The interaction of textual and pragmatic equivalence observed here supports the view that equivalence operates as a negotiated process rather than a fixed correspondence. In humorous contexts, captions must balance the textual economy of timing and space with the pragmatic need to convey irony, sarcasm, or parody. This flexibility demonstrates how Baker's framework can be productively extended from written to audiovisual texts, highlighting the adaptability of equivalence in dynamic, multimodal settings.

Practically, the findings underscore the creative and interpretive role of subtitlers in comedy translation. Far from being technical transcribers, subtitlers act as mediators of rhythm, tone, and cultural resonance. Strategies such as condensation, adaptation, and omission emerged as functional tools that maintain equivalence under the spatial-temporal constraints of AVT. For practitioners, this highlights the need for a dual competence—linguistic precision paired with sensitivity to performance and audience reception.

Pedagogically, the study calls for translator training programs to emphasize humor as a cultural and pragmatic construct. Subtitling should be taught as a creative act of interpretation, not merely a technical task. Students should learn to negotiate between textual brevity and pragmatic expressiveness, understanding how caption choices shape both laughter and comprehension. In this sense, *Johnny English* demonstrates that subtitles are not peripheral additions but integral to how humor travels, reminding us that translation itself is a performative act that keeps comedic meaning alive across languages and cultures.

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