

LOST IN LAUGHTER: TRANSLATING THE DARK HUMOUR OF COMMUNIST ROMANIA

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Abstract: *This article explores the complexities and strategies of translating humor, with a specific focus on political jokes from Communist Romania. By analyzing a range of representative jokes from that era, the study addresses the cultural, linguistic, and ideological issues encountered during the translation process. Drawing on theories from humor and translation studies, the paper points out essential mechanisms, such as irony, satire, and wordplay, that often defy direct translation. The case study method illustrates how translators can overcome these challenges through adaptive, explanatory, or compensatory strategies in an effort to maintain the humorous impact and socio-political insights of the original material. The analysis highlights the significance of cultural context in humor appreciation and emphasizes the necessity of creative translation in conveying subversive messages embedded in politically charged texts. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to broader discussions on humor's translatability and the role of satire as a form of resistance in authoritarian contexts.*

Keywords: *translation method; humour; cultural specificity; wordplay; irony; compensatory techniques*

The idea of writing an article that explores this topic, i.e., the challenges of translating the dark humor of Communist Romania, was triggered by the recent political context of the country, specifically the presidential elections of November, 2024 and May, 2025, which opposed two distinct parties and viewpoints: the pro-European side, on one hand, and the more nostalgic, sovereignty-driven group, on the other. The dispute prompted me to reflect for a while on the not-so-distant communist period in Romania and its distinctive features. Among all the things I remember us having grown accustomed to as subjects of a totalitarian regime (such as interminable queues to buy corn flour and fish, restricted TV hours dedicated entirely to the most beloved ruler of the country, or lack of electricity), one memory stands out from my childhood: a short rhyme, possibly a children's rhyme but with much more serious implications. I remember it vividly, as I used to blackmail my parents with it; whenever I wanted something and they refused to buy it, I threatened to recite it in public, knowing well that it was dangerous to do so. The verses sounded like this in Romanian: "*Hopa, tropa, tropa, tropa,/ Joacă Nicu și cu popa,/ Hopa, tropa, tropa, trop,/ Io-l omor și tu-l îngropi.*"¹ The English

¹ The examples included in this article have either been retrieved from my memory (as in the case of this specific rhyme) or else taken from different online sources.

translation (“*Trot-a-hop, a-hop, a-hop,/ Nicu dances with the pope,/ Trot-a-hop, a-hop, a-hey,/ I will slay and you shall lay.*” – translation mine) preserves the rhythmic and playful tone of the Romanian chant; however, its dark humor is somewhat diminished in the absence of social, historical, and cultural details that could illuminate the Romanian communist period. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze the challenges (cultural, linguistic, and ideological) that play a crucial role in the process of translating humor.

1. An attempt to decode humour

We all understand what humour is; it can be perceived as a generally universal human experience that we have all encountered, sometimes even created, appreciated, or shared. However, much like joy or love, fear or anger, if asked to define humour, we would probably struggle. This difficulty mainly arises because humour includes many forms, types, styles, purposes, intentions, and outcomes. Its expression and appreciation are deeply rooted in cultural and linguistic contexts. Therefore, defining it within a single context or through a singular example is difficult, as its meaning can change depending on these factors.

One simple definition of humour that Alison Ross uses to begin her 1998 book *The Language of Humor* is: “something that makes a person laugh or smile”². However, as in the case of all short and straightforward definitions, the author acknowledges exceptions. One can assert that something has been humorous, even if hardly anyone laughed at the time, or there are instances where the vast majority of people laugh, but there still remains someone who can claim, “That’s not funny!” The exceptions can be easily understood if we focus on the definition provided by the online Cambridge Dictionary which sees humour as “the ability to find things funny,” or “the way in which people see that some things are funny”³. This definition emphasizes the idea that humour, as a human ability, escapes simple categorization. It can be as variable as human beings are, since people’s reactions to the same stimulus are usually likely to differ. As Ross concludes, the *response* is what truly matters in determining whether something qualifies as humour⁴. This response that is so important in the case of humour (no matter whether we refer to its production, reception, or translation) brings us closer to a pragmatic distinction, specifically the illocution-perlocution relationship, or in other words, the connection between the speaker’s intention (intended meaning) and the message’s factual effect on the hearer. By emphasizing the significance of perlocution, i.e., of the *response*, humour reveals its greatest challenges. As pragmatics shows, linguists usually focus on illocutionary acts rather than perlocutionary acts because the former are more directly related to the meaning and structure of language. The speaker intends the illocutionary act in an utterance and has full control over it, while the perlocutionary act, what happens when the utterance is heard, may not be intended by the speaker. It is not entirely under their control and often only becomes clear after the utterance has been made.

² Alison Ross, *The Language of Humour*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, p.1.

³ *Humour*, in *Cambridge Dictionary*, (n.d.), Retrieved May 8, 2025, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/humour>.

⁴ Alison Ross, *The Language of Humour*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, p.1.

Perlocutionary acts are influenced not only by linguistic form but also by context, interpretation, and individual psychology, making them less stable and predictable. In our specific case, a speaker might intend to tell a joke and implicitly amuse the listener, but the listener's reaction could confirm or contradict the intended effect the speaker attributed to their words.

This idea prompts us to try to answer two questions: "What do we laugh at?" and "When does laughter occur?" Humor theories, according to the literature in the field, can be classified into three categories: incongruity, superiority, and relief theories⁵, which highlight different instances that provoke laughter. The **Incongruity theory**, in Aaron Smuts' view, sees humor as a response to "an incongruity,"⁶ a state of being inconsistent, incompatible, or not in harmony with other aspects of the situation. The **Superiority theory** arises from the feelings of superiority people might have over others⁷. As Sophia Stone notes, "we laugh precisely because we recognize the stupidity or even the incongruity of the situation and we have ... that feeling of confirmation that we are in some sense better than the target or butt of the joke."⁸ The **Relief theory**, on the other hand, describes humour as a "tension-release model," viewing it as a means to "release or save energy generated by repression."⁹ This is why the Relief Theory of Humor is also sometimes called the Release Theory¹⁰.

In the specific case of the political jokes of communist Romania, the analysis can consider all the above-mentioned theories. The Incongruity paradigm focuses on ambiguity in the words or structures of the language. In such examples of humor, incongruity can be the result of a conflict "between what is expected and what actually occurs in the joke," or one caused "by an ambiguity at some level of language"¹¹. The following saying, for instance, "*Pauzele lungi si dese/ Cheia marilor succese*"¹² / ("*Long and frequent spells of rest/ Are the key to one's success*" – translation mine), can serve as an eloquent example of inconsistency between what is expected and what really happens in the end, or what the initial part of the assertion states and the conclusion it reaches. The humour here resides in the nonsense it creates. Suppose we are to think about Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle and its specific maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner¹³. In

⁵ Aaron Smuts, *Humour*, in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Retrieved April 7, 2025, from <https://iep.utm.edu/humor/>.

⁶ As far as Smuts is concerned, incongruity refers to a term used to encompass "ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance, and inappropriateness."

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ Sophia Stone, *Why You're Not Worthy- The Superiority Theory of Humor*, in *It's Funny Cause It's True: The Lighthearted Philosophers' Society's Introduction to Philosophy through Humor*, J. Marra Henrigillis, & S. Gimbel (Eds.), LibreTexts, 2025, p. 2.2.1.

⁹ Aaron Smuts, *Humour*, in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Retrieved April 7, 2025, from <https://iep.utm.edu/humor/>.

¹⁰ Vanessa Voss, *A Spoonful of Sugar Makes the Misery Go Down- The Relief Theory of Humor*, in *It's Funny Cause It's True: The Lighthearted Philosophers' Society's Introduction to Philosophy through Humor*, J. Marra Henrigillis, & S. Gimbel (Eds.), LibreTexts, 2025, p. 2.3.1.

¹¹ Alison Ross, *The Language of Humour*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, p. 8.

¹² Retrieved from memory.

¹³ Paul Grice, *Logic and Conversation*, in *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*, Cole et al. (Eds.), New York, Academic Press, 1975, pp. 45.

our specific case, the maxim of *Quality*¹⁴ has definitely been flouted, as, under normal circumstances, long periods of relaxation, as the ones professed in the above-mentioned saying, do not lead to successful outcomes.

The ambiguity at the level of language, on the other hand, generally refers to a humorous use of a word or phrase (i.e., a **pun**), which relies on the fact that two words or phrases that mean different things can sound or be written similarly, this fact causing confusion and consequently laughter.

The other two theories, superiority and relief, are related to the social, historical, and cultural contexts that are of paramount importance in the creation and reception of humor. As Ross states, “It is hard for humour to cross boundaries of time and social groups—humour becomes outdated as quickly as fashion and is often dependent on particular cultures and attitudes.”¹⁵ In the specific case of our analysis, the communist period in Romania could easily fuel both the superiority and relief theories, as the average people, those that suffered the oppression of the system, used these underground jokes as a subversive technique, a means through which they could still distance themselves from the party members and supporters of the regime and feel superior to them. Jokes were also used as a counterpart to the wooden language the party made use of, its distorted realities and propaganda, as well as an opportunity for the dissatisfied and oppressed to give vent to their feelings. In an attempt to identify the social groups that are normally the butt of humor, Ross notes that not only the representatives of lower social class groups can be the focus of humour. “Much humour,” the author points out, “is an attack on people in superior positions of power and influence; in a sense, it is the fight-back of the victim, who has only words to use against money, might and status.”¹⁶

2. Translating humour

Leaving aside the complexity of humor and the difficulties implied in defining and circumscribing its limits, we should also focus on the challenges posed by the process of translating it. As Jeroen Vandaele shows, “humour translation is qualitatively different from ‘other types’ of translation and, consequently, one cannot write about humour translation in the same way one writes about other types of translation.”¹⁷ In order to justify his assertion, the author identifies four elements that can easily discourage translators engaged in the process of transferring humor from one language into another.

First, humour as a “meaning effect” has a clear, external sign, usually laughter or smiling, while the ‘meaning’ of other texts is often perceived as “less compelling.”¹⁸ Second, studies show that understanding humor and producing humor are two separate skills. Some people are highly sensitive to humor but can’t produce it effectively; translators might experience its powerful effect, such as

¹⁴ This maxim asserts that one should make their contribution “one that is true,” (p. 46) without stating ideas that are either believed to be false or lack adequate evidence.

¹⁵ Alison Ross, *The Language of Humour*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, p. 2.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 57.

¹⁷ Jeroen Vandaele, *Introduction: (Re-)Constructing Humour: Meanings and Means*, in *Translating Humour*, Jeroen Vandaele (ed.), London and New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 150.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

laughter, on themselves and others, but feel unable to replicate it. Therefore, humor production is likely talent-based rather than easily teachable. Third, appreciation of humor varies from person to person, so a translator might see something as funny but not actually find it amusing, facing the dilemma of translating a joke that seems bad or aiming for a more genuine humorous impact. Fourth, the emotional impact of humor on translators can be so intense that it clouds the details of how humor is created; as Vandaele suggests, strong emotions may interfere with rational analysis¹⁹.

During Communist Romania, humour served as a subtle form of resistance and a coping mechanism, reflecting people's feelings towards the regime. Jokes became a medium for expressing dissent and highlighting daily hardships; consequently, translating them requires both an understanding of the social, political, and cultural context of the country they originate in, as well as knowledge of linguistic subtleties. This fact is underlined by the definition Lawrence Venuti gives to the process of translating. According to his point of view, translation is not only a linguistic, but also a cultural practice, "distinguished by specific kinds of materials (linguistic and cultural, foreign and domestic) and specific methods of transforming them"²⁰. Language and culture are thus deeply interconnected. Without shared sociocultural understanding between sender and receiver, a common linguistic code might be of limited usefulness. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf have argued that each language, with its unique sounds, words, and syntax, reflects a distinct social reality, different from others. As far as the authors are concerned, "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached."²¹ Therefore, translation is more than just substituting words and adjusting syntax; it requires conveying the cultural meanings embedded in the original language to ensure successful communication.

Under oppressive regimes, humour often emerges as a form of resistance. Romanian political jokes targeted shortages, surveillance, and the absurdities of the regime. Consequently, in communist Romania, laughter became a subtle weapon against oppression. In an era marked by censorship and fear, the Romanians managed to transform humour into a secret code of resistance, which offered a breath of fresh air in a suffocating atmosphere. These jokes, whispered in restricted circles, became a means of cultural and emotional survival, the only strategy capable of fighting the absurd conditions imposed by Ceaușescu's regime. As Bogdan Antonescu claimed in an article dedicated to some of the best jokes during communist Romania, "the jokes circulated like a subversive currency, providing an outlet for the tensions accumulated under the weight of the dictator's personality cult and its severe restrictions. This humor was not just a form of entertainment, but an anchor for collective mental health, reflecting the remarkable ability of

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Lawrence Venuti, *Translating Humour. Equivalence, Compensation, Discourse*, in *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 7(2), Taylor & Francis, 2002, p. 6.

²¹ Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality (Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf)*, John B. Carroll (ed.), Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1956, p. 69.

Romanians to laugh in the face of adversity and to transform suffering into creativity.”²² (translation mine)

3. The Characteristics of the communist jokes in Romania

Communist jokes bore the distinct imprint of the era, ingeniously mirroring social and political realities. Favorite themes revolved around the absurdities of everyday life: endless queues, shortages of basic goods, and, inevitably, Ceaușescu’s cult of personality. An emblematic character was “Bulă”, the seemingly naive child whose awkward questions exposed the cracks in the system, allowing Romanians to criticize the regime under the guise of innocence. His jokes often portrayed the inefficiencies and ironies of daily life under communism. Let us focus on some examples:

“La școală profesoara îl întreabă pe Bulă:

- *Ce este tătăl tău?*
- *E membru de partid, tovarășa.*
- *Și mama ta?*
- *Nici ea nu lucrează!”*²³

(At school, the teacher asks Bulă: “What does your dad do?” “He’s a Party member, comrade,” the boy says. “What about your mom, Bulă?” “Oh, she doesn’t work either!” – translation mine)

This joke subtly critiques the inefficiency associated with Party membership, implying that being part of the regime equates to idleness. Or,

“La dentist.

- *Tovarășe Bulă, v-am pus o plombă. Nu mâncați nimic preț de trei ore.*
- *Asta nu va fi o problem, tovarășe doctor. Nu mănânc nimic de 45 de ani.”*²⁴

(At the dentist. “Comrade Bulă, I’ve just finished your filling. Try not to eat anything for three hours.” “Well, that won’t be a problem, comrade doctor. I’ve been doing this for 45 years.” – translation mine)

As can be easily inferred, this joke highlights the food shortage in a country that prided itself on its low foreign debt and above-average production. Nevertheless, the wonders of the oppressive regime are best rendered by the following joke:

“Toată lumea avea de lucru./ Deși toată lumea avea de lucru, nimeni nu muncea./ Deși nimeni nu muncea, planul se îndeplinea 100%./ Deși planul

²² Bogdan Antonescu, *Glume bune de pe vremea lui Nicolae Ceaușescu – Umorul în epoca comunistă* [Good jokes during Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime – Humour in communism], în *stiripesurse.ro*, 2025, Retrieved May 8, 2025, from https://www.stiripesurse.ro/glume-bune-de-pe-vremea-lui-nicolae-ceausescu-umorul-in-epoca-comunista_3611503.html.

²³ Retrieved from memory.

²⁴ Ibidem.

*se îndeplinea, nu se găsea nimic./ Deși nu se găsea nimic, toată lumea avea de toate./ Deși toată lumea avea de toate, toți furau./ Deși toți furau, niciodată nu lipsea nimic.*²⁵

(In communist Romania, "Everybody had a place to work./ Although everybody had a place to work, nobody actually worked./ Even if nobody worked, the target was achieved by over 100%./ Despite the target being achieved by over 100%, you could not buy anything./ Although you couldn't find anything to buy, everybody had everything they wanted./ In spite of having everything they wanted, everybody was stealing something./ Although everybody was stealing something, nothing was missing." – translation mine)

Subversive humor was the essence of these jokes, using allusions and wordplay to convey critical messages without attracting the attention of the Securitate. As Antonescu states, subtlety was vital in an era when a simple remark could have serious consequences²⁶. The jokes thus became an exercise in intelligence and creativity, demonstrating the Romanians' ability to find light even in the darkest corners of their existence. Although the Securitate was omnipresent, and denunciation was encouraged, Romanians continued to create and share jokes, demonstrating remarkable daily courage. This form of cultural resistance played a crucial role in undermining the legitimacy of the communist system. Through laughter, Romanians reaffirmed their humanity and refused to be reduced to mere cogs in the regime's propaganda machine. Humor thus became a form of inner freedom, inaccessible even to the most vigilant forces of repression.

4. Challenges in translating Romanian political jokes

Translating humour, especially political jokes, involves navigating not only cultural but also linguistic barriers, which leads to a series of challenges difficult to surpass. As Chiaro notes, "Jokes which are too culture-specific are not easily understood beyond their country of origin. Although translation is possible, it is not necessarily going to be meaningful. Similarly, jokes which are too 'language-specific' are doomed to suffer the same fate ... However, jokes in which sociocultural references cross-cut play on language are the most difficult of all to render in another language."²⁷ Culture specificity, if we are to start with it, is of paramount importance, as many jokes are rooted in local experiences. For instance:

²⁵ *Bancuri în communism [Jokes in Communism]*, în *Amintiri din communism*, 2015, Retrieved May 8, 2025, from <https://amintiridincomunism.wordpress.com/2015/04/01/bancuri-in-comunism/>.

²⁶ Bogdan Antonescu, *Glume bune de pe vremea lui Nicolae Ceaușescu – Umorul în epoca comunistă [Good jokes during Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime – Humour in communism]*, în *stiripesurse.ro*, 2025, Retrieved May 8, 2025, from https://www.stiripesurse.ro/glume-bune-de-pe-vremea-lui-nicolae-ceausescu-umorul-in-epoca-comunista_3611503.html.

²⁷ Delia Chiaro, *The Language of Jokes. Analysing Verbal Play*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 87.

“Ce e mai rece ca apa rece? Apa caldă.”²⁸

(“What’s colder than cold water? Hot water” – translation mine)

This joke references the unreliable heating systems in the country, where “hot” water was often colder than expected. Without understanding this context, the humour may be lost. The following joke is another classic example of dark humor in communist-era Romania, satirizing the chronic food shortages. The punchline highlights the absurdity of a store being open despite having nothing to sell.

“Un cetățean intră în măcelărie:

– Aveți mînzat?

– Nu.

– Dar porc?

– Nu.

– Pui?

– Nu.

– Dar ce aveți domnule?

– Avem deschis de la 6 la 16.”²⁹

(“A man walks into a butcher shop: “Do you have veal?” “No.” “How about pork?” “No.” “Chicken?” “No.” “Well then, is there anything that you have, sir?” “We’ve got program from 6 AM to 4 PM.” – translation mine)

Cultural specificity and flavour are difficult to translate, especially because translating is “fundamentally domesticating.”³⁰ As Venuti states, a translation’s goal is to “rewrite linguistic and cultural differences in terms that are intelligible or even recognizable to readers of the translation,”³¹ i.e., “to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar.”³² In doing this, the translator sacrifices the specificity of the source language and culture in order to obtain a level of fluency and readability that offers the illusion of an ‘original’ text rather than a translation. This brings us closer to the well-known opposition in translation: loss vs. gain. The loss inevitably occurs because translating means

²⁸ Bancuri în communism [Jokes in Communism], în *Amintiri din communism*, 2015, Retrieved May 8, 2025, from <https://amintiridincomunism.wordpress.com/2015/04/01/bancuri-in-comunism/>.

²⁹ Liliana Ganea, *Cele mai tari bancuri din perioada comunistă. Ce pățeai dacă făceai glume despre Ceaușescu și afla Securitatea* [The best jokes during communism. What could happen if you made jokes about Ceaușescu and the Securitate found out], in *DCNews*, 2023, Retrieved May 8, 2025, from https://www.dcnnews.ro/cele-mai-tari-bancuri-din-perioada-comunista-ce-pateai-daca-faceai-glume-despre-ceausescu-si-afla-securitatea_936584.html.

³⁰ Lawrence Venuti, *Translating Humour. Equivalence, Compensation, Discourse*, in *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 7(2), Taylor & Francis, 2002, p. 9.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Idem, *The Translator’s Invisibility. A history of translation*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 18.

decontextualizing³³, i.e., detaching the source text from the social, cultural, and literary traditions that are familiar to and provide significance for the source readers. The source context is thus lost, and the role of the translator would be to offer the target text a new context. As Venuti posits, “translating is radically recontextualizing,”³⁴ hence, the gain that counterbalances the loss. One strategy to compensate for translation losses is inserting explanations that clarify unfamiliar elements rooted in the source culture and context, which are fully or partially unknown to the target audience. In our specific case, a presentation of the Romanian communist regime and its impact on the population might be of great help.

Linguistic nuances and wordplay, however, are the ones that pose the greatest challenges. According to Chiaro, “verbally expressed humour (VEH) travels badly,”³⁵ especially because it relies on the use of various aspects of language that resist translation, such as puns, regionalisms, or wordplay. Marina Ilari highlights the same idea. “These devices,” the author claims, “can make the literal translation of humour a *joke* in itself, not to mention a seemingly impossible challenge for the translator!”³⁶ Many forms of humour, such as puns and wordplay, rely on the specific sounds, meanings, or structures of words in a particular language. These linguistic features often lack direct equivalents in other languages, making literal translation ineffective. Let us take, for instance, the following joke:

“*Cum se numește organizația politică a pensionarilor? Șoimii piețelor.*”³⁷

(“*What do you call the political organization of pensioners? The Market Hawks*” – translation mine)

In communist Romania, “Șoimii Patriei” (“The Hawks of the Fatherland”) was a youth organization for children. The joke twists this title to “Șoimii piețelor” (“The Hawks of the Markets”), poking fun at how many retirees used to spend time at local markets, perhaps gossiping, bargaining, or keeping a close watch on prices, much like hawks.

Puns and wordplay are two of the most common forms of humor. Wordplay is verbal wit based on the meanings and ambiguities of words. In contrast, puns are jokes that make use of words that sound alike or nearly alike but have different meanings (homonymy and polysemy are two of the linguistic

³³ Idem, *Translating Humour. Equivalence, Compensation, Discourse*, in *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 7(2), Taylor & Francis, 2002, p. 6.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 7.

³⁵ Delia Chiaro, *Verbally expressed humour and translation*, in *Primer of Humor Research*, Viktor Raskin (ed.), Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 2008, p. 569.

³⁶ Marina Ilari, *Translating Humor Is A Serious Business*, in *American Translators Association. The Voice of Interpreters and Translators*, 2021, Retrieved May 10, 2025, from <https://www.atanet.org/growing-your-career/translating-humor-is-a-serious-business/>.

³⁷ Laurențiu Barbu, *Cele mai tari glume din “Epoca de Aur” a comunismului. Cu astea au supraviețuit românii...* [The best jokes of the “Golden Age” of Romanian communism. The Romanians survived with them...], în *Identitatea*, 2020, Retrieved May 8, 2025, from <https://identitatea.ro/cele-mai-tari-glume-din-epoca-de-aur/>.

phenomena mostly used in creating such structural ambiguities). In the example below, polysemy is the one that causes laughter.

*“Ce este Securitatea? Inima Partidului care bate, bate, bate”*³⁸

(“What is the Securitate? The heart of the Party that beats, beats, beats”
– translation mine)

The verb ‘to beat’ means ‘to hit’ (a physical activity that the members of the Securitate were very proficient at), but it also means ‘to make a regular movement or sound’ (like the one made by a heart).

Let us take another example: the following pun (*“Supă de pui: pui apă, pui sare, pui morcovi, pui roșii, pui nu pui.”*³⁹) is funny to native Romanian speakers, but its meaning would be lost in translation as the word ‘pui’ in Romanian can have a double meaning (homonymy is the cause of ambiguity in this case). On the one hand, it is the equivalent of the English ‘chicken,’ but on the other, it also represents the present tense of the verb ‘to put,’ second person singular. Consequently, translating it literally would make no sense, as the word ‘chicken’ in English doesn’t have the double meaning it has in Romanian.

If we were to translate it, we would have to come up with a completely different joke while trying to preserve something of the original. My personal choice would be a rhymed version that compensates for the impossibility of rendering the exact meaning it has in the source language:

“Chicken soup is quite a feat:/ You put in water, herbs, and heat,/ Add some salt, and carrots too,/ and tomatoes, just a few.../But remember, there’s a trick/ Chicken makes it far too thick/ Put no chicken in the pot/ But use vegies quite a lot.” – translation mine.

Because humor is often related to language itself, the literal translation of a joke would most of the time fall flat or be incomprehensible. To maintain the spirit of a joke, the translator is faced with the dilemma of either preserving the original meaning (such as keeping the literal word-for-word translation) or adapting it completely into another language. According to Lawrence Venuti, the former situation would be synonymous with a foreignizing translation, as the cultural values, or the language of the source or foreign culture, are present in the target text. The translated text thus becomes “a place where a cultural other is manifested.”⁴⁰ The latter situation, on the other hand, suggests a different, opposing technique, a domesticating method which Venuti equates with “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values.”⁴¹ Transcreation is a translation technique that proposes a text specifically aimed at the target

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility. A history of translation*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 20.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

audience, thus focusing on their different cultural background⁴², and it is often used in the translation of humor. It involves adapting content to preserve its intent, style, tone, and context, rather than translating words directly. This approach allows translators to recreate humour in a way that resonates with the target audience.

Speaking about structural ambiguity, Alison Ross states that it can occur in the language at various levels: from phonology and graphology to morphology, lexis, and syntax, many jokes being thus based on the fact that there can be two possible interpretations of the same group of sounds⁴³. We can take another example:

*“Trăim epoca marilor prefaceri: Eu mă prefac, tu te prefaci, el se prefacă.”*⁴⁴

The challenge in this specific case is triggered by the fact that the Romanian word ‘prefaceri’ means ‘transformations’ or ‘changes’, especially in a political or societal sense (often used in official propaganda). But the verb ‘a se prefacă’ also means ‘to pretend.’ The joke plays on this double meaning; while the phrase sounds grand and ideological at first, it twists into a cynical comment on hypocrisy or fakery: everyone is just pretending. Translators have the difficult task of deciding how to handle a challenge like the example above. One option would be to use footnotes or insert an explanation of the joke. However, translators must be aware that although providing such an explanation could be interesting to the reader, it essentially means sacrificing the humor in the joke. Consequently, a simple translation (“*We’re living in the age of great transformations: I pretend, you pretend, he pretends.*” – translation mine), followed by some explanatory notes, risks ruining the meaning of the joke. We could also go for a more poetic and satirical version that somehow keeps the pun and tone:

“We live in the age of great change, they say, /But we’re just acting every day:/ I pretend, you pretend, he’s faking it too.../ Transformation? More likely playing a role or two.” – translation mine.

This version preserves both the formal propaganda tone (“age of great change”) and the twist of disillusionment, at the same time highlighting that what’s called “transformation” is actually just pretending, performing, or faking.

In an effort to untangle the complexities of translating humor, Marina Ilari highlights the most important strategies a translator can use to create effective translations. One approach is to provide context. Jokes often reflect the social and

⁴² Percy Balemans, *Transcreation: Translating and Recreating*, in *American Translators Association. The Voice of Interpreters and Translators*, 2016, Retrieved May 10, 2025, from <https://www.atanet.org/client-assistance/transcreation-translating-and-recreating/>.

⁴³ Alison Ross, *The Language of Humour*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Laurențiu Barbu, *Cele mai tari glume din “Epoca de Aur” a comunismului. Cu astea au supraviețuit românii...* [The best jokes of the “Golden Age” of Romanian communism. The Romanians survived with them...], in *Identitatea*, 2020, Retrieved May 8, 2025, from <https://identitatea.ro/cele-mai-tari-glume-din-epoca-de-aur/>.

cultural environment in which they are created. Because of this, each culture may have its own unique sense of humor tied to its history, traditions, values, and beliefs. Usually, this means that only people from that culture understand or find a joke funny. Therefore, translators should include footnotes or explanations to bridge cultural gaps. Another approach is adapting wordplay. Finding equivalent puns or recreating the joke's spirit in the target language can preserve humor. As the author states, "as translators, we have the difficult task, dare I say the responsibility, of making such jokes work for the target audience."⁴⁵ Another key strategy is maintaining tone, as capturing the original joke's tone ensures the translated version resonates similarly with the audience.

5. Conclusion

Translating the dark humor of Communist Romania goes beyond language, involving an understanding of history, trauma, and cultural context. This humor, born from daily absurdities under an oppressive regime, served as both a way to cope and a form of subtle resistance. Without knowledge of the sociopolitical background, much of its nuance can be overlooked or misunderstood in translation. The key challenge is to accurately render the jokes while also conveying the underlying feelings of fear, absurdity, and resistance. As this paper has tried to demonstrate, translating humour is a complex task that requires more than linguistic proficiency; it demands cultural insight, creativity, and sensitivity. The Romanian political jokes from the communist era are the best example in this respect, being rich in cultural and historical significance. By employing strategies such as transcreation, cultural adaptation, or tone preservation, translators can navigate the intricate landscape of humour translation. These techniques not only preserve the essence of the original content but also foster cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. What this paper has tried to demonstrate is the fact that translators act as cultural mediators, keeping the humor's spirit intact and shedding light on the shadows that influenced it. Ultimately, the laughter from Communist Romania isn't lost but transformed, still resonating with irony, resilience, and a unique Romanian wit.

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⁴⁵ Marina Ilari, *Translating Humor Is A Serious Business*, in *American Translators Association. The Voice of Interpreters and Translators*, 2021, Retrieved May 10, 2025, from <https://www.atanet.org/growing-your-career/translating-humor-is-a-serious-business/>.

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