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## RENDERING THE UNTRANSLATABLE: THE ROLE OF WORDPLAY AND PARADOX IN THE TV SERIES “FLEABAG”

*The article is devoted to the analysis of wordplay and paradoxes as key elements of black humour in the British comedy-drama series Fleabag (2016–2019). Based on the dialogues and monologues from the TV series, a detailed classification of the main types of wordplay and paradoxes is provided, and the most effective strategies for their translation are outlined; specific examples are used to demonstrate ways to create a comic effect, and a thorough analysis of the quality of Ukrainian translation to reproduce these techniques is carried out. The article examines in depth certain phrases and linguistic constructions containing wordplay or paradoxical statements. Each example is accompanied by a comprehensive linguistic analysis of the humorous effect creation mechanism and an assessment of its reproduction in the Ukrainian translation. In the course of the study, special emphasis is placed on the culture-specific components of humour, which pose the greatest challenges for mutual understanding and reproduction. The main feature of the series's uniqueness is its peculiar British black humour, which presents difficulties for translation. The comic effect is based on traditional British irony, love for the absurd and paradoxes, and jokes about taboo subjects (death, religion, sex). The article discusses cases where the cultural connotation is either completely lost in a literal translation or requires a deep adaptation for the Ukrainian audience, as it can only be conveyed through commentary or explanation. Particular attention is paid to how translation decisions affect the perception of the series by viewers with different cultural backgrounds. Ultimately, this study can be beneficial for broadening the understanding of humour and enhancing the practical skills of translators.*

**Key words:** fleabag, wordplay, paradoxes, black humour, translation, British comedy, pun, cultural adaptation, translation strategies.

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## ВІДТВОРЕННЯ НЕВІДТВОРЮВАНОГО: ВИКЛИКИ ПЕРЕКЛАДУ ГРИ СЛІВ ТА ПАРАДОКСУ У СЕРІАЛІ «ПОГАНЬ»

*Стаття присвячена аналізу функціонування гри слів та парадоксів як ключових елементів чорного гумору в британському комедійно-драматичному серіалі «Погань» (2016–2019). На основі діалогів та монологів з серіалу запропоновано детальну класифікацію основних типів гри слів та парадоксів та означені найефективніші стратегії їх перекладу; на конкретних прикладах продемонстровано способи створення комічного ефекту, а також проведено ретельний аналіз якості українського перекладу для відтворення цих прийомів. У статті*

детально розглядаються окрім фразистичних конструкцій, що містять гру слів або парадоксальні висловлювання. Для кожного прикладу наводиться лінгвістичний аналіз механізму створення гумористичного ефекту, оцінка відтворення цього ефекту в українському перекладі. Особливий акцент при аналізі висловлювань з серіалу робиться на культурно обумовлених елементах гумору, які становлять найбільші труднощі для міжкультурного розуміння та відтворення. Основною ознакою унікальності серіалу є своєрідний британський чорний гумор, що і становить труднощі для перекладу. Комічний ефект трунтується на традиційній британській іронії, любові до абсурду та парадоксів, жартів на табуйовані теми (смерть, релігія, секс). У статті детально аналізуються приклади, де культурний підтекст або повністю втрачається при дослівному перекладі або вимагає глибокої адаптації для українського глядача бо може бути переданий лише через коментар чи пояснення. Особлива увага приділяється аналізу того, як перекладацькі рішення впливають на сприйняття серіалу глядачами з іншою культурною основою. Нарешті, таке дослідження може бути корисним для розширення горизонтів розуміння гумору та стати корисним для покращення практичних навичок перекладачів.

**Ключові слова:** погань, гра слів, парадокси, чорний гумор, переклад, британська комедія, каламбур, культурна адаптація, стратегії перекладу.

The relevance of the present article can be explained by the rapid proliferation of English-language humour within the multimedia landscape. The television series *Fleabag* (2016–2019), which exemplifies the British comedy tradition, effectively illustrates how humour can shape viewers' perceptions of urgent social and family issues while simultaneously enhancing the literary value of the work. This study investigates instances where inadequate translation leads to misrepresentation of the author's design or, alternatively, fosters greater intercultural understanding. **The objective of this article** is to analyze the accuracy of rendering wordplay and paradoxes in the Ukrainian dubbing of "*Fleabag*." This analysis involves several key research tasks: developing a typology of wordplay and paradoxes; investigating the role of these elements as essential comedic devices in "*Fleabag*"; analyzing the strategies utilized for translating these components into Ukrainian; evaluating the effectiveness of the translation approaches employed in the dubbing process; and finally, assessing the impact of translation choices on the Ukrainian audience's perception of the series. This study aims to enhance the understanding of translation practices within contemporary humour studies and their influence on cultural reception and intercultural communication.

#### **Analysis of Recent Studies and Publications.**

Recent analyses of studies and publications on humour have provided valuable insights from a range of esteemed scholars. For example, Salvatore Attardo has examined linguistic theories of humour, and Brett Mills has provided a profound analysis of dark humour and taboo themes. Delia Chiaro has investigated various types of humour and the challenges associated with their translation. Additionally, Dirk Delabastita's seminal work on puns and the concept of untranslatability has greatly enriched the discourse of humour studies. Numerous other international researchers have also made noteworthy contributions to this field.

**Summary of the Main Material.** Humour can be considered a universal form of communication that effectively transcends cultural barriers. It is capable of alleviating tension in challenging situations and fostering a tranquil atmosphere, irrespective of individual emotions. Through the use of humour, we can articulate both appreciation and criticism, often conveying thoughts impossible to express directly. This linguistic phenomenon is intricately linked to language and cognition, drawing upon our understanding of vocabulary, context, and cultural references to generate meaning and elicit emotional responses. According to S. Attardo, there is a growing agreement among humour researchers to use "humour" as an umbrella term that encompasses all comic experiences and expressions (Attardo, 2020: 31–32).

There are dozens of different definitions of humour. The following are two representative ones. Crawford defines humour as any communication that generates a "positive cognitive or affective response from listeners" (Crawford, 1994: 57). Romero and Cruthirds define humour as "amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, or organisation" (Romero, Cruthirds, 2006: 59). The definition of humour, likewise, lacks a universally accepted theory that encompasses all perspectives. Nevertheless, four theories are most commonly referenced in humour studies: the superiority theory, the relief theory, the incongruity theory, and the benign violation theory.

The earliest and most contentious theory of superiority dates back to Aristotle's works and was later refined by Thomas Hobbes, who described laughter as a form of "sudden glory" arising from a sense of triumph over others or their misfortunes (Hobbes, 1996). This theory posits that humour often results from feelings of superiority, which can function as a defence mechanism for individuals who may be insecure about their self-worth.

The theory of incongruity, which emerged as a leading theory in the 20th century, emphasises the

source of comedy rather than the individual experiencing the laughter. This notion asserts that laughter is triggered by encounters with situations that contradict our expectations or do not align with our understanding of the world, representing an unexpected transition from anticipated outcomes to actual events (Deckers, Buttram, 1990). In addition, the more contemporary theory of benign violation (Veatch, 1998) suggests that humour arises when something contradicts social norms, ethical standards, or established preconceptions while still maintaining a perception of safety or acceptability. This perspective highlights that effective humour necessitates a careful balance between elements of violation and security.

British humour is known to have its nuanced relationship with language (Fox, 2014). It is capable of manipulating the English language, resulting in complex puns, ambiguities, and subtle wordplay that engage and reward the attentive listener. This playful approach to language, coupled with a cultural tendency toward understatement and brevity, creates a style of humour that can catch some individuals off guard (Ross, 1998). Conversely, British humour often leaves much unspoken, encouraging the audience to interpret and complete the underlying meaning. A defining characteristic of British humour is its embrace of dark comedy, which adeptly juxtaposes the terrible with the ordinary (Collings, 2015). This style frequently touches upon tragic or taboo subjects with a sense of straight-faced politeness, showcasing a unique capability to find humour even in challenging themes.

Dark humour extends beyond the spoken, encompassing the situational context and cultural background that explain its meaning. An understanding of history, social norms, and shared experiences is essential for the effective appreciation of such humour. Without this contextual knowledge, jokes may be perceived as confusing or offensive. This challenge is particularly pronounced in film and television, where translators face the task of conveying not only the dialogue but also the nuanced subtleties of humour (Collings, 2015). Consequently, translators and filmmakers face a challenge to preserve the original intent while ensuring that audiences from diverse backgrounds can fully comprehend and appreciate the humour presented and without distorting the collective author's design.

Humour extends beyond mere entertainment; it fosters a connection with the audience and conveys messages difficult to articulate directly, forcing the author to utilise a variety of humorous devices and techniques. In our study, we follow the classification of humour devices proposed by Attardo (1991) and McGraw & Warren (2010). Respectively, wordplay

and paradoxes play a crucial role in enriching the narrative and enhancing the viewer's experience.

Wordplay is a linguistic and stylistic device frequently employed in film dialogue to elicit comic, ironic, or dramatic effects. It is based on the inherent ambiguity of language, the phonetic similarities between expressions, grammatical transformations, and cultural connotations that can result in dual meanings or surprising interpretations of phrases (Zirker, Winter-Froemel, 2015). The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000: 1759) defines wordplay as a form of humour that emerges from the clever or amusing use of language, particularly through words that possess multiple meanings or through homophones – words that sound alike but have different meanings. After a thorough review of various definitions, in this article, the authors will utilise the terms "wordplay" and "pun" interchangeably.

D. Chiaro argues that wordplay can be understood as "the use of language with the intent to amuse" (Chiaro, 2010: 578). However, the joke's capability of eliciting laughter depends on a variety of factors, with the most significant being the surrounding environment and the context in which the joke is presented.

Classifying various types of wordplay may appear challenging due to the complexity of the linguistic processes involved. Notably, most cases of wordplay often rely on multiple linguistic techniques simultaneously.

In the present study, we follow the wordplay classification by D. Delabastita. According to the scholar, wordplay involves a variety of diverse textual and extratextual phenomena that resemble in form but differ in meaning. Thus, the following types of wordplay can be outlined: *phonological wordplay* (reliant on homonymy), homophony, and paronymy); *lexical development* (polysemy, idioms, metaphors, etc.), *morphological development wordplay* (abbreviations, derivation and composition), and *syntactic ambiguity* (Delabastita, 1996: 347–353).

Further on, Delabastita goes on to propose wordplay translation strategies: 1) PUN > PUN, the TT wordplay replaces ST wordplay; 2) PUN > NON-PUN (humorous effect is lost in translation); 3) PUN > PUNOID (another rhetorical device replaces the ST wordplay); 4) PUN > ZERO (full omission of ST wordplay); 5) DIRECT COPY, (the ST is replaced by a TT functional equivalent); 6) NON-PUN > PUN (a pun emerges in the TT text); 7) ZERO > PUN; 8) EDITORIAL FOOTNOTES OR COMMENTS (Delabastita, 1996: 347–353).

This study analyzes a corpus of 25 instances of wordplay drawn from two seasons of the television series "Fleabag," alongside their Ukrainian dubbing

by the Цікава Ідея studio. The findings indicate that polysemy and composition are the predominant forms of wordplay within the examined corpus, comprising 20% of the total instances. Morphological wordplay, which encompasses derivational processes, accounts for 16% of occurrences. Additionally, homonymy and paronymy each represent 12% of the examples. Less frequently observed types include homophony at 8%, with idioms, abbreviations, and syntactic ambiguity each contributing 4%. Notably, no instances of homography were found. In summary, this analysis underscores the prominence of wordplay grounded in ambiguity and structural formulation of words, rather than solely relying on phonetic or graphic similarities.

To illustrate the challenges of rendering wordplay in "Fleabag," we will analyze instances of the most common types of wordplay.

#### Example 1

ST: "There are some elements of the work that I, you know, I wanted to talk to you about. It's a **sexhibition**" (S01E05, 00:13:01 → 00:13:09)

TT: "Там будуть деякі експонати про які я хотів вас попередити. Це **секспонати**" (S01E05, 00:13:01 → 00:13:09)

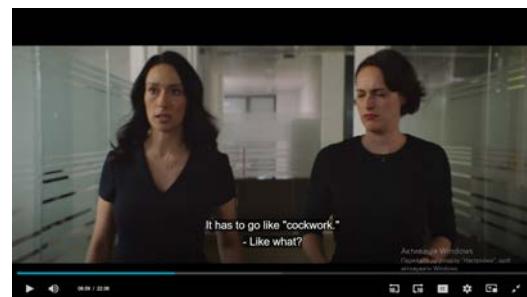


The phrase is spoken during a family dinner when the protagonist's father announces his new wife's upcoming art exhibition. The clever and provocative wordplay created by blending "sex" and "exhibition" illustrates a playful use of language. Translators have proposed the equivalent blend "секспонати." According to Delabastita's classification, this is a Pun-to-Pun translation strategy that allows translators to maintain the comic effect through a similar linguistic mechanism. Although the Ukrainian equivalent shifts the focus slightly from the event (the "sexhibition") to the objects (the term "секспонати," meaning exhibits), it still effectively reproduces the playful pun within a similar target text structure.

#### Example 2

ST: "When you hear me introducing Sylvia, get her on stage. It has to go like **cockwork**. Like what? **Cockwork**. Claire, your brain is somewhere else right now". (S02E03, 00:06:53 → 00:07:03)

TT: "Як почуєш клич її до сцени. Це має бути ідеальний **коїтус**. Що? **Коїтус**. Клер ти сама розумієш що кажеш?" (S21E31, 00:06:53 → 00:07:03)

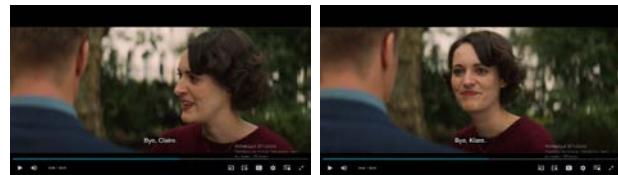


The dialogue takes place between Fleabag and her sister Claire, who is about to announce the winner of the Best Woman in Business award. Claire instructs Fleabag to assist her with the phrase "It has to go like *cockwork*". She likely meant to say "clockwork," which means that something should happen according to plan. However, her mispronunciation created a phonological wordplay with a crude sexual connotation. This wordplay relies on paronymy. The humour lies in the unexpected absurdity of the misinterpretation occurring in such a formal setting. In the adapted version for Ukrainian audiences, translators use the term "коїтус". This choice can be classified as a pun-into-zero strategy because "коїтус" is a straightforward term derived from Latin that means sexual intercourse, lacking any playful distortion or mimicry of another word. While the translation successfully retains the vulgarity and sexual connotations, it loses the pun since "коїтус" does not have the same phonetic twist as "clockwork" into "cockwork." Ultimately, the translators preserve the provocative tone but sacrifice the playful wordplay in favour of a clear lexical substitution.

#### Example 3

ST: "Bye, Claire. Bye, Klare". (S02E05, 00:12:49 → 00:12:52)

TT: "Буваї, Клер. Буваї, Клер". (S02E05, 00:12:49 → 00:12:52)



In the TV series Fleabag, the protagonist's sister is named Claire, while the man Claire is romantically interested in is named Klare. The phrase relies on phonological wordplay, specifically homophony, as the two names sound identical (/klɛər/) despite different spellings which creates a humorous effect. The pronunciation is the same in both languages, however, in the Ukrainian translation, there is no distinction in spelling, which leads to a pun-into-non-pun strategy.

The homophonic effect is lost since Ukrainian lacks an equivalent for Klare. The Ukrainian audience has a clear understanding that Fleabag is directed at two individuals; consequently, the translation proved to be quite effective.

#### Example 4

ST: "I'd spend 40 days and 40 nights in that dessert". (S02E02, 00:06:14 → 00:06:17)

TT: "Не хлібом самим буде жити людина". (S02E02, 00:06:14 → 00:06:17)

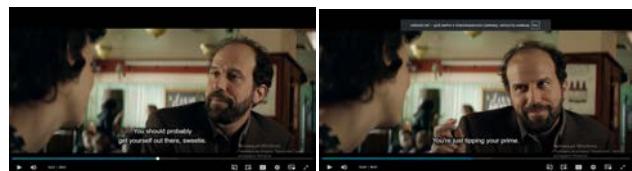


To analyse this, we need to examine the context. The phrase is found in the dialogue between Fleabag and the Priest, where the Priest humorously mentions that he writes restaurant reviews for a food magazine. He titles his latest review "*I'd spend 40 days and 40 nights in that dessert*". Before discussing the wordplay itself, it is important to highlight the Biblical allusion. This expression references Jesus fasting for "40 days and 40 nights" in the desert (Matthew, 4:2). Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to confront temptation from the devil. He fasted for forty days and nights, and when he was very hungry, the tempter approached him and said, "*If You are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread*". Jesus replied, "*Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God's mouth*". This saying is expressed in Ukrainian as "*Не хлібом самим буде жити людина*," which serves as a translation of the original text but differs significantly from the pun and omits it entirely (Gashute, 2025: 64–83). The humour in the original line relies on the play on words between "desert" and "dessert," merging the sacred (the spiritual reference) with the secular (the food critic role of the Priest). This form of pun is phonological, creating humour through the similarity in pronunciation.

#### Example 5

ST: "You should probably get yourself out there, sweetie. You're just **tipping your prime**". (S01E03, 00:12:19 → 00:12:25)

TT: "Знайди собі вже когось, люба, **доки твоя квітка не зів'яла**". (S01E03, 00:12:19 → 00:12:25)



The scene takes place after Fleabag's conversation with her brother-in-law at a bar. The conversation is casual, slightly frivolous, humorous, and somewhat disrespectful. The phrase suggests that Fleabag is at the peak of her attractiveness but risks losing it if she doesn't find a partner soon. Analysing the phrase, we can infer that it employs metaphorical wordplay by exploiting the idiomatic expression "*tipping your prime*". According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, "prime" refers to the stage in someone's life when they are at their strongest, most active, or most successful. The comment conveys that Fleabag's feminine charm is like a perishable product – something that will soon "expire". This wordplay operates on a lexical level (metaphor and idiom) as it relies on figurative language rather than phonological or morphological techniques. The Ukrainian dubbing also employs a metaphor, albeit one that differs but is functionally equivalent: the image of a flower to convey the same idea of fleeting youth and beauty. In Ukrainian, the verb "*зів'яти*" means to lose youth and beauty or to fade. Taking all of this into account, we can appreciate the pun and the strategy being used. The original metaphor is replaced with one that is culturally relevant, as flowers symbolising youth and beauty are common in Ukrainian culture, making this adaptation effective.

Skilful manipulation of language demonstrates that words can be ambiguous and carry multiple meanings. Puns illustrate how the same words can convey different ideas simultaneously. This idea becomes especially important when we encounter statements that not only play with word meanings but also contradict themselves. While wordplay uses our shared language to evoke laughter, paradoxes challenge us to rethink our understanding of logic and reality. These perplexing statements or situations that appear contradictory compel us to question the nature of truth and explore the limitations of our logical reasoning.

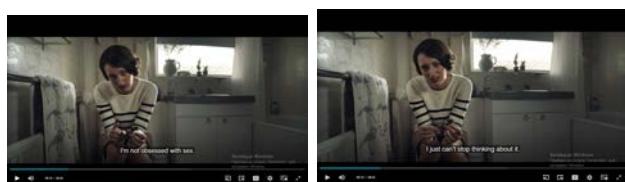
Classifying paradoxes presents a significant challenge due to the diverse methodologies available for categorisation and the varying opinions regarding the criteria for such classifications. In this study, we will employ a system developed by W.V.O. Quine, a prominent American philosopher. Quine identifies three primary types of paradoxes: 1. *Veridical Paradoxes* that may initially appear to be false but

ultimately are revealed to be true. 2. *Falsidical Paradoxes* that seem to be false and result from errors in their explanations. 3. *Antinomies* that go beyond the previous two categories and contain self-contradictions either in their assertions or in their logical structure (Quine, 1976: 76). For translators, it is of utter importance not only to render paradoxes in the most precise way possible, but to navigate the complexities of identifying them in the source text to preserve the intended joke during translation. In the present study, we have considered 16 instances of different types of paradoxes, each contributing to the general idea of the TV series.

*Example 1*

ST: “*I’m not obsessed with sex. I just can’t stop thinking about it*”. (S01E02, 00:05:07 → 00:05:13)

TT: “*Я не повернута на секс, просто без тями про це думаю*”. (S01E02, 00:05:07 → 00:05:13)



In the scene where Fleabag articulates her desire for intimacy following a night with a man, we encounter a compelling paradox. Through the lens of Quine’s framework, this line can be classified as a veridical paradox. Although the statement appears contradictory—asserting a lack of obsession while simultaneously acknowledging a persistent one—it reveals deeper psychological truths regarding obsessive guilt and desire within Fleabag’s character. The TT paradox indicates that the technique employed to present this paradox can be categorized as modulation. The term “obsessed” is rendered as “поворнута,” which is a figurative expression. This term has developed an additional colloquial meaning, denoting someone who is fixated on a specific idea, topic, or hobby. The translation effectively maintains the core contradiction and comedic effect of the original paradox, prioritizing the natural sound of the phrase over a literal interpretation.

*Example 2*

ST: “*I sometimes worry I wouldn’t be such a feminist if I had bigger tits*”. (S02E04, 00:03:14 → 00:03:20)

TT: “*Часом я хвилююсь що якби мала більші цицьки то була б меншою феміністкою*”. (S02E04, 00:03:14 → 00:03:20)

In the described scene, Fleabag unexpectedly rises during a meeting and articulates a provocative yet profoundly paradoxical statement. This remark exem-

plifies her internal struggle: although she identifies as a feminist, she grapples with the question of whether her insecurities or her convictions underpin her beliefs. This case effectively exemplifies a veridical paradox, revealing a poignant reality about self-doubt and the societal pressures faced by women. Furthermore, the structure and meaning of this moment are preserved in translation through the application of techniques such as literal and antonymic translation. The negative construction “...wouldn’t be such a feminist” is rendered with the help of antonymic translation as “була б меншою феміністкою” without changing the original idea, though being more paradoxical than the source cue.

**Conclusion.** This study examines rendering humour through the analysis of wordplay and paradoxes in the British television series “Fleabag” and its Ukrainian dubbing. Humour, while a universal phenomenon, is also distinctly multicultural, serving as a complex means of communication that can bridge cultural barriers, but it presents various unique challenges in translation. The study demonstrates that humour relies heavily on linguistic ambiguity and cultural context, making its preservation in translation a challenging yet crucial task. This topic is particularly relevant in light of the growing use of humour in contemporary media culture as a tool for social critique and psychological impact. The article analyses the verbal mechanisms used to create a comic effect and explores their connection to British cultural mentality. Special attention is given to the challenges of translation, specifically the potential loss of ambiguity, cultural references, and emotional nuances when adapting humour into Ukrainian.

The analysis of wordplay in the series revealed that polysemy and composition-based wordplay are the most prevalent types, underscoring the series’ reliance on multi-layered meanings. Translators employed various strategies to preserve humour, including retaining literal puns, making adaptations, and using compensatory techniques. However, in some cases, particularly those involving morphological or phonological wordplay, it was challenging to convey the original meaning without some loss of meaning. The examination of paradoxes showed that the most prevalent types were veridical paradoxes, which often uncover deeper meanings through apparent absurdity. These paradoxes have largely been preserved in the Ukrainian dubbing.

Further research on this topic could enhance the analysis by incorporating a wider range of genres and contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between humour, language, and intercultural communication.

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