

Translation of wordplay based on ambiguity: The case of *Yes, Minister*

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The wordplay in the famous BBC *Yes, Minister* Series has always attracted the attention of researchers in the field of translation of humour. Zabalbeascoa (1996) mentions it in the context of translation of culture-specific puns, Chang (1997) devotes it a chapter in his description of the process of translating the printed version into Chinese, and most recently Pedersen (2015) analyses visualized metaphors and their translation into Swedish. The aim of our study was twofold: first, to investigate the basic principles of language that the “language dependent” puns in the printed version of the famous BBC series rely on, and second, to systematically analyse the ways these puns are rendered into a language typologically different than English, namely Czech.

We understand wordplay broadly as “the various textual phenomena in which structural features of the language(s) are exploited in order to bring about a communicatively significant confrontation of two (or more) linguistic structures with more or less similar forms and more or less different meanings” (Delabastita 1996: 128). Our analysis reveals that the majority of the ambiguous linguistic structures the puns exploit are lexical; many of the puns rely on switching between two interpretation modes, i.e. the open-choice principle and the idiom principle (Sinclair 1991, 109–110), and can thus be considered as cases of what Partington calls relexicalisation and reconstruction (2009: 1798).

Systematic comparison with the Czech equivalents in the official translation of the book and with translations made by students of the translation programme at Palacký University in Olomouc suggests that although Czech can rely less on homography and homophony, it makes use of polysemy and homonymy of forms. As “verbal humour exploits linguistic ambiguity to extremes” (Chiaro 2010: 2), the comparison allows us to address the issue of its translatability (Attardo 2002: 190).

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