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An analysis of wordplay translation strategies in "Abbott Elementary" Indonesian subtitles

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ABSTRACT

The growing popularity of international streaming platforms has increased the demand for effective audiovisual translation particularly in conveying humor based on wordplay. This study examined the types of wordplay found in Abbott Elementary and investigated the strategies used to translate them into Indonesian subtitles on Disney+ Hotstar. A descriptive qualitative method was employed, and the data were analyzed using Delabastita's (1996) framework of wordplay and translation strategies. The findings identified seven instances of wordplay consisting of phonological structures including homophony and paronymy lexical structures including polysemy and idiom misuse and morphological structures. The analysis revealed that Pun to Non-Pun was the most frequently applied strategy accounting for 71.4% of the data while Pun to Pun represented 28.6%. These findings suggest that subtitle translation tended to prioritize semantic clarity and readability rather than preserving the linguistic form of the original joke. The multimodal analysis further showed that visual and auditory elements often supported the delivery of humor when wordplay could not be fully retained in the target language. It can therefore be concluded that multimodality plays an important role in helping audiences understand humor and maintaining the intended comedic effect in audiovisual translation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Modern technology makes accessing various Over-the-Top (OTT) streaming platforms such as Disney+ Hotstar much easier for everyone today. A recent report from Media Partners Asia mentioned by Ardiyanto (2024) reveals that Southeast Asian paid OTT subscribers reached 48 million in the third quarter of 2023 with Indonesia contributing nearly

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50% or 21 million subscribers. This shows Indonesian massive interest in watching foreign programs filled with different cultures and languages (Shin You et al., 2021). A prominent example on Disney+ Hotstar is the American sitcom series Abbott Elementary. This mockumentary series presents a distinctive linguistic feature through the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) which is closely connected to the representation of Black community life while various forms of wordplay are also employed to create humorous moments making the series an interesting object of study because the comedic effect often relies on language elements whose meaning and humor may not be easily conveyed when translated into another language.

Translating humor that incorporates wordplay alongside a cultural dialect such as AAVE can be challenging since the available text space and subtitle display time are limited which may reduce the translator's ability to convey the intended meaning and often results in the loss of humorous effects in the target language. Previous studies have explored the translation of wordplay in audiovisual media from different perspectives. Fithri and Suyudi (2019) found that wordplay in Friends was most frequently rendered through the pun to non-pun strategy which helped convey the intended meaning but often weakened the humorous effect. Similar findings were reported by Pangaksami and Nugroho (2023) whose analysis of The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge on the Run showed that paronymy was the most common type of wordplay and was largely translated using the same strategy to maintain clarity for the target audience. A different perspective was offered by Paramarta (2023) who examined wordplay translation through a multimodal approach and demonstrated that reductions in comedic effect within subtitles may still be compensated by visual and auditory elements that support the delivery of humor. Previous studies have provided valuable insights into humor translation but most of them examined comedy programs that mainly use standard English while discussions on the translation of wordplay embedded in a non-standard dialect such as AAVE within a contemporary sitcom remain limited which highlights a gap in the existing literature and gives this study a different focus from earlier research.

This study focuses on examining how the humor found in Abbott Elementary was translated into Indonesian subtitles on Disney+ Hotstar by exploring the choices made by the translator and the analysis is carried out using the wordplay classification and translation strategies proposed by Dirk Delabastita (1996). Delabastita classifies wordplay into five structural types:

1. Phonological/graphological structure: manipulate identical sounds and spellings to create humor
2. Lexical structure of polysemy: utilize one specific word containing multiple related definitions
3. Lexical structure of idiom misuse: happens when characters intentionally understand standard expressions in a completely literal sense
4. Morphological structure: play around with basic word forming elements
5. Syntactic structure: generate humorous situations by creating ambiguous sentence arrangements

To examine how these forms of wordplay are translated, this study applies Delabastita's translation strategies including pun to pun which renders a wordplay into another wordplay and pun to non-pun which replaces a wordplay with a non-wordplay expression, while a multimodal perspective is also employed since multimodality refers to the complexity and interrelation of a variety of meanings that combine linguistic, visual,

auditory, gestural, and spatial aspects (Paramarta, 2023) in order to determine whether the humorous effect is maintained or reduced in the translated subtitles.

2. METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method to examine the translation of wordplay without relying on statistical measurement. Abbott Elementary and its Indonesian subtitles available on Disney+ Hotstar were selected as the source of data due to the series' portrayal of American public-school culture and its frequent use of educational language. During the preliminary observation several humorous expressions involving wordplay were found to be inadequately conveyed in the translated subtitles which may have reduced the intended comedic effect for viewers who depended on the target-language version and this issue encouraged a more detailed investigation of how wordplay was rendered throughout the series.

The data were collected through purposive sampling by observing all five seasons of Abbott Elementary and selecting dialogue segments containing wordplay. Screenshots of relevant scenes were compiled to capture both the English utterances and their Indonesian subtitle translations while several excerpts were transcribed manually to maintain textual accuracy and contextual integrity. Data collection was concluded when similar translation patterns repeatedly appeared and no additional categories were identified. The researcher acted as the primary instrument and employed a data table to organize the collected materials before examining each example to identify patterns in the translation of wordplay from English into Indonesian.

The data were analyzed using descriptive content analysis by first classifying the source language data according to Dirk Delabastita's categories of wordplay and then comparing the original utterances with their Indonesian subtitle translations to identify the translation strategies applied. The analysis was further supported by a multimodal perspective to examine whether humor was successfully preserved or experienced reduction in translation through the interaction of subtitle texts with visual cues such as facial expressions and gestures as well as auditory cues including intonation and vocal delivery.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion are presented in two main sections. The first section discusses the structural types of wordplay found in the data whereas the second section focuses on the translation strategies employed in the Indonesian subtitles of Abbott Elementary.

3.1. Types of Wordplay

Seven instances of wordplay were found in Abbott Elementary Seasons 1-5 on Disney+ Hotstar. These data were classified using Delabastita's (1996) framework and the results can be seen in the table below:

Table 1. Phonological Structure (Homophony)

Visual Frame	Context	SL	TL (Indonesian Subtitle)
S3. E3 "Smoking"	This scene unfolds when the teachers are accidentally recorded by a student while discussing	Janine: "Hi!"	This scene unfolds when the teachers are accidentally recorded by a student while discussing

	marijuana, and the video is wildly spreads, leading to a false assumption that they are consuming drugs. A while later, when Janine greets a student by saying "hi," the student replies, "bet you are," because the greeting "hi" is homophonous with the word "high," an expression denoting the state of being under the influence of drugs.	marijuana, and the video is wildly spreads, leading to a false assumption that they are consuming drugs. A while later, when Janine greets a student by saying "hi," the student replies, "bet you are," because the greeting "hi" is homophonous with the word "high," an expression denoting the state of being under the influence of drugs.

This example illustrates a phonological type of wordplay that is built on the identical pronunciation of "**Hi" /haɪ/** and "**high" /haɪ/**. The humor arises from the overlap between these two expressions after a rumor regarding the teachers' alleged drug use has circulated among the students. As a result, Janine's greeting is interpreted as an indication of drug use rather than a friendly salutation which creates a humorous misunderstanding. The comedic effect is achieved through homophonic ambiguity since the same sound pattern can be associated with two different meanings.

The Indonesian subtitle renders the greeting and the student's response as ordinary expressions, so the sound-based connection between "hi" and "high" is not available to the target-language audience. This indicates that the subtitle communicates the immediate conversational meaning but does not reproduce the phonological trigger of the joke. The preceding rumor about drug use and the scene's reactions therefore become important contextual cues for viewers to recognize why the student's response is humorous.

Table 2. Phonological Structure (Paronymy)

Visual Frame	Context	SL	TL (Indonesian Subtitle)
S1. E11 "Smoking" 	This scene occurs when Jacob introduces his boyfriend, Zach, to his colleagues. When Ava reacts to Zach's race by saying "Black?", Zach jokingly interprets it as a mispronunciation of his name and replies, "It's actually pronounced Zach."	Ava: "Black?"	This scene occurs when Jacob introduces his boyfriend, Zach, to his colleagues. When Ava reacts to Zach's race by saying "Black?", Zach jokingly interprets it as a mispronunciation of his name and replies, "It's actually pronounced Zach."

In the Indonesian version, "Black?" is translated literally as "Hitam?", while Zach's clarification is retained as a reference to the pronunciation of his name. The translation makes the exchange understandable, but the resemblance between "Black" and "Zach" is less apparent in Indonesian. Consequently, the humorous effect depends largely on viewers' access to the original spoken exchange and the characters' delivery. This example shows how a paronymic joke tied to English pronunciation can be difficult to transfer through subtitles alone.

The wordplay is based on the phonetic resemblance between the word "Black" /blæk/ and the name "Zach" /zæk/. Although the two words are not pronounced the same, their similar sound patterns create an opportunity for linguistic play. The humorous effect arises when Ava intentionally exploits this phonetic similarity to make a racially charged remark

while simultaneously expressing her surprise regarding Zach's identity. Consequently, the wordplay functions through paronymic ambiguity, allowing the speaker to convey both humor and social commentary within a single utterance.

Table 3. Lexical Structure (Misuse of Idiom)

Visual Frame	Context	SL	TL (Indonesian Subtitle)
S3. E3 "Smoking"  	This scene unfolds as Jacob is delivering a history lesson about the Dust Bowl to his class, when a student suddenly makes a sarcastic remark, asking whether the interior of his car looks like a dust storm when he vapes. This insinuation alludes to a prior rumor circulating among the students regarding the teachers' alleged drug use. In response, Jacob attempts to assert his authority by sternly emphasizing that students are strictly prohibited from discussing or consuming drugs.	Student 1: "Is that what inside of your car looks like when you're vaping, Mr. C?"	This scene unfolds as Jacob is delivering a history lesson about the Dust Bowl to his class, when a student suddenly makes a sarcastic remark, asking whether the interior of his car looks like a dust storm when he vapes. This insinuation alludes to a prior rumor circulating among the students regarding the teachers' alleged drug use. In response, Jacob attempts to assert his authority by sternly emphasizing that students are strictly prohibited from discussing or consuming drugs.

The Indonesian phrase "*sudah dibantai*" communicates the idea of being defeated or overwhelmed, but it does not carry the association with smoking that is activated by "got smoked" in the source dialogue. The translation therefore prioritizes the idiomatic meaning that fits the students' teasing of Jacob, while the link to the earlier vaping and drug-use discussion is weakened. The surrounding scene still provides context for the joke, but the double meaning of the English expression is not fully represented in the subtitle.

The humor in this dialogue is built around the expression "got smoked," which carries more than one meaning within the context of the scene. The joke emerges after students spread a rumor suggesting that several teachers were involved in drug use and later use the phrase to tease Jacob in front of others. In its idiomatic sense "got smoked" refers to being badly defeated or embarrassed during an argument. At the same time the word "smoked" evokes associations with smoking and vaping which are directly connected to the rumor discussed earlier. This overlap of meanings creates a double entendre that allows the utterance to function on two levels simultaneously by referring to Jacob's verbal defeat while also linking him to the act of smoking or vaping.

Table 4. Lexical Structure (Polysemy)

Visual Frame	Context	SL	TL (Indonesian Subtitle)
S5. E7 "Goodgirl"	Barbara is having a conversation with the school counselor and explains that she has successfully resolved a conflict with her husband, Gerald. The issue they	Barbara: "Gerald, your chewing those nuts in my ears is driving me nuts"	Barbara: *"Gerald, kau membuatku gila dengan mengunyah kacang itu di telingaku"*

	discussed concerns Gerald's habit of chewing nuts, which Barbara finds highly irritating.		

The subtitle translates the two occurrences of "nuts" differently in effect: the literal reference to the snack remains, while the idiomatic sense of "driving me nuts" is rendered through "*membuatku gila*." This makes Barbara's irritation clear to Indonesian viewers, but the repetition of one English word with two related meanings is no longer present. The example illustrates a semantic trade-off in which the subtitle preserves the character's complaint while reducing the lexical play that produces the original humor.

The wordplay revolves around the polysemy of the word "nuts." The humorous effect emerges when Barbara expresses her frustration with her husband's habit of chewing nuts through the repetition of the same lexical item. In its first occurrence, "nuts" is used in its literal sense, referring to the snack being consumed. However, in its second occurrence, the word appears within the idiomatic expression "driving me nuts," where it figuratively means causing someone to become irritated or crazy. The use of the same lexical form to convey two different meanings creates semantic ambiguity, which serves as the primary source of humor in the dialogue.

Table 5. Morphological Structure (Acronym)

Visual Frame	Context	SL	TL (Indonesian Subtitle)
S2. E20 "Educator of the Year" 	This scene occurs when Barbara discovers that she is still missing one course required to fulfill the continuing education requirements mandated by the school district. As this issue could affect her teaching license, Barbara seeks Jacob's assistance in enrolling in an online course.	Jacob: "Okay got one, Boom! IGAL: Intergenerational Active Listening."	This scene occurs when Barbara discovers that she is still missing one course required to fulfill the continuing education requirements mandated by the school district. As this issue could affect her teaching license, Barbara seeks Jacob's assistance in enrolling in an online course.

The Indonesian subtitle creates the acronym "MAAG" and expands it as "Mendengarkan Aktif Antar Generasi," while the dialogue continues with a playful sequence involving "kawan" and "kalendermu." The adapted acronym gives the target audience a locally recognizable verbal form, although the sound pattern and word associations differ from "IGAL," "gal," "cal," and "pal." The example demonstrates an attempt to recreate linguistic play through target-language resources rather than reproduce the source wording literally.

This example contains a morphological type of wordplay built around the acronym IGAL which stands for Intergenerational Active Listening and is expanded using several rhyming expressions. The humorous effect is generated when Jacob links the acronym to words such as "gal," "cal," and "pal," creating a chain of similar sounds that makes the utterance appear playful and spontaneous. Through this linguistic pattern the dialogue not only produces humor but also reflects the character's creativity in manipulating language during the interaction.

3.2. Translation Strategies

Seven instances of wordplay were found in the data and were subsequently analyzed according to the translation strategies used in the Indonesian subtitles. The results indicate that the Pun to Non-Pun strategy was applied in five cases (71.4%) whereas the Pun to Pun strategy appeared in two cases (28.6%). Examples of how these strategies were implemented are discussed in the following section:

Table 6. Pun to Non-Pun

Visual Frame	Context	SL	TL (Indonesian Subtitle)
S5. E11 "Team Building"  	This scene unfolds when the Abbott Elementary teachers discover a box of donuts left on the table in the teachers' lounge, unaware of who brought it. To lighten the mood, Janine then reads the text printed on the donut box, which says, "donut worry about a thing."	Janine: "Donut worry about a thing"	Janine: *"Donat menghilangkan kekhawatiran"*

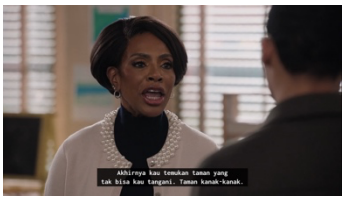
Unlike the previous example, this translation retains a wordplay relationship through the Indonesian expressions "taman" and "taman kanak-kanak." The repeated lexical element allows the subtitle to connect the metaphor of a garden with the name of the school level, preserving the basis of Barbara's teasing. The example suggests that Pun to Pun can be effective when the target language offers a familiar expression with a comparable form and meaning. Its success is thus dependent on the availability of a suitable linguistic parallel.

The Pun to Non-Pun strategy was applied by translating "donut worry about a thing" as *"Donat menghilangkan kekhawatiran."* Rather than preserving the original wordplay the translation focuses on delivering the intended message clearly and easy for Indonesian viewers to understand. This choice is commonly found in subtitling since subtitles are restricted by both space and display time. As noted by Saputra et al. (2022) subtitle texts are generally shorter than spoken dialogue because viewers need to read and process the information within a limited timeframe which often encourages translators to prioritize clarity over linguistic creativity.

Although the meaning is successfully conveyed the humorous effect of the source text is reduced in the subtitle. The joke relies on the phonological similarity between "donut" /ˈdoʊnət/ and "do not" /duː nɒt/ which creates a playful variation of the phrase "do not worry about a thing." Since this sound-based relationship does not exist in Indonesian the wordplay cannot be reproduced, and the joke is transformed into an ordinary expression. Even so the humor is not entirely lost when viewed from a multimodal perspective. The donuts shown on screen provide a visual cue that helps viewers connect the dialogue with the object being discussed which supports the delivery of the intended joke despite the absence of the original linguistic play.

Table 7. Pun to Pun

Visual Frame	Context	SL	TL (Indonesian Subtitle)

S5. E16 "Campaign"  	This scene happens when Gregory and Barbara argue about which grade is harder to teach. Gregory claims that first grade is more challenging because teachers must build basic skills from the beginning, while Barbara feels this statement underestimates kindergarten teachers. To prove their points, they agree to switch classrooms. However, Gregory quickly gets overwhelmed by the kindergarten students and asks to return to his original class.	Gregory: "Hello, Mrs. Howard. I'd like to switch back now, please."	Gregory: *"Halo, Bu Howard. Aku ingin bertukar kembali sekarang."* Barbara: *"Pak Eddie. Akhirnya kau temukan taman yang tak bisa kau tangani. Taman kanak-kanak."*

The translator applied a perfect pun to pun strategy by translating the dialogue directly into *"Akhirnya kau temukan taman yang tak bisa kau tangani, Taman kanak-kanak".* This specific language conversion successfully saved the original joke because the English word "garden" and its longer version "kindergarten" share identical root connections with our local terms "*taman*" and "*taman kanak-kanak*". Indonesian viewers can easily understand the humor since that exact core vocabulary appears visibly clear across both sentences. This finding proves how amazing this translation method works in transferring pure comedy alongside its true meaning directly to local audiences. The final text managed to capture the sharp sarcastic tone flawlessly while keeping the authentic verbal joke completely intact.

The comparison of the two translation strategies indicates that the transfer of wordplay in Abbott Elementary involves a balance between preserving linguistic creativity and communicating the intended meaning. The Pun to Non-Pun examples demonstrate how a translator can prioritize semantic clarity when a source-language pun has no direct equivalent in the target language. In "donut worry about a thing," the Indonesian subtitle communicates the reassuring message, but the sound relationship between "donut" and "do not" is not reproduced. A similar reduction can be observed in "got smoked" and "driving me nuts," where the Indonesian renderings convey the relevant meaning but do not retain all the associations activated by the English expressions. These cases show that meaning can remain accessible even when the original wordplay is reduced. However, viewers may rely more heavily on the scene, the characters' reactions, and prior dialogue to recognize the humorous intention.

By contrast, Pun to Pun attempts to maintain a humorous linguistic effect by creating a corresponding form of wordplay in Indonesian. The "garden" and "kindergarten" exchange is rendered through "*taman*" and "*taman kanak-kanak*," allowing the repeated element "*taman*" to connect the metaphor with the name of the school level. This example illustrates the possibility of preserving humor when the target language provides a familiar expression with a comparable relationship in form and meaning. Nevertheless, such a solution depends on the availability of a suitable linguistic parallel; it cannot necessarily be applied to every pun, particularly those based on specific English sounds, idioms, or word formations.

The difference between the two strategies should not be understood simply as a distinction between successful and unsuccessful translation. Pun to Non-Pun can be useful when retaining the original form would make the subtitle confusing or unnatural, while Pun to Pun can preserve more of the source text's playful effect when an appropriate target-language equivalent is available. The predominance of Pun to Non-Pun in the data indicates that clarity and comprehensibility were more commonly prioritized than formal similarity. This pattern reflects the challenges of audiovisual subtitling, where viewers must read the translated text while following dialogue and visual action within a limited display time.

The findings also highlight that humor in audiovisual media is communicated through more than words alone. When a pun is weakened or omitted in the subtitle, visual and auditory information may still help viewers understand the situation and the characters' intentions. In the examples discussed, the objects shown on screen, the surrounding events, and the characters' delivery provide contextual support for interpreting the dialogue. These elements do not necessarily recreate the original linguistic joke, but they can help maintain the scene's humorous tone and make the interaction understandable to Indonesian viewers.

For subtitle translation, this suggests the importance of considering the relationship between language, context, and the other modes available in a scene. Translators may preserve a pun when a natural and meaningful equivalent exists but may choose a clear non-pun expression when the original linguistic mechanism cannot be transferred effectively. In either case, the translation should be considered in relation to the complete audiovisual scene rather than as an isolated written sentence. Overall, the data indicate that maintaining humor requires a flexible approach: linguistic creativity is valuable, but clarity and the support of visual and auditory cues also contribute to the audience's comprehension of wordplay.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examines the types of wordplay found in "Abbott Elementary" and the strategies used to translate them into Indonesian subtitles on Disney+ Hotstar. Seven instances of wordplay are identified, consisting of phonological, lexical, and morphological structures, indicating that humor in the series is frequently created through linguistic manipulation and multiple layers of meaning. The analysis reveals that Pun to Non-Pun is the most frequently applied strategy, accounting for 71.4% of the data, while Pun to Pun accounts for 28.6%. These findings suggest that subtitle translation tends to prioritize clarity and accessibility for the target audience over the preservation of the original linguistic humor. The findings also show that the dominance of Pun to Non-Pun often results in a reduction of humorous effect because the phonological, lexical, and morphological relationships present in the source language cannot always be reproduced in Indonesian. Despite this limitation, the intended joke is often understood through the support of visual and auditory elements presented in the scenes. Facial expressions, gestures, intonation, and situational context frequently contribute to the delivery of humor even when the original wordplay is partially lost in translation. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the successful transfer of humor in audiovisual translation is influenced not only by the subtitle text but also by the interaction of multiple communicative modes. While linguistic constraints may restrict the preservation of wordplay, multimodal elements play an important role in supporting audience comprehension and helping maintain the intended comedic effect throughout the series.

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