Problems and Strategies in Comics Translation

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Abstract

Comics are illustrated stories that have been an alternative entertainment for many people of all ages. They can be fictional stories such as myths, legends, fairy tales, science fiction, and folklore. There are two types of comics: printed comics and digital comics. Many comics are translated from the source language to the target language. The translation process should ensure that the target text language is parallel with the source text language. Occasionally there are inaccurate translations, and the original message that the author wants to convey to the reader cannot be delivered. Due to the multimodality of comics, their translation often involves more complex processes compared to that of other text types. This literature review aimed to identify what problems exist in comics translation and what solutions had been suggested to overcome the problems. The primary goals were to synthesize the existing literature describing patterns of problems and strategies in translating comics. The data was collected from thirty research reports on the translation of comics in which the source language was either English or Indonesian. The review found five categories of problems with the two most frequent strategies suggested to overcome the problems.

Keywords: comics, translation, problems, strategies

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Today, it is pretty convenient to find various kinds of entertainment. One of them is reading comics and funny illustrated stories. Reading comics can be an alternative entertainment for many people as they are now widely accessible both in printed and digital forms. Comics can attract the attention of many readers because they usually have various fictional stories such as myths, legends, fairy tales, science fiction, and folklore. Since comics originate in different countries, they are often translated into many languages to reach out to diverse audiences.

A translation process itself involves replacing a text representation in one language with an equivalent text in a second language (Bell, 1991). An inappropriate translation can hinder the delivery of the author's message to the readers (Suryawinata, 1989). The translation of comics needs special attention because it concerns not only linguistic content but also symbols and images. Altenberg and Owen (2015) state that translating comics requires consideration of all features related to the source text and the multimodality aspect. Considering the complexity of translating multimodal texts such as comics, this literature review aimed to offer insight into the process involved in comics translation by identifying the translation challenges and ways to overcome them.

This review's main purpose was to synthesize what previous research had found about problems and strategies in translating comics. Understanding the problems can make translators aware of how these problems can affect their translation results and help them convey the author's message better. The data were taken from several research reports examining the translation of comics from various genres and those addressing problems that often arise during comics translation. The review focused on examining the gap between the translation of comics from English as the source language (SL) to Indonesian as the target

language (TL) and vice versa. It discussed how the translation problems affected the results of translation.

Literature Review

Translation of texts involves problems at and above word levels. According to Baker (2011), a common difficulty that translators often have in translating a text from SL to TL at the word level is non-equivalence. The problem can arise when no word in the TL expresses the same meaning as the SL word. Baker classifies these non-equivalence problems into eleven categories. They are (a) culture-specific concepts, (b) non-lexicalized concepts, (c) semantically complex words, (d) differences in meanings of words in SL and TL, e) lack of superordinate in the TL, (f) lack of specific term/hyponym, (g) differences in physical or interpersonal perspective, (h differences in expressive meaning, (i) differences in form, (j) differences in frequency and purpose of using specific forms, and (k) loan words in the SL (2011, pp. 18–23).

Some strategies have been suggested to overcome problems in translating comics. The current review referred to the strategies suggested by Celotti (2008) and Kaindl (2004) who agree that translators should consider the interplay between verbal and nonverbal messages in the translation of comics. Celotti states a range of strategies to be used by translators, focusing on four areas where verbal messages appear: balloons, captions, titles, and linguistic paratext, also known as verbal messages contained in pictures. Whereas Kaindl, seeing comics from the design perspective, classifies the techniques to convey meanings as ranging from linguistic elements like speech bubbles and narrative texts to typographic aspects such as pictorial representations of persons, objects, and situations.

Considering the complexity of verbal and nonverbal signs in comics, appropriate strategies are essential to address problems in comics translation. The following list combines the different translation strategies of comics suggested by Celotti and Kaindl such as

(a) Translation proper, a translation that translates the source text as it is and by following its intended purpose; (b) Non-translation, maintaining the text to be the same as the source text; (c) Functional translation, translating words from the source text to target text with functionally appropriate words; (d) Deletion, removing some parts of the text to prevent misunderstanding, while still maintaining the author's message; (e) Shortening, abbreviating a few sentences without removing any meaning; (f) Addition, adding material in the target text, for example, by inserting footnotes to add context or a translation; and (g) Cultural adaptation, replacing culture-specific elements of the source culture with those of the target culture (Celotti, 2008, pp. 33–49; Kaindl, 2004, pp. 173–192).

Methods

This descriptive literature review discussed the existing research in comics translation involving English or Indonesian as the source or target language. Using Baker's (2011) classification of translation problems at the word level as a point of departure, the review synthesized the patterns of problems and strategies identified in the translation of comics as reported in the reviewed research reports. The data collection and analysis employed keywords to select research reports to review. While the translation problems were clustered according to Baker's (2011) classification, the strategies identified were discussed in light of the strategies proposed by Celotti (2008) and Kaindl (2004).

Reviewed Research Reports

There were thirty research reports on comics translation retained for the review. All the reports analyzed are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Reviewed Research Reports on Comics Translation

Author/s (year)	Type of Publication	Article Title	Aims or research question
Adhedia (2012)	Undergraduate Thesis	Analysis of expressive interjection translation in terms of meanings, techniques, and quality	To find out what strategies the translator

Author/s (year)	Type of Publication	Article Title	Aims or research question
		assessments in *The Very Best Donald Duck* bilingual comics (17th ed.)	uses in translating expressive interjection
Agustine (2014)	Journal article	Semantic shift in the English-Indonesian translation of the *Tintin* comic series *The Adventures of Tintin: The Black Island*	To analyze the categories of semantic shift
Assis (2016)	Journal article	The concept of fidelity in comics translation	To find out the fidelity of comics translation
Barezzi et al. (2018)	Journal article	Analysis of translation technique and translation quality of Marvel comics *Civil War: Whose Side Are You On? Part 1, 2* (Multimodal approach)	To know the translation techniques of Marvel comics
Borodo (2015)	Journal article	Multimodality, translation, and comics	To investigate the translation of comic books in the context of their multimodal nature
Delespaul (2015)	Journal article	Translating comic book dialogue, humor, and sound effects	To analyze and clarify the different strategies adopted for the Dutch translation of two works by Canadian cartoonist Bryan Lee O'Malley.
Hermawan (2013)	Journal article	Multimodality: Menafsir verbal, membaca gambar, dan memahami Teks (Multimodality: Interpreting verbal, reading pictures, and understanding text)	To describe multimodality as an "analysis procedure"
Kosiński (2015)	Undergraduate thesis	Translation techniques used in the translation of comics	To find out how to translate comics
Lestari et al. (2018)	Journal article	Translation of idioms in *Hayate no Gotoku* comic volume 36	To find out how to use strategies and procedures in translating idioms
Munoz-Luna (2019)	Journal article	The translation of onomatopoeias in comics: Linguistic and pedagogical implications	To compare and analyze three versions of *Garfield* comic strips
Macková (2012)	Undergraduate thesis	Specifics of comic translation	To describe the processes of comics translation and publication and introduce the specifics of comics translation.
Mansur & Purnamasari (2020)	Journal article	Representing onomatopoeias in the Britain comic and their translations in Indonesia	To reveal the issue of onomatopoeias found in *Asterix* comics

Author/s (year)	Type of Publication	Article Title	Aims or research question
Ningtyas (2017)	Undergraduate thesis	Pergeseran bentuk dan makna dalam terjemahan komik *Detective Conan* vol 84 dan 85 (The shift of form and meaning in the comic translation *Detective Conan* vol. 84 and 85)	To analyze the shift in form and meaning in translating
Nurmadea (2019)	Journal article	Terjemahan beranotasi komik *Psychiatric Tales* karya Darryl Cunningham ke dalam bahasa Indonesia	To analyze the translation of the *Psychiatric Tales* comics
Nusanti (2011)	Undergraduate thesis	The translation quality assessment of *The Amazing Spiderman* comic published by KOMPAS	To measure the accuracy of a comic translated by KOMPAS
Octaviani (2016)	Journal article	Prosedur dan metode penerjemahan bahasa slang dalam komik *Crayon Shinchan* karya Yoshito Usui (The translation procedure and method of slang language in *Crayon Shinchan* by Yoshito Usui)	To describe the category and frequency of occurrence of slang language in comics translation
Rumlus (2017)	Journal article	Comparison analysis translation method in comic *Wayang Light* vol.1 into English version	To compare and analyze the translation methods used in translating the Comic *Wayang* (vol.1) into English
Salor & Marasligil (2013)	Journal article	Translating comics: It's not just in the bubble	To explore the characteristics of comics and the challenges and opportunities for comic translators
Santika (2015)	Journal article	The translation strategy of slang expression in comic entitled *The Punisher*	To identify the types of slang expressions in the comic *The Punisher*
Sugiarto (2016)	Undergraduate thesis	Translation method in R. Goscinny and A. Udezo`s comic *Asterix: The Legionary* into Tim Pustaka Sinar Harapan's *Asterix: Prajurit Romawi*	To analyze the translation methods found in the comic of *Asterix: The Legionary*
Suryani (2013)	Undergraduate thesis	Translation techniques used in bilingual comic *Asterix and the Golden Sickle* translated into *Asteric Dan Sabit Emas*	This study aims to describe and analyze the techniques used in translating *Asterix and the Golden Sickle*
Suryoalam (2011)	Undergraduate thesis	A study of translation strategies used in comic translation of *Lucky Luke: The Bridge on The*	To find out what strategy is used in comic translation and in what

Author/s (year)	Type of Publication	Article Title	Aims or research question
		Mississippi to *Lucky Luke: Jembatan Mississippi*	situation that strategy is used
Susain (2013)	Undergraduate thesis	Methods of translation in comic novel *Diary of a Wimpy* Kid into *Buku Harian Wimpy* by Jeff Kinney	To find the method used in the translation of idioms in a comic novel
Sutrisna (2017)	Undergraduate thesis	Bentuk dan strategi penerjemahan onomatope bahasa Jepang pada komik *One Piece* (Penerjemahan) (Bentuk dan strategi penerjemahan onomatope bahasa Jepang pada komik *One Piece*)	To know the translation strategy used in translating Japanese onomatopoeia to Indonesian
Taran (2014)	Journal article	Problems in the translation of comics and cartoons	To illustrate how translators face the problems on a cultural, technical, and linguistic level
Utamayasa et al. (2017)	Journal article	Loss and gain in translation process in *Big Nate* comic strips books into Indonesian	To analyze the kinds of structural loss and gain found in the comic
Wardani (2014)	Journal article	Analysis of the untranslatibility in direct-speech translation: Towards *Tintin in The Land of Soviets*	To analyze the occurrence of untranslatability in the translation of *Tintin* comics
Wisudawanto & Pratiwi (2015)	Journal article	Masalah keakuratan terjemahan tuturan karakter Spongebob dalam komik *Amazing Journey* dan terjemahannya (Problems with the accuracy of the translation of *Spongebob*'s character in the *Amazing Journey* comic and its translation)	To describe the problem of accuracy of translation utterance in *Spongebob* comics
Yuliasri (2017)	Journal article	Translators' censorship in English-Indonesian translation of *Donald Duck* comics	To determine censorship through translation techniques used by translators in translating humorous texts
Yablonsky (2016)	Journal article	Text and image in translation	To investigate the relationship between text and images and their implications in the translation process.

Data Collection and Analysis

The initial data collection process began by searching for articles from various sources such as books, journal articles, newspapers, undergraduate theses, and personal documents. Subsequently, the selection of papers for the analysis was based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria and by reading the abstracts. The inclusion criteria were articles that discussed comics translation, strategies for translating comics, problems in comics translation, and challenges in comics translation. Additionally, only articles published within the last ten years were retained. The reports could be written in Indonesian or English. Those that did not meet one of those criteria were excluded from the analysis. After the process of elimination, the researcher read through the introduction and findings to ensure that the paper addressed the problems of and strategies for comic translation.

The data analysis followed the steps of (a) reading papers and note-taking each study collected, (b) summarizing the main findings of each study, (c) classifying the translation problems by comparing and contrasting the data summarized, (d) identifying relationships and contradictions between the data that have been classified by category, and (e) inferring and proposing translation strategies in light of the theoretical framework.

Results and Discussion

Translation problems arise because of the difficulties faced by the translator in translating a particular word, phrase, or sentence. Reviews of the thirty articles revealed seven problems often occurred in comics translation that could be classified into five categories. These problems were determined based on problems identified in previous studies and the problem classification of Baker (2011). These five categories of problems were (a) cultural-specific concept problems that occur because of cultural differences, (b) difficulty in lexicalizing the source-language concept in the target language because there is no equivalent word when translating SL to TL, (c) differences in expressive meaning, (d), differences in

form problems, which occur where there is no equivalent in the TL for a particular word from the SL, and (e) technical problems that occur during translation.

Table 2

Identified Problems and Source Texts

No.	Categories – Problems	Source Texts
1	Cultural-specific concept – Multimodality – Idiom – Humor	– Assis (2016); Borodo (2015); Hermawan (2013); Mansur & Purnamasari (2020) – Lestari et al. (2018) – Yuliasri (2017)
2	Source-language concept is not lexicalized in the target language – Onomatopoeia	Delespaul (2015); Macková (2012); Salor & Marasligil (2013); Sutrisna (2017); Yablonsky (2016)
3	Differences in expressive meaning – Slang	Octaviani (2016); Santika (2015)
4	Differences in form – Equivalent	Adhedia (2012); Agustine (2014); Kosiński (2015); Ningtyas (2017); Nurmadea (2019); Nusanti (2011); Rumlus (2017); Suryani (2013); Suryoalam (2011); Susain (2013); Wardani (2014); ; Sugiarto (2016)
5	Technical problem – Space limitation	Barezzi et al. (2018); Munoz-Luna (2019); Taran (2014); Utamayasa et al. (2017); Wisudawanto & Pratiwi (2015)

Table 2 shows the problems of comics translation classified under cultural-specific concepts as multimodality, idiom, and humor. The article reviewed suggested that multimodality was a problem in translating comics. Borodo (2015) asserted that comic characters do not merely interact and communicate meanings through speech balloons, but equally importantly, through gesture, posture, eye gaze, or facial expression. For example, moving the back of the knuckles up and down the jaw a few times is an expression of boredom in French. At the same time, in Indonesia, this movement can be interpreted as kill or die. These very different meanings can cause misunderstandings when reading and make the reader unable to understand the story.

The second problem identified was the idiom. Lestari et al. (2018) revealed that if the translated text contains idioms that are not culturally equivalent to those in SL, the reader can

find it challenging to understand the translation. For instance, *buaya darat* and "crocodile tears." In Indonesian, buaya darat means a man who likes to play with women's feelings. This idiom arises because of the Betawi culture in Indonesia, which believes that crocodiles symbolize loyalty. If the translator does not get the context of the buaya darat, it can be difficult for them to find a suitable translation. "Crocodile tears" in English means someone who shows insincere sadness. The two idioms have the word crocodile, but the meaning of crocodile from the two idioms is different. If the translator cannot translate the idiom correctly into the target language, misunderstanding may occur.

The third problem was humor. Yuliasri (2017) argued that humor might be language-specific and culture-specific. It is not easy to translate humor since humor is subjective. What is funny to one person may not be funny to another.

Onomatopoeia problems can result from an SL concept that is not lexicalized in the TL. Not lexicalized in the target language here means that words from the SL sometimes do not have the right vocabulary in the TL. Salor and Marasligil stated, "Onomatopoeia is particularly difficult to translate because even if a specific sound is heard similarly by people of different cultures, it is often expressed using different consonant strings in different languages" (2013, p. 8). For instance, the onomatopoeia made while eating in English is "yum yum." In French, it is "miam miam." Onomatopoeia in comics helps readers to feel the atmosphere that occurs in comics. The comic can be dull if onomatopoeia is not translated properly.

The next problem associated with differences in expressive meaning was slang. Slang refers to a non-standard language often used by teenagers when communicating with their peers. Santika (2015) and Octaviani (2016) argued that language diversity and variation, especially slang, makes translation between two different languages difficult. Examples of Indonesian slang that are difficult to translate are the word *jayus* (not funny), *woles* (the

writing is reversed from the word slow and means relax), *unyu* (cute), and *kudet* (outdated). Mistranslation of slang can make readers misinterpret expressions and lead to uninteresting stories.

The equivalence was the most frequently mentioned problem in the reviewed articles. This problem belongs to the category of differences in form. Twelve articles stated equivalent problems occurred in translating comics. Sugiarto (2016), Agustine (2014), and Suryani (2013) said it was challenging to decide on an equivalent translation from English to Indonesian as the two languages had different systems and structures. The finding was also supported by Rumlus (2017), Ningtyas (2017), and Susain (2013). They found a complex problem often faced by translators is finding equivalents or words for objects and events that are not known in the target culture. If the translator cannot find the equivalent word from SL to TL, it can lead to miscomprehension or difficulties in understanding the storyline of the comic.

The last problem was the technical problem caused by limited space. Taran stated, "One of the most obvious problems in translating comics is the limited amount of space translators have for translating comics" (2014, p. 93). Having limited space can be a problem for the translator since the TL translation can be more extended than the SL. Spatial limitations in the text balloons require the translator to find words that fit the available space. If the translator fails to do this, the translation can cover the comic image.

Table 3

Problems and Suggested Strategies

No.	Problem	Suggested Strategies
1	Slang	– Literal translation – Borrowing
2	Humor	– Generalization – Reduction
3	Idiom	– Omission/deletion – Using an idiom of similar meaning and form

No.	Problem	Suggested Strategies
		– Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form
4	Onomatopoeia	– Omission/deletion – Borrowing/loan word – Adaptation
5	Equivalent	– Omission/deletion – Borrowing/loan word – Substitution – Literal translation – Establish equivalent – Adaptation
6	Multimodality	– Adaptation – Borrowing/loan word – Substitution
7	Space limitation	– Omission/deletion – Borrowing/loan word – Literal translation – Adaptation

Table 3 shows a summary of the problems and strategies presented in the thirty articles reviewed. From Table 3 the researcher showed how each translator in the thirty articles reviewed used a strategy in each of the problems they experienced. The following are examples of strategies used:

Example 1: Literal translation

SL: Hey, Man! Don't leave me here for the pigs!

TL: Hey, bung! Jangan meninggalkanku di sini bersama babi-babi itu!

(Santika, 2015, p. 139)

The word "pigs" here means disgusting people or unpleasant people. The literal translation strategy is used here because the word pigs has a resemblance to the meaning in TL.

Example 2: Borrowing/loan word

SL: It won't be easy, he's a pro.

TL: Itu tidak akan mudah. Dia itu pro.

(Octaviani, 2016, p. 34)

The word "pro" is borrowed from SL because pro in the sentence above is widely known by TL, especially in Indonesia, where it means professional. So borrowing is the right strategy in translating the slang in this example's context.

Example 3: Generalization

SL: Feed the pigs!

TL: Beri makan ternaknya!

(Yuliasri, 2017, p. 110)

The word "pig" in SL is generalized to *ternaknya* because, in Indonesia, the common meat sources are chicken and beef. Therefore, the word "pigs" is translated into the word ternaknya to refer to animals that are kept as food sources.

Example 4: Translation by using an idiom of similar meaning and form

SL: Chicken.

TL: Pengecut.

(Suryoalam, 2011, p. 62)

The word "chicken" is translated as *pengecut.* The translator can use an idiom of the same meaning and form. The translator may use it because the word chicken is considered familiar to the TL readers and has the same meaning in the SL context. This word is also often used in the TL to make jokes.

Example 5: Translation by using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form

SL: Cleaned out!

TL: Bangkrut!

(Suryoalam, 2011, p. 67)

The phrase "cleaned out" is translated into *bangkrut.* Cleaned out in this context means there is nothing anymore. So, the most appropriate word to describe in the TL is the word bangkrut.

Example 6: Reduction

SL: But how those termites engineered the trick is beyond me!

TL: Tapi bagaimana bisa anak-anak merencanakan tipuan ini padaku!

(Yuliasri, 2017, p. 110)

The word "termites" is translated into *anak-anak* using a reduction strategy to adjust to the TL. In TL, the actual meaning of termites, animals that eat wood, can lead to ridicule or a negative connotation.

Example 7: Adaptation

SL: Boy! Is he sensitive today?

TL: Aduh! Apakah dia sensitif hari ini?

(Adhedia, 2012, p. 14)

The word "boy" is translated as *aduh.* The word boy has many other interpretations in the SL, so it is difficult to find the right word in the TL. The translator uses the adaptation strategy and translates it into aduh to suit the TL reader. The word is suitable for the TL reader because the word boy in the dialogue is more directed to expressing annoyance towards the other person.

Example 8: Omission/deletion

SL: $10 per girder brought to the surface.

TL: 10 dollar per kerangka

(Suryoalam, 2011, p. 55)

The translator omits the phrase "brought to the surface" because the word does not have an equivalent translation in the TL. If the phrase "brought to the surface" were translated, the translation would change to "10 dollar per kerangka dibawa ke permukaan," which could confuse the TL reader.

Example 9: Substitution

SL: Scrggngrghjhhggbgh

TL: Alaaa, tobaaat, tobat, tobat!

(Agustine, 2014, p. 19)

The sentence above uses the substitution strategy because the translator might not find the right translation of "Scrggngrghjhhggbgh" for TL. So, the translator translated it into "Alaaa, tobat, tobat, tobat!" and adapted it to the context of the existing story.

Example 10: Literal translation

SL: The car shoot down the one-way street, scattering, and the traffic

 headed towards them, horn angrily blaring at them.

TL: Mobil itu meluncur di jalan satu arah itu, melawan arus laju kendaraan di

depan mereka. Bunyi klakson mobil bersahut-sahutan. Menggemakan

kemarahan para pengemudi.

(Suryoalam, 2011, p. 16)

The translator uses a literal translation of the phrase "horn angrily blaring at them" which is "menggemakan kemarahan para pengemudi." The phrase "horn angrily blaring at them" does not have a proper equivalent in the TL. The translator translates it literally to make the sentence acceptable to TL readers.

Example 11: Establish equivalent

SL: Good sickles don't grow on trees

TL: Susah mencari yang mutunya bagus

(Adhedia, 2012, p.16)

The sentence above is translated to the TL using the equivalence established because "good sickle don't grow on trees" is an expression that is difficult to find an equivalent for. It may mean that it is difficult to find a good quality thing in the target text. The translator changes the meaning of the words so the reader can understand them easily.

Conclusion

The review suggested seven problems under five categories that arise in comic translation. The problems were equivalence, multimodality, onomatopoeia, humor, slang, idiom, and space limitation. These problems are categorized into five sub-categories, namely: (a) cultural-specific concept, (b) the source-language concept is not lexicalized in the target language, (c) differences in expressive meaning, (d) differences in form, and (e) technical problems. The category of problems that most often occurs was differences in form.

The absence of equivalence most often occurs in comic translations due to the difference in structure between the source language and the target language. These differences sometimes make it difficult for translators to find the right words when translating comics. Finding the right translation also takes a long time and can hinder other translation processes. The reader may think outside of the story context or be unable to understand the storyline if the translator fails to find equivalent words from the SL to the TL.

Furthermore, considering all the problems that frequently occur, the strategies most often recommended are the borrowing and omission strategies. These strategies appear to overcome many problems effectively in comics translation. This strategy can be used to solve problems in the translation of comics, especially slang, idioms, onomatopoeia, equivalence, and space limitations. Many translators use borrowing strategies because they seem to be the most accessible, especially in today's era where English is used daily in Indonesia. If the translator uses this strategy, it can help the TL reader quickly understand the meaning of the translation.

The second common strategy is omission, which is used to minimize problems such as equivalence, onomatopoeia, idioms, and space limitations. This strategy is also convenient to use in the translation process because it only reduces words that according to the translator do not have an appropriate translation or do not affect comprehension if omitted. Besides being

easy to use, the omission strategy also helps translators reduce words that can cause misunderstandings in comic stories.

In the future, it is recommended that translators pay more attention to the translation of comics, especially those pertaining to cultural aspects. In addition to culture, translators must also determine which strategy is most appropriate to use during the comic translation process so that they can produce translations that convey the author's message.

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