# Unintentional Humour in the Translation of Jordanian Shop Signs

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**Abstract**

This paper examines unintentional humour, as a *non-bona-fide* instance of communication, in the translation of shop signs in the Jordanian public commercial environment. It shows that unintentional humour not only permeates a shop sign's translated version, but is also indissolubly linked to its lingua-cultural and social context. Closer scrutiny reveals that unintentional humour, just like intentional humour, essentially emerges from script opposition and script overlap (Raskin, 1985), where the communicator *unconsciously* infringes one or more of the Maxims of Conversation (Grice, 1975). The analysis also indicates that, in interlingual communication, unintentional humour hinges upon the interaction between the mediated script and the receiver, apart from the producer; particularly, upon the output of the communicator's interlingual translation competence, which is extricably bound to be conducive of humour-inducing potential.

**Keywords**: unintentional humour; script opposition; infringing a maxim; translation competence; interlingual/intercultural communication

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## 1. Introduction

Humour is a human communication phenomenon that represents a multidisciplinary and fertile research field. As a corollary, there is not a consensusly accepted theory for humour. Despite the fact that recent studies have begun to outline theories that provide an evolutionary characterization to the diverse cognitive, social, psychological and aesthetical facets of humour (Caron 2002), the field is still far away from being fully-fledged. This can be ascribed to the fact that any given humour piece may be accounted for from different viewpoints. For example, the same piece of humour can be interpreted from the psychological perspectives of incongruity, tension relief, or superiority, as described by Lynch (2002). Indeed, humour is a multifaceted communication phenomenon that can be approached from a variety of perspectives in existing research studies (e.g. Freud 1916; Koestler1964; Minsky 1980; Nash 1985; Chiaro1992; Berger 1993; Ruch 1998; Lopez & Maria 2002; Buijzen & Valkenburg 2004). More specifically, humour has been discussed by psychologists (Ruch 1991; Lefcourt 2001; Chiaro 2004); linguists (Alam 1989; De Bruyn 1988; Farghal 2006); discourse analysts (Sherzer 1985; Al-Khatib 1997); computational linguists (Shelley *et al*. 1996; Di Maio 2000); screen translation scholars (Vandaele 1996; Asimakoulas 2001; Buijzen & Valkenburg 2004); ethnographers (Sacks 1974; Apte 1985; Davies 1988); theatre semioticians (Delabastita 1994, 1996 & 1997; Bassnett 1990 & 1998; Heylen 1993; Aaltonen 2000; Marinetti 2005); and, sociolinguists (Martineau 1970; Tannen 1984; Benton 1988). Such heterogeneity of views reflects the fact that humour is a complex notion (cf. also Chiaro 2006:198).

Thus, the very notion of humour seems to be rather elusive and unpindownable as a theoretical concept, which has never ceased to confuse scholars to define the essence of humour. This, however, has not prevented them from venturing down this path, which has, more often than not, resulted in "epistemological hairsplitting" (Attardo 1994:1). Therefore, there is no wonder why humour has rarely been systematically studied as a specific translation problem, and why it still lacks workable definitions or description in relation to its 'translation' (cf. Attardo 1994:3; Vandaele 2002:150). Despite all of this, the conceptual complexity of humour can be analyzed and appreciated. Thus, some humour researchers defend a definition of humour in terms of *effect*; some in terms of *response*; some in terms of *emotions*; and, some are *stimulus-oriented*. Yet, translators and translation scholars seem to have a predilection to operate with what Vandaele (2002:155) calls the "minimal definition of humour", that is "humour is whatever has a humourous *effect*" (ibid.:153; italics in original). This, however, does not mean to

overlook investigating the causes of any particular instance of humour, both linguistic and otherwise, and whether it has intended or unintended effects. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I have chosen to use "humour" as a generic term to cover any phenomena with humour-inducing potential.

Humour can be characterized by the two most general concepts: *incongruity* and *superiority*. The former is concerned with the humourous effect resulting from the departure from normal cognitive schemes, i.e. flouting of basic formal language rules, while the latter relates to the effect of humour (Vandaele 2002:156). This is what has been recently referred to as *script opposition* (Attardo and Raskin 1991), according to which the mechanism of humour production involves conflicting knowledge representations. This criterion holds for humourous translations, that is, if the two domains of *source language text*(SLT) and *target language text* (TLT) are opposed to one another, more successful humour is to be expected. Thus, incongruity as a humorous technique can be used to automatically elicit the dissonant element that is the source of humorous interpretation. Most jokes employ a justification of the incongruity, a "sense in nonsense" (Freud 1905), a faulty or "local logic" (Ziv 1984) in their plot, functioning only on account of a "willing suspension of disbelief" (Attardo and Raskin 1991). Similarly, Paz (1992:159) underlines that texts do not have fixed readings and that every reading of a text generates a new text. Thus, the key component in the structure of a humourous stretch is *incongruity*, without which there can be no laughter.

To probe the semantics of humorous communication (Rojo-López 2002), let us adopt the main hypothesis of the Semantic Script Theory of Humour (Raskin1985) which states that "a text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the (following) conditions [--] are satisfied [:] i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts [and] ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite [--]" (Raskin 1985:99). A script is defined as "a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it" (Raskin 1985:81), i.e. all the information, both intralinguistic and extralinguistic, or encyclopedic, included in a lexical unit (Attardo 1994:201). Scripts are linked with other scripts, forming "semantic networks" (Attardo 1994:201; cf. also Raskin 1983:199; Attardo 1994:198; Attardo 1997:399–400; Attardo 2002:181). It is worth noting that the definition of script was later partly altered by Attardo, or at least the social aspect of the notion was highlighted: [scripts are] "collections of semantic information pertaining to a given subject…[embodying] the sum total of the cultural knowledge of a society, which can be represented as a set of expectations and/or weighted choices" (Attardo 1997:402). Thus, as an everyday phenomenon, humour is increasingly envisaged within its social and cultural context.

The above description maps to translation of humour as follows: a standard analysis of the linear structure of humour states: First, a sense S1 is established in *source language* (SL), based on individual lexeme senses for the content words; the recipient expects to find the same S1 in the *target language* (TL), but encounters an incompatible sense S2, an element that causes the passage from the first sense to the second, which is antagonistic to the first one. The passage from S1 to S2 must be "unexpected" on the one hand, and "immediate" on the other (cf. Attardo 1994:95). Raskin (1985:27) refers to this situation as the *normal/abnormal* script opposition: the initial S1 sense of the SL is rendered by scripts that are invoked by the more standard readings (normal), whereas, the alternative sense S2 in the TL is based on scripts that are invoked by less standard readings (abnormal). For the humour to arise, a suitable incompatibility between the senses is needed.

Therefore, a translated humour is an ideal translation when it shares the same script opposition. Shop signs, the focus of this study, could be described as a specific genre, where the audience has certain genre-based expectations towards it. Unintentional humour in shop signs can be said to represent a *non-bona-fide* instance of communication in the way script opposition arises and the way it violates one or more of the four conversational maxims of Grice's (1975) *Cooperative Principle* (quality, relation, manner, and quantity) in order to achieve mild jocose effect. The selected shop signs for this study do seem to have a great potential for humour to arise from script opposition/incongruity, as the use of words trigger disparate readings since these are associated with one or more scripts, or packaging of information.

A distinction should be made between two types of humour: an intended perceived humour attributed to *intentional* causes as opposed to situational humour where the perceived humour is attributed to *unintentional* causes. The study will largely focus on the latter category where there is an obvious

communicator having no possible intention but unintentionally has aroused a humourous effect. Regardless of the approach followed in 'dissecting' humour, there is a consensus among humour researchers that humour, which typically results in laughter, is basically an *intentional* act that emanates from both the humour communicator and the humour itself, and is expected to be of a perceived value to the listener or reader, who usually turns into a key player once the humour has been aroused. As far as *unintentional* humour is concerned, a completely different picture is obtained in the sense that the communicator's intention to amuse or to entertain is quite lacking. The humour, in this case, emerges unintentionally as a result of the *non-bona fide* mode of communication; yet, resulting in laughter. To illustrate the foregoing remarks, let us take some examples:

1. [In a sign describing a Jordanian flower shop as paradise] "*Paradays* Flowers"

2. [In a sign outside a Jordanian shop targeting naughty kids] "*Crazy* kids"

3. [In a sign outside a Jordanian wash car station] "*Laundry* for Car"

The humour in the above examples arises as an immediate consequence of the communicator's imperfect command of the foreign language (English in our case). This is self-evident from the communicator's inadvertent employment of the words in italics. Hence, each script above is bound to trigger another script that is semantically incongruent with the first; thus, leading to a mild humorous sense. Therefore, these are clear examples of infringing Grice's maxims of quality and manner unintentionally; that is, the communicator declined to provide the phraseology that can appropriately convey the message intended by the source language shop sign, i.e., the English version is incongruent with the Arabic script. It follows also that the induced humour in the scripts above is unconscious on the part of the communicators, but conscious on the part of the receivers. As for the texts themselves, they are victims of unintentional humour, which stems mainly from interlingual rather than intralingual script opposition and overlap. It should be noted that interlingual humour belongs to situational rather than fictional humour (Morreall 2004). A running premise in this paper is that *unintentional humour* emerging from attempting to communicate in a foreign language is a *non-bona fide* linguistic case, which involves socio-cultural implications. On the one hand, it fosters intercultural communication by creating an amiable linguistic environment among interlocutors coming from different backgrounds and cultures, and, subsequently, consolidates inter-social ties.

## 2. The Present Study

This paper is not intended to provide definitive and comprehensive tools that teach translators how to reformulate humour in another language; nor, it is intended to verify the validity of the renowned linguistic theory of humour developed in Raskin's (1985) *Semantic Script Theory of Humour* (SSTH) and its revision, the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GTVH) by Attardo and Raskin, owing to the existence of an enormous amount of work in this respect (for more details cf. Attardo and Raskin 1991; Attardo 1994, 1997, 2001 & 2002; Ruch *et al*. 1993). Because of space limitations, no attempt will be made to reproduce in this context the elaborate taxonomies of humour that have been developed over the years. Drawing on Raskin's (1985) notion of *script opposition*, the aim of this paper is rather to investigate *unintentional humour* in the translation of a number of Jordanian shop signs, which have been selected from different parts of the country. It is crucial to point out that the type of the unintended positive humour response to any given translated humour in this study is indissolubly linked to the linguistic-cultural differences that could not be sorted out in the translation itself.

The widespread existence of translated shop signs, up-and-down Jordan, hardly needs an explanation, for English has become a global language at the moment. This being the case, most local services, consultancies and businesses find themselves in a throat-cut competition to juxtapose the native shop signs with relevant English translations, in order to survive and economically thrive. Translation is used in Jordan as a marketing strategy. This has important implications for successful sign-based communication, which can achieve special effects and the desired stimuli. This paper stresses the point that promoting the status of any shop in Jordan implies the transfer of information from one language to another, which is almost automatically seen as a task that calls for translation. The intended effect of a translated shop sign is to impress customers and arouse positive feelings about products.

Shop signs incorporate everything the client finds significant. They adapt their information to suit their prime objective, which is to promote commodities and ideas that encourage consumption, boost purchase and make money. In other words, a shop sign is an attention-seeking tool to attract clients as to engage them in shopping-making. Therefore, lexical choices are of paramount importance here, while structural properties are less seen than the former (cf. Di Marco *et al*. 1993). Translation plays here a facilitating role as to enable communication and promotion. In the context of shop signs in Jordan, the translation of shop signs sets a benchmark for aspiring and ambitious retailers and traders. It could plausibly be argued that contemporary commercial shop signs are somewhat influenced by the genre produced in the West. Translation can also be regarded as an educational instrument revealing the Western supremacy. Hence, translation is not only a linguistic and cultural activity, but also a key commercial activity.

From *the point of view of Jordanian shop owners*, what they *are normally preoccupied with when it comes to translating* a commercial shop sign *does not seem to be gravitating towards* functional equivalence *along* with a corresponding English translation; in fact, it would be immaterial to them to seek an accurate corresponding version in English; *rather, what is of paramount importance to them is solely to give* some information in English relevant to the shop sign in question; that is to say, the existence of a similar piece of writing in the other language (i.e. English) is irrelevant to the communication act, but relevant to the marketing act. Thus, *for them*, there is no a priori obligation to maintain functional equivalence or faithfulness to the English version in the content or structure of the Arabic one, a fact which provides a rich ground for unintentional humour to surface up. Most likely, shop owners seem to be more concerned about getting an English version that would be effective along the general lines spelled out above than about getting a functionally equivalent or faithful representation of the original.

## 3. Data

The advent of digital photography enabled a smooth compilation of a large electronic corpus of shop signs. This study is based on 467 digital photos of Jordanian shop signs, only a sample of which can be displayed in this paper for spatial limitations. The documentation of these was collected via digital cameras, and the data therein, were stored on CD-Rom and USB Flash Drive files. In the first stage, these signs were sorted out based on whether or not they embody humourous effect. In the second stage, the two parameters of *intentionality* vs. *unintentionality* were applied, as explicitly intentional humourous shop signs were excluded. In order to represent the diversity of the Jordanian "linguistic landscape" (Landry & Bourhis 1997; Ben-Rafael *et al*. 2006), a distinction was also made between a number of different domains according to types of services and areas of activity. The digital photo sampling focused on three affluent cities: Amman (the capital), Irbid (the second largest city in the north of Jordan), and Mafraq (in the east). These three cities exhibit a great concentration of shop signs, owing to the fact that this is where the 'sizzling' commercial activity takes place and the principal public institutions are located.

## 4. Discussion

In the following pages, there will be an attempt to explore the polymorphous nature of *unintentional humour* by investigating the linguistic-translation resources that may 'flare it up' in shop signs in the Jordanian public commercial environment.

## 4.1. Misspelling

Misspelt words can be said to represent the most basic level that may induce unintentional humour. There are many shop signs that have been found to cause a certain degree of laughter, owing to the fact that misspelling unexpectedly took place with lexical items and proper names that are very well-known and common to almost everyone who possesses a fair flair of English. Consider the following illustrative examples (henceforth the humorous words/chunks will be printed in italics):

    4.[In a shop sign outside an orthodontist clinic] Dr. Haithem *Shit*

    5.[In a barber shop sign] *Gentelman* for Men

    6. [In a boutique sign that sells clothes for both sexes] *Uni Six* Nash'at Boutique

7. [In a shop sign for mobile phones] Diamond *Mobil*

8. [In a shop sign outside a pharmacy] *Lorans* Pharmacy

Innocuous the spelling mistakes may seem, the examples above (4-8) clearly show how the inadvertent use of the right spelling of the words in italics can result in a tantalizing feeling of amusement. In example 4, the orthodontist's Arabic surname شيط *shiet* is blatantly misspelt in translation in a way that it shares the form and semantics of another already existing pejorative word in English, *shit*; thus, producing unexpected, unexpurgated smutty farce. Conspicuously, the translator seems to have lost sight of the fact that this unbowdlerized option is problematic in the *shitty* sense, and thus, humour would ooze out as a natural corollary of this linguistic coincidence. The humour in example 5, not only springs from the misspelt word *gentleman*, but is also accidentally heightened by the existence of the prepositional phrase 'for Men', which creates a state of intolerable linguistic redundancy. It should be pointed out that the source shop sign (Arabic in this case) does not maintain this pervasive property; whereas, it unconsciously emerged in the TLT, as the translator was attempting to emphasize the fact that this shop is restricted to men only. Nevertheless, this linguistic property does seem to contribute to the humourous force of the whole sign in the TL.

In example 6, the humour mainly stems from the frivolous spelling mistake in 'Uni Six', where the word *six* in particular is used instead of the word 'sex'. Though this is a simple error, it is quite entertaining, considering the fact that the communicator was struggling to get across the idea that this specific boutique contains clothes and stuff for boys and girls. Examples 7 is self-explanatory in displaying how humour can emanate from misspelt words (mobil) that are pretty familiar to anyone with basic command of English. It is really this familiarity which causes a tickly feeling of entertainment. The last example (8) shows a pathetic orthographic mistake in the proper name 'Lawrence' which was rendered into *Lorans* in the TLT. This pharmacy is actually named after its owner Dr. Lawrence who seems to have taken liberty in spelling his name the way he pleases. The sharp difference between the English name 'Lawrence' and its Arabic counterpart 'Lorans' in the translated version is likely to lead to a mild feeling of joy. As it has been noticed, misspelling is often bound to produce funny forms that enable the emergence of scripts that are drastically different from the intended ones, which is likely to trigger humour. It is clear though that frivolousness of misspelling remains one of the sources of unintentional humour in translated Jordanian shop signs. *Equally important, mastering spelling is a key linguistic competence which enhances appreciating the humour stemming from the reverse (i.e. from the mishandling of it)*

## 4.2. Semantic Accuracy in TT

The analysis of data has shown that there is a plethora of instances which constitute a breach of the semantic accuracy of the intended message, which results in humourous scripts in their translated versions. The communicator's inability to render into the TL a given message adequately and accurately can cause a translation havoc that would induce humour, as can be seen in the following authentic representative examples:

(9) [In a shop sign outside a saloon for ladies] *Another You*

(10) [In a boutique's shop sign] Al-Karawan *Spore*

(11) [In a department store's shop sign] Barakaat *Show Room*

(12) [In a takeaway restaurant's shop sign] Mishwaar *Rest*

The humour in example 9 can be captured when the SL shop sign text is juxtaposed with its TL counterpart. The directionality of humour in this specific example is reversed, as it originally lies in the SLT, rather than in its translation. The source Arabic script أنت أخرى (enta ekhra), which literally translates as 'you may/can shit' represents a case of lexical ambiguity, emanating from the homonymous word أخرى *ekhra* which simultaneously means 'to shit' or 'too/another'. Indeed, this less standard (less prudish) reading violates Grice's maxims of manner and quality. It is taken for granted that homonymous words are ambiguous words that exhibit multiple senses that are completely unrelated, as has just been indicated. The latter meaning (to shit), which is essentially a colloquial bawdy usage represents the

unintended humourous reading or script, while the other more standard sense (too/another) represents the intended humour-free reading or script. The communicator could have avoided ambiguity had he/she used الاخر *al-aakhar* (an alternative mono-semantic, unequivocal standard word) instead of أخرى *ekhra* in order to remove any innuendo to the idea of 'human excrement'. Thus, homonymous words may produce humour by introducing an incongruent, but prominent, script into the context in question. In other words, homonymous words may cater for humour by giving rise to two competing scripts in a given context, although the humorous script usually takes precedence over the other one, as has been shown in 6 above. Finally, it can be said that ambiguous words, in general, do seem to come into play with humour in translation, irrespective of the directionality of the activity of translation.

The humour in example 10 reflects a socio-linguistic cultural difference between Arabic and English. The word *spore*, in the boutique's shop sign *Al-Karawan Spore*, is extraordinarily funny and comical once one figures out what it has been used to communicate. Culturally speaking, Arabic makes a distinction between two types of clothes: the ready-made clothes that can be picked up from boutiques and clothes that are being tailored out. Accordingly, Arabic differentiates between 'ready-made clothes shops' and 'tailors' shops'. Normally, the first type is linguistically marked by the expression ألبسة جاهزة *albisah jahiza* which literally means 'ready-made clothes'. Due to the fact that this type of shops significantly outnumbers the other type (i.e. the tailors'), there have been many attempts to render into English this linguistic label as a distinctive feature, and, as a result, different funny translations emerged. One of these is the "sense in nonsense" (Freud 1905) choice of *spore* which has nothing to do with the intended message. Indeed, this translation triggers a fawning script that is totally different from the one envisaged by the communicator. A possible explanation for this inept humourous choice is the existence of the colloquial Arabic word سبورات (sporaat), which is extensively used in the Jordanian markets to mean 'ready-made clothes'. Considering the influence of such a word (i.e. sporaat), we have no choice but to have a good laughter at this linguistic 'creativity'. Another aspect which does appear to boost the humour of this unintentional script derives from pondering the semantics of this medical word (*spore*). In many scientific- medical writings, *spore* is exclusively used to indicate micro-organisms and germs that particularly go through their dormant stage, and so, one here can just imagine the awkwardness and comicality of such a translation.

Likewise, example 11 further supports the claim that unintentional humour is indissolubly linked to its linguistic, cultural, and social context. In this example, the unintentional humour arises from the inadequate employment of the noun phrase *Show Room* as a rendition for the Arabic word *ma'rad* معرض which is linguistically used in the Jordanian culture to denote an exhibition, but more recently, has become a "local logic" (Ziv 1984) indicative of a big shop, or anything equivalent to a semi-department store. Thus, what generates the humour in this example is the communicator's improper choice of *Show Room* which ineluctably gives the wrong idea about the shop and flouts Grice's maxim of quality. For the English mentality, the compound *show room* must be indicative of a place where plays (dramas), movies, seminars, or presentations are shown; a script that is utterly different from the originally intended one. Though this script is dissonant with what the communicator basically aspired to get across over, it remains the most prominent and overriding one, whereas the intended script is relegated to a subaltern one, and remains lingering in the background. It is clear that this discrepancy is what fuelled the emergent unintentional humour in such a socio-linguistic and cultural context.

As far as the humour is concerned in example 12, it can be said that this particular example further substantiates the broad premise that in cross-language communication, the communicator's interlingual translation incompetence caters for script opposition, which, in turn, yields amusement and jocosity. The word *rest* in the above example is a culture-bound concept in the Jordanian socio-linguistic environment, which is employed to signify 'a takeaway restaurant', 'a café', or 'a highway service'. In this particular context, *rest* is only pared down to mean 'a takeaway restaurant'; a script that is entirely incongruent with what it should presumably indicate, and the basis upon which the resultant unintentional humour rests. A possible reason that may account for the erroneous employment of the English word *rest* is its SL counterpart استراحة *istiraha* which literally means *rest or comfort*. Figuring the semantics of the Arabic word, one can realize how the communicator was influenced by the SL to the point that his/her translation competence could not bail him/her out. As a result, *rest* was utilized as a corresponding lexical item for the idea of a 'takeaway restaurant', which is a dominating unintended reading that infringes Grice's maxim of quality. *It is clear from the above discussion that possessing an explicit knowledge of*

*the meticulous cultural references and linguistic differences is deemed not only to assist in judging the extent of lingua-cultural derailment in the translated version, but also, in appraising the arising humour.*

## 4.3. Lexical Gaps

Lexical gaps, which reflect the voids in the semantic blanket in any given language (Rabin 1958; Ivir 1977; Dagut 1981), are prevalent in almost all human languages without exception. This should not be understood as those languages which occasion less lexical gaps are more capable in expressing the human propositions operative in such a language or culture, and thus, should be considered superior to others, while those which feature more lexical gaps are less capable in doing so, and thus, should be viewed as inferior. On the contrary, every language has its own ways and means to express any thought in the world, and to abridge the lexical gaps communicatively functionally and idiomatically; a fact that explains the existence of different concept systems across languages and cultures. It is this fact that motivated many people to acquire foreign tongues. The analysis of data has shown that sometimes unintentional humour trickles through to us as a result of the communicator's inability to handle lexical gaps in the target language. Observe the following three authentic examples:

> (13) [In a diary's shop sign] *Jameed* Karaki جميد تركي
>
> (14) [In a shop sign for accessories] *Danadiesh* Accessories
>
> (15) [In a jewelry's shop sign] *Karamiesh* Jewelry

To comprehend the unintentional humour in example 13, it is imperative to demarcate the cultural context, without which the humour would escape cognition and go unnoticed. In the Jordanian culture in specific, *jameed* is a semantically-loaded lexical item that is employed to refer to a special type of condensed yoghurt that is, most often, prepared locally at the countryside and Bedouin areas. This type of yoghurt is prepared by being dehydrated and over-salted as to obtain it in the solid state (usually taking the shape of ball-like lumps), as it was initially saved for the long winter nights. At winter, it would be melted down again by water and then consumed up. In fact, this represents a Jordanian tradition that was basically driven by the dire need for yoghurt in winter, since it cannot be saved in its liquid state in summer. This tradition has never come to a halt at all despite the fact that the electric refrigerator has sorted out the 'saving problem' once and for all. The reason for clinging to it, however, is that the standard yoghurt is quite watery which spoils its flavour, while *jameed* is condensed in a way that gives the original strong taste of yoghurt that has not lost its goodness. Indeed, *Jameed* is very well-known to all Jordanians, as it is used abundantly with Mansaf, a delicious Jordanian dish that ranks first among all Jordanian local and national dishes. Avaricious Mansaf-eaters would very well cherish just the thought of it with *jameed*.

The unintentional humour in example 13 above gushes out from the communicator's attempt to fill in the lexical gap by recourse to the SL expression *jameed* itself, which is far away from being lexicalized in English. Thus, the expression *jameed* is totally incomprehensible in English and thus the reader would work it out based on his/her encyclopaedic knowledge which may avail him/her nothing in this intricate situation. As a result, this unsatisfactory choice compels the reader to encounter an incompatible sense which unavoidably results in an abnormal script. The humour is also heightened by the misspelling mistake in the second word Karaki. Karak is a governorate in the southern part of Jordan renowned for the best home-made *jameed* in the country. The /i/ at the end of the word is suffixed as to derive genitive, and so Karaki means pertaining to Karak. In the Arabic version, Karaki was unconsciously translated as Turki, which means Turkish. This might be attributed to the fact that Karaki and Turki show some morpho-phonological affinity.

Similarly, examples 14 & 15 further support the notion that lexical gaps could create humourous scripts. Feeling the pinch of incredulity in translating unlexicalized and semantically-complex expressions, the producer in these two examples opted for transliterating rather than translating: *Danadiesh* in 14 & *Karamiesh* in 15. As it can be noted, these two words do belong to the same morphological pattern, let alone the phonological similarities. Semantically, these words are different as each denote and connote different things. The word دناديش (danadiesh) is overextended in Arabic, covering anything dangling or hanging out that can be put on as an ornament such as bracelets, bead-series, bead-made stuff, necklaces,

ribbons, pins, medals, etc. The word is also semantically extended to include the multi-colour thread strands ornamenting the horses' saddles and the like. In its immediate Arabic context, *danadiesh* was also subjected to incorporate all modern various garnish snippets and accessories, which adds to its conceptual complexity and gives it a great deal of humourous effect. Being unaware of this lexical gap, however, the producer verbalizes the multi-layered meaning of *danadiesh* by borrowing the very same word, thus, causing laughter by bringing to the foreground a humorous script.

As far as *Karamiesh* is involved, the Arabic word كراميش (karamiesh) does not have a specific fixed meaning, i.e., the word is somewhat vague in the sense that it can be employed to talk about anything cool, tender, gentle, soft, glittering, sparkling, glossy, flashy, etc. The wide spectrum of senses this word holds can explain why there is a lexical gap in this semantic field. To bridge the linguistic-cultural rift, the communicator introduced the very same word *karamiesh* as an insipid corresponding lexical item for the Arabic *karamiesh*. The humour here comes from the thought that the communicator had the assumption that the choice he/she resorted to is successful in communicating the semantically and culturally-loaded meaning. Thus, lexicalizing by snitching the same lexical construction from the SL is itself a funny, entertaining semanticizing repartee. Clearly, the two examples already discussed infringe the maxims of quality, quantity and manner. *In general, it can be said that exhaustive acquaintance with the semantic fields and/or the concept systems across languages and cultures is extricably bound to help assess how communicators deal with cases of lexical gaps, which subsequently, affects the way the resultant humour is perceived and weighted up by the TL audience*.

### 4.4. Morpho-phonological Resemblance

In some instances, perceptible fortuitous humour can be triggered by the communicator's linguistic blunders, germane to the erroneous employment of a lexeme that bears some morpho-phonological resemblance to an already existing word in the TT. This sort of linguistic mishap can be exemplified by the following illustrative cases:

(16) [In a computer shop sign] *Laptops* Service صيانة لا بتوب

(17) [In a body-building & fitness sign] *Teen* Agers تين ايجرز

(18) [In a flowers shop sign] City *Rose* ستي روز

(19) [In an Internet café's sign] Orbit Internet *Café* أوربت انترنت كافيه

(20) [In a carpets' shop sign] *Save way* الصراط للسجاد والموكيت والمفروشات

In the examples 16-19 above, the unintentional humour emerges as a result of recourse to transliteration (a point that will be taken up in more details in the subsequent section 4.2.4), where the provided transliterated form bears a morpho-phonological resemblance with an already existing expression; a linguistic coincidence that rekindles passion for banter. At this juncture, it is crucial to point out that the morpho-phonological resemblance can be of varying degrees, reaching in some cases to a complete resemblance or match; that is, the transliterated form sometimes happens to share the same *linguistic sign* with another TT word; yet, each shows great expressive variety. Being unaware of the consequences of transliterating, the communicator unconsciously provided لا بتوب *labatuub* in 16 as an equivalent for *laptops*, where *labatuub* happens to mean 'I will not repent' in Arabic, and thus, the accidentally emerging script reads "I will not repent service." In example 17, the transliteration of *Teen* into تين *teen* yields humour as the latter happens to mean 'figs', and thus, producing an odd script that reads 'figs agers' in the TT; in example 18, transliterating *rose* into روز *roz* gave rise to humour as *roz* happens to mean *rice* in the colloquial Jordanian varieties, and so, delivering in that a script that reads 'city rice' in the TT, while in example 16, transliterating café into كافيه *kafiyah* produced humour as *kafiyah* happen to mean 'enough', generating in that an abnormal script that reads 'Orbit Internet Enough' in the Arabic version. In the last example (20), the humour results from the communicator's confusing 'save way' with 'safeway'.

Apparently, the communicator's search for words in his lexicon was based on fuzzy morpho-phonological resemblance, which initiated a humorous script, thus effectively plunging him/her in the happy snare of

unintentional humour. Needless to say that this bunch of instances categorically violates three maxims: quality, relation and manner. *Based on what has been indicated above, it can be claimed that having an 'eagle-eye' on the input as well as the output of translation insofar as transliteration is concerned can play a vital role in a wholesale grasping of the comical byproduct of the entire activity.*

## 4.5. Semi-translation

Semi-translation is especially rife in the translation of Jordanian shop signs. Thus, a dazzling number of accidental humour situations can also originate from translating half of the script and transliterating the other half. Rather than being a mere linguistic or intellectual frippery, the strategy of transliteration is predominantly employed in the translation of many commercial Jordanian signs, as the analysis of data has shown. Indeed, Jordanian translators have a long-standing tradition of resorting to transliteration. In the previous section, we have seen how transliterated forms created confusing unintended scripts, as they coincidentally matched actual morpho-phonological forms in the TT. In this section, the communicator heavily utilizes transliteration as a somehow rumbustious solution to encounter any lexical or conceptual problem in translation. Humour here emanates form two factors: the first is that these transliterated words can be *easily* translated into English; i.e., they never constituted lexical gaps in the TT, and secondly, the TT version becomes a curtailed or truncated script which needlessly baffles the mind of those who do not know any Arabic. Consider the following authentic examples:

> (21) [In a pharmacy sign] *Al-Wasat* Pharmacy

> (22) [In a pharmacy sign] *Al-Shifa* Pharmacy

> (23) [In a shoes shop sign] *Kutkut* أحذية

> (24) [In a boutique's sign] *Prince* بوتيك

> (25) [In a boutique's sign] *For Fashion* العراب

From the point of view of non-natives, the above examples (21-25) reveal how transliteration gives rise to truncated scripts, which can be a source of unintentional humour. Thus, exteriorizing the words *Al-Wasat* in 21 and *Al-Shifa* in 22 from such translations leave the reader with only the other halves of the scripts, that is, *pharmacy* in both cases. In other words, on the assumption that these transliterated words are oblique and unintelligible to the English-speaking interlocutors, they should not be regarded as part of the scripts, and so each script should be envisaged as if the transliterated component did not exist there. Such intuitively mental exteriorization is geared to produce incompatible scripts, compared to their SL ones. The communicator could have easily avoided the resultant humourous incongruity had he/she weeded out the Arabic elements *Al-Wasat* and *Al-Shifa*, and communicatively translated them into 'central' and 'cure', respectively.

In the examples 23-25, a little bit different picture is obtained in the sense that the communicator built a script half in Arabic and half in English, without transliterating any material. Though transliteration was not exploited as a translation strategy, the point of semi-rendition is still prevailing, as some words were left untranslated, posing in that a comprehension problem. Likewise, the inconceivable Arabic words أحذية *ahthyyah* in 23, بوتيك *buteek* in 24, and العراب *al-arraab* in 25 are automatically mentally dropped out from the intended scripts, thus reducing the TT scripts into nebulous ones: *Kutkut*, *Prince*, and *For fashion*, respectively. Evidently, the fortuitous humour here burgeons from the fact that these truncated scripts are, on the part of the producer, presumed to formulate autonomous and self-contained scripts, but, on the part of recipients, are actually far away from doing so, as the overseas reader or spectator misses out on Arabic. From the above, it is already clear that the transliterated form or the borrowed SL word can be said to act as a kind of magnifier of the incongruity between what is said and what is meant, and the recourse to semi-translation inevitably pushes the text beyond the semantic grasp of foreign readers who don't speak the language.

Casting a scrutinizing glance, it can be noted that this specific set of examples (21-25) do seem to infringe the four maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner. *It should be highlighted here that a sharpened knowledge of the different promotional strategies operative in a particular setting and a*

*sharpened sense of market perceptions may well advance our understanding of the semi-translation technique being opted for as well as help obtain an educated insight into the type of humour yielded.*

## 4.6. Word Order

Word order refers to the way words are concatenated in phrases and sentences. It is an incontestable fact that such a concatenation is syntactically governed. Hence, breaking the relevant syntactic rules is bound to destabilize the intended script, and give rise to antagonistic humourous scripts, as can be illustrated in the following examples:

(26) [In a kids' shop sign] Planet Angel دنيا الملائكة

(27) [In a dentist's clinic sign] *Care Dental Center* مركز العناية

(28) [In an Internet café's sign] *Center Rana Future* مركز رنا المستقبل

(29) [In a computer's shop sign] *Spectrum City Computer* طيوف مدينة الكومبيوتر

(30) [In a pharmacy's sign] *Amman West Pharmacy* صيدلية عمان الغربية

On closer inspection, the above examples do seem to flaunt the inextricable link between wrong word order and the emergence of unintentional humour. The precursor of humour in example 26 is the wrong placement of the word *planet* initially, as it should have occupied the second position in this nominal construction. Similarly, reversing the right order of *Dental Care* in 27, *Rana Future Center* in 28, *Computer City Spectrum* in 29, and *West Amman Pharmacy* in 30, generated somehow burlesque scripts. The communicator seems to have capitalized on his/her linguistic knowledge of the moveability of constituents within phrases, compounds, sentences, etc., but has forgotten that these changes would attenuate the intended scripts and flout the maxims of quality and manner. *Thus, a deeper appraisal of the emerging humour in the TL in the above instances is clearly associated with possessing some little syntactic knowledge on how the immediate constituents of the English sentence are arranged and syntactically-governed by each other. However little this syntactic knowledge may be, it results in a poignant humour in the TL version.*

## 4.7. Denormalizing Normality

Denormalizing normality refers here to the tampering with the local logic operative in a certain culture or subculture through the use of a convoluted register, which is likely to produce a somehow marked, clumsy, dodgy, or even insipid linguistic localisms. As a result, such linguistic fooleries may successfully transpose a comical prank into the script**.** To get a better grip, let us consider the following illustrative examples:

(31) [In a shoe's shop sign] *Strawberry* فراولة للأحذية

(32) [In a boutique's sign] *Fresh Fashion* أزياء فريش

(33) [In a fish shop sign] *Fresh Frozen Fish* سمك طازج مجمد

While not smuggling in obscene or hostile content, the twisted local logic in the above examples (31-33) seems to have led to reigning humourous scripts, which may be ascribed generally to the lack of homology between SL culture (i.e. Arabic) and TL culture (i.e. English). Thus, the accidental humour in example 31 hinges on the inadequate combining of *strawberry* and *shoes* in the Arabic script. Dropping out the word *shoes* from the TL version yields an incongruous script, consisting of the word *strawberry* alone, thus making the audience, on the basis of normal logic, associate the TT one-word script (i.e. strawberry) with something like fruits, cocktail juice and the like; a surreptitiously practical joke. Likewise, both the SL script producer and the translator had no qualms over combining *fresh* with *fashion* in 32, and *fresh* with *frozen* in 33; weird combinations which open the path to pleasure. Admittedly, the example *Fresh Frozen Fish* can be said to represent a case of translation which can twist information into factual error, thus declining into a laughable linguistic ineptitude.

In other words, this is an instance of blatant self-contradiction which brings about informational redundancy, insofar as English has a low tolerance for such a feigned ignorance or transgression. As we have seen, much of the nudging unintentional humour in the above examples derives from denormalizing normality; or rather, from twisting the local logic prevalent in a given speaking community. *It is obvious that the more sensitization we have to the various linguacultural localisms, fooleries and even stereotypes, the tighter our grip would be on the concomitant humour in the TLT and the more pleasure we would enjoy.*

## 5. Conclusion

This paper is an overdue attempt to highlight the issue of *unintentional humour* as a topic of – serious – research in English-Arabic translation studies. The study has followed an empirical line by attempting to investigate what may happen when translators, in real life, are engaged in an interlingual communication and with which foreseeable implications. In this study, a sketch of an application of the *script opposition* parameter of the General Theory of Verbal Humour to the translation of Jordanian shop signs is presented. Under this cloak, the translation of Jordanian shop signs proved to be a fertile ground for the emergence of salubrious unintentional humour, offering an ideal, humour-prone type of a "linguistic landscape" (Landry & Bourhis 1997; Ben-Rafael *et al.* 2006) to unintentionally leverage amusement in commercial and social contexts. The discussion has made clear that translation produced humourous scripts which appeared to be "models of the interaction of language and social life" (Muhawi 1994:155). The study has particularly shown that social life, or culture, and language do not function as separate analytical categories; they come together in a playful manner in such a fashion that culture shapes the rhetoric of texts/scripts and even the rhetoric of their translated versions. On the interlingual side of the equation, the discussion has revealed that the communicator's translation incompetence in cross-language communication is a primary source for unintentional humour, which constitutes a clear instance of *non-bona fide* humourous communication.

The study has also indicated that unintentional humour considerably differs from tendentious humour in terms of intentionality. While the former lacks the communicator's intention to create a laughtrack, or to open the path for pleasure, the latter persistently hinges upon the communicator's intention to amuse his/her audience. As far as the status of the receiver is concerned, the study has shown that, in unintentional humour, the receiver assumes the role of an astute reader who is capable of seeing through the translated version much more than the producer himself/herself; whereas, the receiver in tendentious humour is aware of the intended speech act of entertaining, and thus, he/she qualifies as a collaborating interacting participant, i.e. as the other half of the equation. As for the humour itself, the two modes of humour display a commonality in the sense that both of them operate through *script opposition* and *script overlap*. Indeed, the study made it clear that effective unintentional humour depends on the ease with which the opposed scripts and the resolution of the opposition are accessible to the receivers. It follows also that while the humourous script in tendentious humour is generated as a result of the conscious flouting of one or more of Grice's (1975) maxims of conversation; it is argued that the humourous script in unintentional humour is yielded through the unconscious infringing of one or more of these maxims, i.e., delivered as a *non-bona fide* humour.

Indeed, the present analysis has done little more than provide the groundwork for such empirical study as far as Jordanian shop signs are concerned: the study has also attempted to yield flashes of issues such as knowledge of foreign language, norms of linguistic integrity, translation norms, metalinguistic dimension of scripts, the interaction of language and culture, and linguacultural sensibilities and sensitivities.

- For the purposes of documentation, a sample of the digitally collected data is deemed necessary to be attached.

## APPENDIX

## A. Misspelling

## B. Semantic Accuracy in TT





## C. Lexical Gaps



## D. Morpho-phonological Resemblance



## E. Semi-translation

## F. Word Order



## G. Denormalizing Normality

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