“First one to have a platinum album wins, GO.”

Challenges that humour present to a translator
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1. Introduction

Audio-visual translation has become a widely researched topic over the course of a couple of decades. The ease of distributing audio-visual material internationally has brought visibility to audio-visual translation, which in turn has led to more research on the topic (Cintas "Subtitling" 344). Many of the studies that were conducted as a result from the increase of visibility assess the quality of a translation or the equivalence between the source material and the translation; often the primary goal—if not the only goal—of these studies is to highlight mistakes made by the translator (Gambier 18). Out of the many audio-visual translation mediums, subtitling can be argued to be the most vulnerable to criticism. Criticising the quality of a subtitled translation is, arguably, easier than criticising for instance a dubbed translation; in a subtitled translation, the original material is still present, which makes it easy for the audience to compare the original message to the provided translation, unlike in dubbed translations. Even individuals with an intermediate understanding of the source language can easily assess the quality of a subtitle translation by simply comparing the equivalence of the text that they see, and the utterance they hear. For that reason, I feel it is important to research the problems that a translator faces, rather than examining the solutions that they have made. Accordingly, the focus of this study is not on the quality of the translation in question, but the problem that the source material presents to the translator.

The purpose of this paper is to find and analyse translation challenges presented by humour in an utterance. In this study the term translation challenge will be used when discussing an element that presents the translator with an apparent problem. These problems require a solution which the translator has to provide in order to deliver a successful translation. The data for analysis will be collected by examining the subtitles and the original spoken message of an audio-visual material. An episode from South Park, a cartoon-like comedy television series, will be used for data in this study. A subtitled translation from English to Finnish that has been used on the official Finnish DVD release will be used as a point of reference. South Park was selected for this study because of its unique artistic style and humour; the animated series contains intricate social satire, and commentary on contemporary phenomena, such as pop culture gossip or popular news subjects.
The focus of this study is to discover the various kinds of translation challenges that South Park presents, not to review a translators’ solutions to said problems. That being said, the paper will also touch on some of the most commonly used practices when it comes to facing different translation challenges. The subtitles used in this paper are the official subtitles presented with the published DVD, and are mainly used as examples of possible solutions and as a point of reference; the accuracy or the successfulness of these subtitles will not be extensively analysed in this study.

Research questions:

- What makes humour difficult to translate?
- What are the most common types of problems that a translator faces when translating humour into subtitles?
- What are the most commonly used solutions for different kinds of translation challenges?

2. Theory

This section will present the theoretical background that has been used in the paper. Translation theory will be the primary theoretical background; in addition, some theory of humour must also be examined for the purpose of correctly categorising and processing the selected data.

2.1 Translation Theory

According to Bassnet, one of the first steps towards a perfect translation is to accept the fact that there is no perfect translation: no translation can ever be similar enough to the source language to be considered to represent the same social reality as the source language (Bassnet 13). Language is an integral part of a culture, and any attempts to disconnect a language from its culture, by replacing it with another language will result in a loss. A translator should never treat a source material in isolation of its original cultural environment; Bassnet sees language as the heart within a body of culture, and she even compares the procedure of translation to a heart surgery, “In the same way that the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from the culture at his peril” (14). Even so, translation has
an important function in society. By distributing translated material, cultural knowledge is also being distributed, knowledge which otherwise might not be available to a group of people. So, exporting source material beyond the original cultural environment has an educational value, even if the material by itself was not meant for educational purposes.

While translation from a subject language to a target language is often seen as the prevalent type of translation, it is not the only type of translation. Bassnet (14) lists a total of three main types of translation:

1. Intralingual translation

*Rewording* is a form of translation, where the original subject language is interpreted and expressed through different signs in the same language. This kind of translation may be used for example in subtitles made for the deaf or those hard of hearing. Extremely complicated texts and lingo-heavy texts may also be reworded.

2. Interlingual translation

Referred to as *translation proper*, this type of translation seeks to interpret signs of another language into a target language. This mode of translation is the most common of the three, and regarded as the primary type of translation.

3. Intersemiotic translation

*Transmutation* of a language, which means the interpretation of a subject language into a nonverbal sign system. Translating speech into sign language might be mentioned as an example of an intersemiotic translation.

For the purpose of studying translation challenges in an audio-visual material, this paper will be focusing on interlingual translation as a translation type.

2.2 Audio-visual translation

Cintas describes audio-visual translation in Handbook of Translation as, “The translation of programmes in which the verbal dimension is only one of the many shaping the communication process” (344). Gestures, images, and written text should be mentioned as examples of these other dimensions that Cintas discusses. The purpose of all forms of audio-visual translation is to
spread the original content across linguistic borders ("AVT comes of age" Cintas 2). These borders may be set by languages, health conditions or other factors.

Audio-visual translation is one of the more recent branches of translation to be studied. This is simply because of the fact that in the scope of history, audio-visual material is fairly new when compared to other means of narration such as literature. That being said, the concept of audio-visual material is not limited to videos of differing lengths, but also includes other kinds of material that offer both a visual and an audio, such as stage productions. In addition to the most popular forms of audio-visual translation (e.g., dubbing and subtitling), modes such as voice-over, narration, and surtitling are recognised as well. Subtitling for the deaf and the hard of hearing, and audio description for the blind and the partially sighted are nowadays considered modes of audio-visual translation as well, even though there has been some debate over whether they should belong in the field or not ("Introduction" Cintas 7).

This study will closely examine all elements that require a translation in an audio-visual context. For that purpose, the term utterance or scene will be used when discussing selected parts of a phrase in the source material, since terms such as word, or sentence can be argued to be inadequate for the purpose of looking at translation challenges in subtitling in particular since the focus is often on more than just the lexical elements of a scene (Pedersen 107).

2.3 Subtitling

In translation theory, subtitling falls under the umbrella term of audio-visual translation. Out of all audio-visual translation modes, subtitling is perhaps the most common one; its popularity is largely due to the fact that it is both cheap, and fast when compared to other modes, such as dubbing for example. Cintas also notes that unlike dubbed translations, translating into subtitles also preserves the original message, which can also be argued to be one of the reasons for the popularity of subtitling as a form of audio-visual translation. ("Subtitling" 344)

The challenge in subtitling lies in the amount of information that audio-visual material carries. In addition to the original message, it also includes the original image, and the added subtitles. It is the translator’s responsibility to find the perfect balance between all of these three main elements. Finding such balance might prove especially difficult in the case of translating humour into subtitles. (Cintas "Subtitling" 344)
When attempting to translate any source material into another language, a translator is sure to encounter points where they have to pay special attention to their translation. These crisis points may be caused by humour, songs, slang, or other kinds of communication that differs from basic interaction. When providing a solution, the translator must consider the aspect of the original material that they wish to emphasise: information, humour, stylistics or other aspects. When translating material into subtitles, time and space restrictions are also to be considered before making decisions. (Pedersen 101)

From a translator’s point of view, South Park may seem daunting. The show contains large amounts of cultural references, puns, songs, and other types of humour that increase the difficulty of accurately translating the show—especially into subtitles. However, there are certain strategies that a translator can utilise to provide a solution to the challenges that an audio-visual material presents. According to a taxonomy of subtitling strategies that Pedersen presents in his article (see figure 1), a translator has two main strategies to choose a solution from: minimum change strategy and intervention strategy (Pedersen 103).

Minimum change strategies seek to follow the original source materials as closely as possible, differing as little as possible from the original message; minimum change strategies include Official Equivalent, Retention, and Direct Translation.

In some cases, an element of a translation may have an official equivalent, for example some government institutions may have a different target language specific name. In these cases, often the best solution is to use the equivalent if possible. (Pedersen 103)

Retention is a strategy where the challenge presented by the translated material is left unchanged, or altered as little as possible. This strategy relies on the receivers’ ability to comprehend the...
message through their own knowledge of the source language, or through the context of the material. (Pedersen 103)

The last of the three minimum change strategies is direct translation. This strategy seeks to change the language of a challenging point exclusively, without making any semantic alterations. (Pedersen 103). Using a direct translation strategy can often result in the translation sounding unnatural and clumsy to the receiver, but usually still understandable. However, in some cases a direct translation may lead to a mistranslation, which is a risk that a translator must take into consideration when using this strategy.

Intervention strategies seek to alter the message of the source language in order to guide the receiver to better understanding of intended the meaning (Pedersen 103). They are used when the translator decides that the original message cannot be conveyed accurately enough without differing from the source language. These strategies include Specification, Generalisation, and Substitution.

**Specification** as a translation strategy refers to the addition of extra information to the translation. This information might be for example the completion of acronyms, or the addition of characters’ occupations. As a subtitling strategy, the specification strategy might be difficult to use, since the space in which the translation must be delivered is limited, even without adding extra material. (Pedersen 103)

**Generalisation** is the opposite of specification; the strategy is used to take the original material to a more general level, in order to be more easily understood (Pedersen 103). For example, if the original material refers to a specific nation, a translator might want to intervene and exchange it to people in general. This might be the case if the source language references something that the target language audience might have difficult time understanding.

Sometimes **substituting** a problem in the source text can guide the receiver towards a more accurate understanding of the intended message. The substitute might be entirely different to the original utterance, but more easily understandable, or better fitting to the situation. (Pedersen 103)

In addition to Minimum change and Intervention strategies, Omission has also been proven an effective tool. The strategy is especially popular in subtitling, due to the restrictions that are typical for the translation medium (Pedersen 104). Omission in the context of translation refers to
refraining from translating a part of the source text, and choosing to ignore it. Reasons for omitting parts of an utterance in an audio-visual context are manifold. To add to the time and space restrictions that are typical for subtitling, audio-visual material often contains onomatopoetic parts or context related utterances that generally do not require translation to be understood.

2.4 Humour theory

As a theoretical background for humour in this study, I have read a study on the typology of humour in audio-visual media, conducted by Bujizen and Valkenburg. The purpose of their study was to create a preliminary typology in audio-visual media, based on earlier research and a study of their own. In their study, Bujizen and Valkenburg presented a typology of 41 different audio-visual humour techniques; this list was composed in part by analysing humorous television commercials. (147-167)

I have used the list provided by Bujizen and Valkenburg to categorise the translation challenges I have selected. Due to the unique style of humour in South Park, the scenes tend to contain several humour techniques, which makes the categorisation of the selected segments challenging. The segments have been categorised according to what seems to be the prevalent technique in each segment. Out of all the categories that Bujizen and Valkenburg introduced, the following categories were selected for this study: Absurdity, Bombast, Conceptual surprise, Irreverent Behaviour, Parody, Ridicule, Satire, and Stereotype. Several segments had an element of irony in them as well, but in the selected segments it did not seem to be the main technique that was being utilised, so it was left out from this study.

While somewhat closely related, ridicule and parody have been separated from each other both in this study and in the list of humour techniques by Bujizen and Valkenburg. The main differences between ridicule and parody as humour techniques are that parody uses explicitly imitation to amuse, while ridicule can utilise a number of methods. Ridicule is also more often aimed towards specific people, while parody is aimed at genres or styles for example (Bujizen and Valkenburg 154).
3. Data and methodology

I have picked an episode from the American TV-series South Park to be analysed in this paper. This show was selected mostly because of the style of its comedy. The unique comedic style presents the translator with challenges they might not see in other comedy shows. South Park is known for its commentary to contemporary events through controversial humour; in order to understand the message that the creators are trying to convey, and most of the humour that the show contains, the viewer has to have knowledge of the topics that an episode of the show focuses on. The topics of the show range from American pop culture gossip to worldwide phenomena, which makes it even more challenging to export the show from its place of origin.

The data I have used in this paper was collected by watching the episode chosen for this study, and then selecting the translation challenges to be discussed. The basis for selecting the scenes to be discussed was the clear presence of humour that presented a challenge for the translator. Since this method of selecting data is highly subjective, and South Park as a show is filled with hidden references, obscure humour, and comedic content in general, it is possible that some of scenes that might have warranted discussion have not been included in this paper; some scenes may have also been deliberately left out for the limited amount of space this study has.

3.1 South Park

Originally aired on the American television channel Comedy Central, South Park shocked, and awed viewers with its unique, grotesque style of humour. The series was created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone, and its protagonists are four third-graders from South Park, Colorado. The show made its debut in August 1997, and quickly rose to become an incredibly popular series first among the American audience, then all around the world. The series started out as a low budget paper cut-out animation; however, its real charm lied in its daring, and often politically incorrect humour. Nowadays the show has a considerably larger budget, and a more advanced style of animation, but its unique style of humour has not changed. (Carter 17.3.2016)

I have selected episode nine “Christian Rock Hard” from season seven to be analysed in this paper. The episode focuses mainly on three topics, Christianity, internet piracy, and the condition of contemporary music industry. This episode was selected because the topics that it covers are still
relevant to this day, and South Park’s way of discussing them is civil enough to fit formal
discussion, unlike some other topics that the show has covered. The episode starts out with all of
the four protagonists—Cartman, Kyle, Kenny, and Stan—playing in a band together. After
receiving some criticism on the song they played, Cartman leaves the band, betting Kyle that he
will get a platinum album before their band ‘Moop’ does. Cartman’s grand idea is to play Christian
rock in order to gain recognition fast from a large audience; he proceeds to form a band of his own
to pursue his vision. Meanwhile the boys from Moop illegally download music from the internet,
since they failed to get money from their parents to buy CDs with. Internet piracy leads to the
boys being arrested, and taken to the Federal Bureau of Investigation headquarters. One of the
agents at the bureau takes the boys on a trip to show them the error of their ways by showing the
effect that piracy has on the music business. Having learned from their mistake, the boys go on a
strike, refusing to play before internet piracy has stopped. During all of this, Cartman has cheated
his way to selling a million copies of his album, full of plagiarised songs. He then organises a grand
award ceremony to celebrate his victory over Kyle. The episode closes with Cartman discovering
that he cannot receive a platinum album by playing Christian rock, and losing all of his audience
thanks to a fit of rage brought on by the discovery of his defeat.

Somewhat typically for South Park, the episode is rich in satire and parody, which causes the
material to be even more difficult to translate than it may seem. However, satire and parody
aren’t the only techniques of humour introduced to the episode. In the next chapter of this paper,
I will categorise the scenes I have selected for analysis and discussion. The categories that the
selected segments will placed in are based on a study on humour techniques, which was
conducted by Bujizen and Valkenburg.

4. Analysis & Discussion

In this section, the data I have collected from the episode will be categorised into humour
technique categories, introduced, analysed, and discussed. After introducing a segment, I will
present both the source text and the target language translation. When presenting the subtitled
translation, a double slash (//) will be used to indicate the changing of the subtitles that are being
displayed on the screen. With each segment, I will discuss the humour, the challenges it presents
to the translator, and some of the most common solutions to the challenges. I have named each one of the selected scenes for easier comparison and discussion.

My findings can be split into the following humour categories: Absurdity, Bombast, Conceptual surprise, Irreverent Behaviour, Parody, Ridicule, Satire, and Stereotype.

4.1 Absurdity

In addition to satire, absurd humour is what South Park is possibly best known for. As a technique of humour, absurdity seeks to amuse the receiver by presenting them with situations or events that go against the rules of logic. As an example of absurdity in this particular episode of South Park, I have selected a scene that I have named “Randy’s Concern”.

The episode opens with all of the boys playing a song together in a bad called Moop. The song that they are playing sounds unrefined to say the least and Stan’s father steps in as they stop playing.

(1) Randy’s concern

“**Randy: Stan, are you OK?**

*Stan: Yeah, dad we’re just rehearsing our band. (Stan)*

**Randy: Ohh, I thought a group of Vietnamese people were having their intestines pulled through their mouths.***

*Cartman laughs sarcastically*

“**Stan, oletko kunnossa? //Joo, isä, meillä on bändiharjoitukset. //Luulin, että täällä on vietnamilaisia, //joiden suolia vedetään ulos suun kautta.”***

Thanks to the style of humour in South Park, and Randy being portrayed as a peculiar individual throughout the series, it is difficult to tell in this particular scene whether he is being serious, or whether he is just making fun of the boys. His tone of voice suggests seriousness, but Cartman’s sarcastic laugh after he exits suggests otherwise. Translating South Park’s humour often involves inappropriate language, and this utterance is no exception. As a translator, involving the gore seems like an essential part of the humour, but what is the role of the Vietnamese in Randy’s line? As a nation the Vietnamese possess no special connotations to a Finnish audience. However, to the intended American audience, the Vietnamese are known from the massively unpopular Vietnam War.
The war was the first to be televised, which brought the brutal reality of war closer to the general public; some of the vivid materials that were released from the warzone shook the public and arguably turned them against the war (Mandelbaum 157). Mentioning the Vietnamese in a violent and gory joke is most definitely a reference to the Vietnam war, which calls for the translator to choose his approach carefully. On one hand, if the translator chooses a minimum change strategy, like the translator on the DVD has, and they suggest a direct translation, the reference is most likely missed by most Finnish viewers. On the other hand, a translator might choose to intervene, and substitute the Vietnamese in the utterance with something more relatable to the Finnish audience, such as the Russians for example. Choosing to intervene might take the translation closer to the intended connotations, but it might also confuse the viewer, and draw their attention to the subtitles instead of the show itself.

4.2 Bombast

Bombast as a technique of humour refers to a character’s manner of speaking or acting. This technique has a character present himself or his thoughts in a “high-flown, grandiloquent, or rhetorical manner” (Buijzen and Valkenburg 153) as an example of bombast humour, I have found Cartman’s pep talk.

Having gathered his band members at his house, Cartman introduces them to his plan for getting a platinum album. Token and Butters—the two other members of Cartman’s newly-formed band—have no idea what Cartman is talking about, and are in awe after Cartman’s sales pitch, only to be disappointed after his idea is finally revealed.

(2) Cartman’s pep talk

“*Cartman: Gentlemen, we are about to embark on the most amazing, life-affirming, financially windfalling experiences of our young lives.*

*Butters: Wow!*

*Cartman: We are going to start a Christian rock band.***

*Butters: Aww...*

*Token: I’m out.”*

“–*Olemme aloittamassa uskomatonta, elämää mullistavaa, // taloudellisesti kannattavaa*
This scene presents the translator with a challenge of conveying the tone of Cartman’s speech accurately enough for the receivers to understand the humour in the utterance. Cartman is clearly trying to use the most bombastic words he has got in his vocabulary, and even ends up inventing a new adjective from the noun *windfall*. It is up for the translator to find appropriate expressions to convey Cartman’s tone accurately enough. When it comes to translating invented words, such as “windfalling” in this case, direct translation is rarely an option. The translator in the DVD subtitles has opted to substitute Cartman’s made up word with a real expression “profitable” and then to translate it into Finnish. As an alternative option, a translator could consider substituting the original utterance with a similar invented word in Finnish; however, these kinds of solutions require extra effort and time being invested, resources that a translator rarely has to spare.

There is also the issue of translating “a Christian rock band”. The challenge in translating Christian rock band is the apparent lack of visibility of Christian rock in Finland when compared to the American Christian music culture. The translator in this case has chosen to use the official equivalent translating strategy with the expression, since an official Finnish term for Christian rock exists. The term “kristillinen rokki” can be argued to carry little meaning to the public, since Christian rock is far less pervasive in Finland than in the United States. With this in mind, a translator could consider generalising Christian rock into Christian music, for the purpose of attempting to preserve the connotations that the original message might have.

4.3 Conceptual surprise

Conceptual surprise as a humour strategy relies on misleading the audience, and then revealing an unexpected change to provoke a reaction. (Buijzen and Valkenburg 153)

The Boys’ band Moop is on a strike, and has gathered quite a crowd. Stan is beginning to grow tired of the strike, but Kyle urges him to stay strong until they get word from the public that
internet piracy has stopped. As Kyle finishes his sentence, a U.S. Mail van pulls up, carrying a certified letter to the band.

(3) A letter to Moop

“Kyle (reading out loud): Dear Moop, this letter is to inform you that Faith Plus One’s debut album has just sold one million copies.

Stan: What?

“Kyle: We cordially invite you to attend the platinum album award ceremony, which will be held tomorrow morning at ten. Details and proof of sales enclosed. PS. Nya nya nya nya nyaa nya, ha ha ha hah ha ha.”


The challenge here lies in translating the stark contrast between the official and highly formal tone at the beginning of Cartman’s letter, and the childish remark at the end of the letter. The lack of space and screen time presents a challenge to the translator; they must attempt to find a way to make the contrast as apparent as it is with the source language with the restrictions of subtitled translations in mind. A viewer that has a higher than average knowledge of the English language might understand the joke simply by listening to the source language. However, a below average viewer might miss the humour in the segment all together. One of the possible solutions, as showcased in the DVD subtitles, is substitution. In the DVD subtitles, Cartman’s “Nya nya nya...” has been exchanged for a more Finnish “Lällä lällä lieru...” which is what an average Finnish viewer would most likely expect to hear from an elementary school student making fun of their friends. Another possible solution for this particular problem could be to simply omit the utterance from the subtitles. This solution would rely on the viewer’s ability to recognise what Cartman is trying to achieve with this remark; supposing that the audience understands the utterance without subtitles is not farfetched. However, by omitting the utterance from the subtitles here the translator might undermine the joke, which is based on the contrast between the two very distinct tones that are present in the letter in written form.
4.4 Irreverent behaviour

Irreverent behaviour is not uncommon to South Park. In this particular episode this sort of behaviour is targeted at the Christians. As a strategy of humour, Irreverent behaviour refers to the displaying clear disrespect towards an authority figure or the prevailing standards (Buijzen and Valkenburg 153).

Cartman organises a grand award ceremony to celebrate his platinum album, and thus his victory over Kyle. However, the ceremony quickly turns sour, when Cartman discovers that Christian rock bands are unable to earn platinum albums. Enraged by his loss, Cartman loses the band’s audience by revealing his one and only reason for making Christian rock in a vulgar fashion.

(4) Award ceremony tantrum

“Cartman: Goddammit!
*audience gasps*
Collins: Oh, please don’t take the Lord’s name in vain.
Cartman: Who cares! I can never win my bet because you stupid assholes don’t give out platinum albums.
Collins: But you spread the word of the Lord, you brought faith in Jesus.
Cartman: Oh, fuck Jesus.
*gasps and screams in the audience*
Butters: Eric, I’m pretty sure you shouldn’t say the f-word about Jesus.
Token: Yeah, you’re gonna hurt the band.
Cartman: Who fucking cares, Token, I can never beat Kyle now. I’ll say it again, fuck Jesus!
*screams in the audience*
Man in audience: My ears are bleeding!
Token: Good job dickhead, you lost the entire audience.

“Voi jumalauta!/
Älä sano turhaan Herran nimeä!/ 
Mitä väliä? En voita vetoa, koska te tyhmät paskapääät/ette jaa platinalevyjä!/ 
Mutta olette levittäneet Herran sanaa. Olette luoneet uskoa/
...Jeesus!/
Eric, olen melko Varma, ettei V-sanaa saa sanoa Jeesuksen yhteydessä.//
Vahingoitat bändiä!/
Mitä väliä? En ikinä voita Kylea!/
Sanon vielä! ...Jeesus!/
Korvani vuotavat verta!/
Hieno homma, mulkku! Menetimme koko yleisön!"

The disrespect towards the Christians, and music award shows that Americans hold so dear, requires no translation to be understood from the context. However, finding the appropriate way of translating Cartman’s vulgar fashion to express his frustration might prove difficult for a translator. When looking at the translation that was provided with the DVD, a problem with the subtitling medium also surfaces. In the subtitles of the DVD, all the f-words have been replaced with a triple dot (...) instead of an equivalent swearword like most of the other swearwords in the segment. It is safe to assume that this is not because the translator wanted to avoid using such a bad word on the DVD, but rather because of Comedy Central tends to censor all the f-words before the show is aired on television. However, in the DVD-version the swearwords are being left uncensored, so it would be a good guess that the translator of the DVD subtitles had to work with the aired version of the show, and decided to omit the censored words from the translation. Then again, omitting the f-word might be a completely conscious choice from the translator’s part.

Translating swearwords requires extra care from the translator’s part. Sometimes swearwords can be translated by using direct translation without a shift in meaning; such as in this scene, where Cartman’s “Goddammit!” has been directly translated into “Voi jumalauta!” These two swearwords can be seen as official equivalents to each other. With that in mind, it must be said that not all swearwords have obvious equivalents. In most cases, a translator has to have an understanding on the severity of a certain swearword in its source culture in order to provide a good solution for the presented challenge. There’s also the fact that the written word can often times have a bigger effect on the receiver than the spoken word; successful subtitles should not draw attention to themselves, but help with understanding the show, so in some cases it may be preferable to choose a milder expression than what has been used in the source text.

4.5 Parody:
South Park has a reputation for providing commentary for recent events and phenomena. This commentary often involves parody, the mockery of others by means of imitation. (Bujizen and Valkenburg 153)

After discovering the effects that internet piracy has on the music industry, the members of Moop decide go on a strike, refusing to play until internet piracy has stopped. A news anchor from News 4 is on the scene with live footage.

(5) News Flash!

“Tom, I’m standing in South Park, Colorado, where the rock band ‘Moop’ has refused to play! The strike started yesterday and could go well into next week.”

“UUTISET 4-SUORA//Tom, olen South Parkissa, jossa bändi nimeltä Moop//kieltäytyy soittamasta!//Lakko alkoi eilen ja saattaa jatkua ensi viikkoon.”

South Park is clearly making fun of America’s big news channels who, at least according to South Park, do their best to turn any event into a headline. News 4 seems to be an interstate news channel, since the news anchor specifies his location with both the state and the city he’s in. This information is what makes the live news coverage of the strike even more absurd. If the channel was a local one, it wouldn’t be as ridiculous to the receiver that a group of fourth-graders striking gets live coverage. The quick pace of the news, and the amount of information on the screen forces the translator to decide what to display on the screen with the little time and space they have. The DVD translator has decided to omit Colorado and the Moop’s genre of music from the utterance. This solution allows for the translator to fit in the information that is being displayed on the screen, the name of the news channel and the live broadcast sign to be specific. Another possible solution might be to omit the information on the screen, which could then allow for Colorado to be included, highlighting the interstate nature of the channel. It is up to the translator to decide his approach, based on what they think is important.

4.6 Ridicule
As a humour technique, ridicule refers to making a fool out of someone or something, which can be argued to be quite common to the show.

Cartman bets Kyle 10 dollars that he will create a platinum album before Kyle does. Races like these are typical for kids, but selling platinum can be considered one the greatest achievements of a musician’s career and yet Cartman treats it as if it was something that could be done overnight. By belittling one of a musician’s greatest milestones, South Park takes a jab at music industry as a whole.

(6) Race to the finish

“Ready? First one to have a platinum album wins, GO.”

“Valmiina? // Eka joka saa platinaa, voittaa. Hep!”

The scene might prove difficult to translate because of the timespan over which the joke is delivered is quite short. The translator is forced to omit some of the source language in order to keep up with the audio. Cutting out album and only saying platinum requires for the recipient to be active and to fill in the gaps. In this case, the translator has decided that the Finnish expression albumi is so close to the English expression that hearing Cartman say the word being is enough for the receiver to make out the intended meaning. The omission of album also focuses the translation on the fact that getting a platinum album is an achievement, rather than an actual platinum album, which is obvious to an adult, but might be an idea inside of a fourth-grader’s mind.

After being arrested, the boys are taken to the FBI headquarters for interrogation. In the transition between Kyle’s house and the interrogation room, the FBI headquarters are being shown from the outside.

(7) FBI

*Shot of FBI headquarters, a small brick building in a corner of a street with a sign saying UNITED STATES FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, *
This scene is a great example of the challenges that the audio-visual medium presents the translator with; even in a scene with no actual words being said, a challenge for the translator exists and requires a solution. The Federal Bureau of Investigation only exists in the United States, and might be unknown to some of the Finnish audience. There isn't much for the translator to do if the receiver fails to see the comedy behind the headquarters being a tiny brick building, but the translation of the institution’s name itself requires some thought. The translator of the DVD subtitles has chosen to use the official equivalent, which is possibly the most obvious solution. However, the official equivalent can be a bit undescriptive to a large portion of the receivers. Another solution to the challenge might be to use the specification strategy and include the acronym that is commonly used when discussing the bureau. A possibility for direct translation exists as well, but it might result in a clumsy translation with little more meaning than the official equivalent.

4.7 Satire

Satire is the act of mocking or making fun of well-known things, situations or public figures (Buijzen and Valkenburg 153). It is by far the most common technique of humour that South Park utilises; after all, making fun of public figures, contemporary events, and other well-known things, is what the show is probably best known for.

After being arrested, the members of Moop are shown the effects that internet piracy has on the recording artists. The agent that is guiding the boys takes them to Britney Spears to see what kind of effect internet piracy has on her life. Almost like in a nature documentary, the boys are observing the celebrity from afar, with the agent providing commentary.

(8) Britney’s Jet

“Britney used to have a Gulfstream IV, now she’s had to sell it and get a Gulfstream III because people like you chose to download her music for free. The Gulfstream III doesn’t even have a remote control for its surround sound DVD-system.”
Once again, South Park takes a jab at the music industry, and those who have made their fortune by making music. The series uses Britney Spears as an example of a successful and wealthy musician, and dramatically displays the viewers the discomfort that she has to go through thanks to internet piracy. This segment offers the translator some choices to shift the focus of the translation. Because of the amount of information that the agent conveys during his line, and the space and time limitations that are characteristic for the subtitling medium, the translator is once again forced to come up with a way of expressing the message as accurately as possible with little resources. The DVD translator has chosen to use omission as a strategy for this particular segment, which might be the only realistic option, given the small amount of time that a translator most usually has to produce an entire episode’s worth of subtitles. However, a translation can shift the focus of the subtitles by choosing the parts they omit; in this case, the words *people* and *chose* have been omitted from “*people like you chose to download her music...*”, uttered by the agent. This shifts the focus towards Britney, her music, and her jet, instead of the pirates that download her music. Another option would be to omit the personal pronoun *her* from the translation and replacing it with *chose*. Replacing the personal pronoun would put the focus of the translation on internet piracy and those who practice it.

Cartman takes the members of his newly-formed band to a beach to take a picture for their new album’s cover. Token and Butters pose for the picture, but Cartman isn’t satisfied and proceeds to instruct the boys on how to take a picture for an album cover.

(9) Faith Plus One’s album cover

“No, no, no! Haven’t you guys ever seen an album cover? You’re supposed to be standing at random places, looking away like you don’t care.”

“Ei! Ettekö ole nähneet levyn kansia?//Seiskää summittaisissa paikoissa,//ja näyttäkää siltä kuin ette välittäisi.”

While some of the fans claim on the internet that Cartman’s line combined with Faith Plus One’s album cover is a direct reference to the Irish rock band U2’s album The Joshua Tree, looking away and peculiar positioning in the frame seem to be somewhat common when it comes to cover
pictures. In this scene, South Park is once again taking a jab at the music industry, by claiming that covers are what sell the album not the content, and that musicians are keen on imitating each other. While the segment seems to be straight forward to translate, Cartman tends to talk fast when he’s agitated, which makes it hard for the translator to fit what he is saying on the screen. Omission is one of the more common solutions when the main issue is with time and space; however, another possible solution, as shown on the DVD subtitles, is to intervene and alter the source language. For example, in this case, the translator has substituted the source language “to be supposed to” –construct with an imperative sentence, which is an effective way of making the subtitles more readable. The downside to using an imperative sentence structure is that it lacks the satirical tone of Cartman’s original message. Cartman’s original tone suggests that all album covers are supposed to look a certain way in order to sell, this tone is lost when using the imperative sentence structure.

After being arrested for downloading music from the internet for free, an FBI detective shows the boys the error of their ways. He takes the boys to see the luxurious lives of some of the most famous artists in the world, and how internet piracy affects their everyday life. He concludes dramatically, by dooming the celebrities into a life of “semi-luxury”.

(10) Artists’ affliction

“Man must learn to think of these horrible outcomes before he acts selfishly, or else, I fear...
Recording artists will be forever doomed to a life of only semi-luxury.”

“Ihmisten on opittava ajattelemaan kamalia seurausia,//ennen kuin he käyttäytyvät itsekkäästi. Tai muuten// levyttävät artistit on tuomittu ikuisesti puolittaiseen luksukseen.”

This scene serves as another great example of the satire which South Park has become known for. Internet piracy has been a popular topic of discussion for a long time, and the creators of the series provide the viewer with their opinion on the actual effects of piracy in this episode by making light of the consequences that piracy has. The sad background music paired with the agent’s ominous way of phrasing sets up the joke beautifully.

From a translator’s point of view this particular scene is challenging in multiple ways. First of all, the translator must find a way to convey the original message accurately enough to replicate the ominous mood that the show is going for. Achieving a similar tone requires excellent command of
the target language, and more time and effort being put into a translation of a single utterance. Secondly there is the ever present factor of time and space that limits the options of a translator when looking to set the correct tone for the subtitles. Finally, there are some tricky expressions in the agent’s utterance, such as the usage of *man* as a passive structure and the expression “semi-luxury”.

A translator must decide what kind of passive voice to use, when translating this utterance. On one hand, a translator might seek to save a bit of space, and omit the word “man”, choosing “On opittava”, the basic Finnish passive. On the other hand, they might choose to use a word for word direct translation, with words such as “Ihmisten” or “Ihmiskunnan”, in order to attempt to replicate the dramatic and ominous mood of the utterance. Finding a good solution for translating “semi-luxury” can prove difficult as well. Although the prefix semi- is not entirely unknown to the Finnish language, it is hardly common enough to be used in official subtitles for a DVD. To catch the sarcastic tone, a translator must provide a solution that is close enough to the source language, yet understandable enough for the public to get the humour.

After receiving criticism on the song Moop played at the opening of the show, Cartman suggests that the boys turn the band into a Christian rock band. Kyle doesn't agree with his logic, but Cartman argues his point by mentioning Creed and their success with the genre.

(11) Cartman’s idea

“*Kyle: That’s a retarded idea, Cartman*

*Cartman: It worked for Creed!*”

“*Älytön idea, Cartman.\//*

-Creed pärjäsi sillä.”

Creed is an American Rock band that had religious themes in their songs; they never claimed to be a Christian Rock band though, which makes Cartman’s statement bold and humorous. The humour in this particular utterance is difficult to translate because of its cultural aspects; Creed never was as popular in Finland as it was in the United States, for that reason the direct translation only works for a very specific group of people—Finnish fans of Creed. It is not unreasonable to think that the joke would not achieve its original purpose among the Finnish Creed fans; Cartman’s daring joke is mainly funny to those who know of Creed, but not necessarily consider their music
anything special. The die-hard fans of the band might even be offended by this sort of a statement. On the other hand, South Park is notorious for its offensive and controversial humour, so offending the die-hard fans might be an intended side-effect of the joke as well, which means that the direct translation achieves at least a part of the original intended effect. An alternative approach to retention, which the DVD translator has used, could be substitution: exchanging Creed with a similar Finnish band or an artist. The problem with substitution is that Christian music isn’t as popular in Finland as it is in the United States, so the joke might still not achieve the intended effect. Another solution a translator might choose is to generalise, replacing Creed with something more generic, like “it worked for others”.

After producing their debut album, Cartman’s band Faith Plus One attends a festival called Christfest, “The single largest gathering of Christians in the Midwest”, as Cartman puts it. Christians from all over North America gather to listen to live performances, and to buy Christianity-related products, such as Psalm t-shirts, bibles, and CDs. Cartman sees the festival as the perfect opportunity to promote their newly-released album.

(12) Christfest

*Shot of Neon sign saying CHRISTFEST TONIGHT! and stands selling merchandise.*
*Shot closer to stands with names such as CHRIST ALMIGHTY & CO, Psalm T-Shirts, Leather bound Bible, and Faith plus one CD’s*

“Psalm t-shirts, get a t-shirt with your favorite psalm! (Man at stand)
—Leather bound bibles, show your faith! (Woman at stand)
—Yes it’s really the best Christian album that’s ever been produced, actually. (Cartman at stand)
—Ooh, this would be great for my grandchildren, they need hip-cool music, but with inspirational lyrics. (Elderly woman at Cartman’s stand)”

“KRISTUS KAIKKIVALTIAS & CO. PSALMIPAIITOJA//
Psalmipaitoja! Osta paita lempipsalmillisil!//
Nahkaraamattuja! Näytä uskosi!//USKO PLUS YKSI CD-LEVYJÄ//
Tämä on kaikkien aikojen paras kristillinen levy.//
Tämä olisi hyvä lapsenlapsilleni.//He tarvitsevat musiikkia, jossa on kunnon sanat.”
In this scene South Park criticises the American way of life; the show makes fun of the way Americans commercialise everything, in this case Christianity. Not one of the stands shown in the picture promote Christianity as a religion, instead they all seek to profit from it like it was just another product to be sold. This particular segment is also another example of the challenges that the audio-visual medium presents a translator with. The screen is cluttered with signs, people, and symbols; the clutter directs the viewer’s attention to the picture and away from the subtitles. In order to avoid taking the viewers’ attention away from the picture, a translator must find the balance between offering enough information for the receiver to know what’s happening, and making the subtitles easy enough to read to not take steal the attention away from the picture. Omission can be used to make the subtitles less distracting, but the translator has to consider what they omit to avoid losing the humour from the translation. For example, in this scene, a translator might choose to omit the names of the stands, and other signs that are in the frame. The omission would give more time for the character’s lines to be on screen, and more time for the viewer to focus on the actual picture. However, at the same time omitting the signs from the translation can be argued to take away from the slightly hectic mood of the picture and the commercialism that it is trying to convey to the receiver.

4.8 Stereotype

South Park often boldly plays with stereotypes to amuse the viewers and to highlight some of the ridiculous stereotypes that exist.

Immediately after leaving Moop, Cartman ventures to start his own Christian rock band. He runs up to Token’s door to ask him to come to his house. He doesn’t tell Token the reason why he’s being invited to Cartman’s, but he tells Token to bring his bass guitar with him.

(12) Token’s bass

“Cartman: Token! Get the bass-guitar out of your basement, and meet me over at my house.
Token: What?! We don’t have a bass-guitar.
Cartman: Your family’s black, Token. There’s bound to be a bass guitar in your basement somewhere”

“Token! Ota bassosi kellarista, ja nähdään meillä.”
South Park plays with the stereotypes of African American people, in this case they claim that all black people play the bass or at least have a bass; these stereotypes might be foreign to a Finnish audience. To get the joke, a recipient has to be aware of the existing stereotypes, so a direct translation might not help a Finnish recipient in catching the joke. There’s also a running joke with Token’s name that the Finnish audience might not understand even though it is very apparent to the American audience. The joke has to do with the American film business, where at one point there was a law that every movie has to have at least one African American person in it; these people soon became known as the ‘token’ black people, hence Token. This joke needs no explanation for the American viewers, since it is common knowledge, but for the majority of Finnish the joke will be lost. These kind of culture or nation specific jokes can be difficult to export into other languages; without intervening, the humour remains inaccessible to the target language audience, and with intervening a translator risks mistranslation, since these specific challenges are most often complicated to translate. One of the effective ways of attempting to translate tightly culture-bound challenges is to substitute them with similar expressions from the target culture, or a different expression from the subject culture, which has roughly the same effect that the source expression does.

After Cartman leaves the band, the rest of Moop seek to define their musical style by listening to other artists’ music. Kyle goes to his family for financial support in the matter, but his father fails to comply with Kyle’s request. Kyle then reports his failure to the rest of Moop.

(13) Kyle’s allowance

“Kyle’s father: The answer’s no, Kyle.
Kyle: Oh C’mon dad, don’t be such a Jew!
Kyle’s mother: Kyle! Don’t belittle your own people!
[...]
Kyle: It didn’t work. My stupid Jew dad won’t lend me money for CDs.”

“–Vastaus on ei.//
–Älä viitsi olla noin juutalainen!”
–Kyle! Älä mollaa omiasi!/

[...]

–Se ei toiminut./Tyhmä juutalainen isäni ei lainaa rahaa levyihin.”

Some stereotypes are more accessible to the Finnish audience than others. For instance in this segment, Kyle’s frustrated exclamation plays with the stereotype that all Jewish people are greedy and stingy with their money. It can be argued that Jews have a bigger presence in the Finnish media and day-to-day life than for example African American people, which South Park also discusses a lot. In this segment, Kyle uses the word Jew to describe his father who is, at least to Kyle, being stingy and not lending him money. Arguably, the stereotypes of Jewish people aren’t all that different here in Finland when compared to the United States, so retention as a translation strategy can be a viable option. If a translator wants to highlight what Kyle is trying to say when using Jew to describe a person, they could also choose to use specification as a strategy. For instance, by adding the word stingy “Älä viitsi olla noin pihi juutalainen!” a translator can specify what the show is hinting at, without altering the source language all that much.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to discover the effect that humour has on subtitle translation. The main goal was to highlight different kinds of translation challenges that various humour techniques cause, and to introduce some basic tools and translation strategies that can be used when approaching these challenges. This was conducted by extracting segments from the South Park episode Christian Rock Hard, and then categorising them according to the different techniques of humour they represent. This particular show and episode were selected because of the South Park’s unique style of humour and the episode’s topic which is still relevant to this day.

The translation challenges that the selected segments presented can be divided into three main groups: challenges caused by cultural references, time and space restrictions, and tone or vocabulary. From the data I gathered, it seemed that satire, stereotype, and absurdity categories included the largest amount of challenges retaining to cultural references, while bombast and irreverent behaviour categories’ challenges were mostly tone and vocabulary related. Even though almost all of the selected challenges required for the translator to manage time and space on the
screen, the restriction seemed to affect the categories ridicule, parody and conceptual surprise the most.

The three main types of translation challenges appeared to all require use different translation strategies. The most common strategies for cultural challenges were substitution, direct translation and retention. Tone and vocabulary challenges on the other hand appeared to require substitution, generalisation, official equivalent, or specification. Finally, time and space restrictions heavily favoured omission, substitution being an optional strategy.

Based on the data I collected from the episode, humour seems to be challenging from three angles, a cultural angle, a technical angle, and a stylistic angle. Cultural challenges as seen in examples 1 and 2 cause problems because they are not easily transferrable to other languages. Technical challenges such as the ones in examples 5 and 3 are extreme examples of what a translator faces simply due to the fact that the screen space is limited, and the receivers can only read so fast. Example 2 showcases the stylistic angle of a subtitled translation. While the stylistic angle may not always be considered as important as other angles, it is necessary to take it into account when attempting to produce a good translation. When it comes to the most common types of translation challenges, in the context of this episode—and most likely of South Park in general—cultural references are the most common problems that a translator will be facing, time and space restrictions are frequent as well. Out of the basic tools and strategies introduced in this paper, substitution, omission, and direct translation seem to be the most common ways of dealing with the challenges that humour presents.

Further work on this topic may cover some of the introduced techniques more in depth, as well as introducing a wider range of the tools and strategies available to a translator. Some of the technical elements of subtitle translation can also be expanded upon, for example the materials that a translator has to work with when asked to provide a translation, or the restrictions of the most commonly used softwares.
6. Works cited


