# Chapter 15
# Humor

Humor is difficult to translate and even more difficult to interpret. For a simultaneous interpreter to draw a laugh from the audience at the same time that those hearing the original joke burst into laughter is a rare feat.

An interpreter must be attentive to the purpose of the humor. Many speakers will begin a speech on a humorous note just to be clever or simply to establish rapport with the audience. For example, a British Ambassador acting as President of the UN Security Council once began a meeting with a limerick dedicated to the Russian ambassador, who had just come back from Florida with a handsome tan while the other Security Council members had weathered a bitter New York snowstorm:

> Serguei is a difficult name
> To slip in the limerick game
> But we have to admit
> That he looks so fit
> That he puts the whole Council to shame.

Needless to say, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for simultaneous interpreters to render a complex verse form like a limerick into French, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, and Chinese while preserving the humor.

In such cases it is helpful but not indispensable for the joke to be accurately translated; the joke is merely an "opening gambit". On the other hand, jokes are sometimes used to convey a key point of the speech. In those cases, the message is more important than the humor, and it is the content of the message, not the humorous "sugar coating", that the interpreter should strive to translate.

Although the joke must sometimes be sacrificed to the message, it is of course preferable to preserve the humor whenever possible, since it can often be *part* of the message. Moreover speakers sometimes use humor to

revive a somnolent debate or to break the ice when a negotiation has come to a deadlock. In such situations the humor is not incidental to the speaker's substantive intent; it *is* the speaker's intent. And an interpreter who fails to get across the humor has failed to get across the point. Consider the following all-too typical situation:

> Lost in Translation
> In his toast at a State Department luncheon honoring President Yeltsin, Vice President Al Gore, dead-pan, told a typically shaggy story about his job's lack of clout.
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> When he had his left leg operated on recently, he said, he was under general anesthesia for 90 minutes. During that time, he surrendered his Constitutional prerogatives to the person next in the line of succession, House Speaker Thomas S. Foley.
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> When he came to, Mr. Gore re-claimed his powers, which, he said, restored Mr. Foley to his usual position of authority.
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> The Americans in the room weaned on tales of Vice Presidential superfluousness, laughed. But when the story was translated, most of the Russians sat stone-faced.
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> Defense Secretary William J. Perry did the best he could to help. He leaned to his left and told the Russian Defense Minister, General Pavel Grachev, "That's a joke." No laugh. Then he tried to explain. No laugh.
>
> Maybe the Russians were saving their senses of humor for their boss. A little later, Mr. Yeltsin noted with approval that the United States was relaxing its trade restrictions linked to the emigration of Jews. Everyone in his country, he said, would be pleased; in Russia, "even schoolchildren know who these people are – Jackson and Vanik".
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> Finally, the Russians laughed. (*The New York Times*, 28 September 1994)

At the other extreme from jokes that fall flat in translation is the temptation some interpreters may feel to go rather *too* far in conveying the speaker's wit or charm. For instance, at a joint news conference given by Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin, the latter humorously chastised the journalists present for their grim predictions about the inevitable failure of the presidential talks. The interpreter rendered Mr Yeltsin's remark as "It is *you* who are a disaster!" This was a bit too strong for Mr Clinton's taste, and, in his embarrassment, he immediately quipped to the press, "Be sure you get the attribution right!" However, it turns out that what Mr Yeltsin actually said in Russian was simply "It is you who fell

through" (i.e. not the meeting that fell through), which is not particularly witty or funny, but certainly more charitable toward journalism than the word "disaster" and well short of causing Mr Clinton any discomfort in his relations with the press. It would have been better if the interpreter had not tried so hard to be clever and had handled this simple point more cautiously.

As the above episodes suggest, part of the problem of translating humor stems from the fact that "humor is in the eye of the beholder", and what is funny in one language or culture is not necessarily funny in another. But another aspect of the problem is the fact that much humorous speech is by definition *fast* speech: repartee is amusing because it is quick and lively, and many jokes are funny mainly because of the split-second timing of the punchline. Consider, for example, the following rapid exchange (which the French interpreter handled quite well):

**Speaker**: Mr President, I have made so many concessions on this resolution that I feel I am sticking my neck out.
**President**: Well, I will do all I can to make sure it doesn't get chopped off. (laughter)
(**French interpreter**: Je ferai de mon mieux pour que vous ne soyez pas décapité! (laughter))

A speaker often has to "lay the groundwork" for a humorous punchline in much the same way that a lawyer examining a witness has to lay a foundation which shows the relevance of the question to which he is leading up. This is helpful to the interpreter, because it gives some advance warning that a punchline is coming. In order to sense when a joke is in the works, it is helpful to study different types of humor and joke-telling techniques, and to practice trying to translate jokes and puns. A recommended source is Isaac Asimov's anthology of jokes, which analyzes and categorizes jokes by type (Isaac Asimov, *Treasury of Humor*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1971).

One of the most widely used types of humor in formal speeches is "deadpan" or "straight-faced" sarcasm. This caustic form of humor does not require as much finesse as irony. Apparently it was even within the reach of the mad and notoriously unfunny Roman emperor Caligula, who, during lucid moments, is said to have been pleasant and cordial and once replied to a shoemaker who had the audacity to call him a sycophant to his face, "It's true, but my subjects are no better." Dry sarcasm was also a style for which Abraham Lincoln was famous. Once accused by a critic of being two-faced, he earnestly replied, "Ladies and gentlemen, if I had two faces, would I be wearing this one?"