



## Humour Shifts in the Indonesian Dubbing of SpongeBob SquarePants Selected Episodes

Fikry Prastya Syahputra<sup>\*1</sup>, Ely Hayati Nasution<sup>2</sup>, Dea Yuanita Nasution<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author: [fikryprastya@usu.ac.id](mailto:fikryprastya@usu.ac.id)

---

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 10 April 2026

Revised 3 May 2026

Accepted 20 May 2026

Available online

<https://talenta.usu.ac.id/lingpoet/>

E-ISSN: 2745-8296

---

#### How to cite:

Syahputra, F. P., Nasution. E. H., & Nasution, D. Y. (2026). Humour Shifts in the Indonesian Dubbing of SpongeBob SquarePants Selected Episodes. *LingPoet: Journal of Linguistics and Literary Research*, 7(2), 246–253.

---

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyse the types of humour shifts found in the Indonesian dubbing of the SpongeBob SquarePants cartoon. In this study, the author uses a descriptive qualitative method, drawing on data from 5 episodes of SpongeBob SquarePants. This study focuses on the translation of audiovisual theory. The findings of this study indicate that the translation of humour in audiovisual media is influenced by several factors, including linguistic differences, cultural references, and technical aspects such as timing and synchronization. In some cases, humour based on wordplay or phonetics cannot be produced directly in Indonesian, resulting in the loss of some humour analysis. However, the translation applies adaptive strategies to recreate the humour effect in the target language. Further analysis reveals that literal translation remains the dominant strategy in the Indonesian version. Thus, the translation of humour in the English-Indonesian dubbing of SpongeBob SquarePants involves various forms of translation shifts, as the translator balances linguistic constraints with the need to produce clear and contextual dialogue in the literary language.

**Keywords:** Humour Shift, Audiovisual Translation, Spongebob Squarepants

---



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International.

---

## 1. Introduction

Humour is widely acknowledged as one of the most challenging elements to translate in audiovisual media. Unlike ordinary dialogue, humour is deeply rooted in linguistic features such as wordplay, idioms, sarcasm, irony, and culture-specific references. When a humorous text is transferred from one language to another, the translator is not merely transferring meaning but also attempting to recreate a similar comedic effect for the target audience. In audiovisual translation (AVT), particularly dubbing, this process becomes even more complex due to technical constraints such as lip synchronization, timing, and voice performance.

According to Chiaro (2009: 141), AVT is defined as the interlingual transfer of verbal language when it is transmitted and accessed both visually and acoustically, usually but not necessarily, through some kind of electronic device. Furthermore, Bartolomé and Cabrera (2005) identify as many as seventeen modes of audiovisual translation, including dubbing, subtitling, voice-over, narration, and subtitling. Among these modes, dubbing is considered one of the most demanding due to the necessity of synchronizing the translated dialogue with the visual and acoustic elements of the original production. When we discuss humour and

dubbing, many things naturally come to mind, whether it's comedy films, stand-up comedy, or even cartoons. However, let's focus on one of them: the animated film *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

*SpongeBob SquarePants* is an American animated television series created by Stephen Hillenburg and broadcast internationally by Nickelodeon. Originally produced in English, the series is well known for its distinctive style of humour, which includes absurd comedy, puns, exaggerated expressions, irony, and culturally embedded jokes. Although categorized as a children's cartoon, the humour in *SpongeBob SquarePants* operates on multiple levels, appealing to both children and adults. As part of its global distribution, *SpongeBob SquarePants* has been dubbed into various languages, including Indonesian. Luyken et al. (1991: 31) define dubbing as the replacement of the original speech by a voice track which attempts to follow as closely as possible the timing, phrasing and lip movements of the original dialogue.

The Indonesian dubbing aims to make the series accessible and entertaining for local audiences who may not understand English. However, because much of the original humour is embedded in English linguistic structures and Western cultural contexts, transferring the same humorous effect into Indonesian presents significant challenges. Certain jokes may lack direct equivalents, while others require adaptation or modification to conform to Indonesian linguistic norms and cultural expectations. Furthermore, this study try to examine the dubber's role as a co-creator of the text. In the Indonesian context, dubbers of *SpongeBob SquarePants* often employ improvisation to accommodate lip-synchronization constraints, adding exclamations, fillers, or localized interjections to fill timing gaps. While these creative adjustments may enhance comedic timing and audience engagement, they may also generate shifts in meaning, tone, or humorous effect compared to the original version.

In practice, Indonesian viewers may encounter humorous lines that seem unclear, less amusing, or disconnected from the context. Some jokes appear to lose their original meaning, while others are creatively adapted into new forms of humour. These changes indicate the occurrence of humour shifts during the dubbing process. The central issue, therefore, is whether the humour in the Indonesian version is genuinely lost in translation or successfully recreated in a different yet effective form.

Some previous studies, such as Xia (2023) on the Chinese dubbing of *SpongeBob SquarePants* found that humour loss frequently occurs due to linguistic and cultural differences, as well as technical constraints such as lip synchronization and timing. Although substitution strategies were employed to recreate humorous elements, the newly constructed jokes did not always maintain the original comedic impact. Moreover, translation is influenced by various social factors, including target language and cultural norms, as well as self-censorship (Baños, 2013: 483). While numerous scholars have examined translation shifts and strategies for maintaining meaning or adapting cultural references, limited research specifically addresses humour shifts in the Indonesian dubbing of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Furthermore, few studies critically evaluate whether such shifts result in humour loss or successful humour recreation within the English–Indonesian context.

This gap highlights the need for a focused investigation into how humour shifts occur in the Indonesian dubbing of *SpongeBob SquarePants* and whether these shifts diminish, maintain, or reconstruct the original comedic effect. Understanding this phenomenon is significant not only for translation studies but also for assessing the effectiveness of dubbing strategies in cross-cultural media adaptation. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the types of humour shifts found in the Indonesian dubbing of *SpongeBob SquarePants* and to examine whether the translated humour is lost or recreated. By doing so, this research seeks to contribute to the broader field of audiovisual translation studies and provide insight into the complexities of translating humour across languages and cultures.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Audiovisual translation (AVT)*

With the rapid development of digital media, audiovisual translation (AVT) has become an important area in translation studies. Audiovisual translation refers to the process of transferring audiovisual materials such as films, television programs, and online videos from one language into another while maintaining both meaning and viewer comprehension. These materials combine several semiotic channels, including spoken dialogue, visual images, sound effects, and written text that appear on the screen. Because audiovisual texts involve multiple communicative modes, translators must consider linguistic, visual, and contextual aspects

simultaneously when transferring meaning into the target language. According to Alohaidb et al. (2023), audiovisual translation requires translators to attend not only to verbal dialogue but also to the interaction between verbal and visual elements to ensure the translated message remains understandable to the target audience.

Audiovisual translation also involves several constraints that influence how meaning is transferred from the source language into the target language. Translators must consider linguistic differences, cultural context, and technical limitations of audiovisual media. Linguistic constraints relate to differences in grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure, while cultural constraints involve references or expressions that may not exist in the target culture. Technical constraints such as timing and synchronization between audio and visual elements also affect translation decisions. Cintas & Remael (2014) explains that translators often need to adapt or shorten dialogue to fit the temporal and spatial constraints of audiovisual media while still conveying the intended meaning of the original text.

## 2.2 *Descriptive translation studies (DTS)*

In translation studies, descriptive translation studies (DTS) provide a framework for analyzing translation as it occurs in real contexts. The concept of DTS was introduced by Holmes (1988), who categorized translation research into product-oriented, process-oriented, and function-oriented approaches. Product-oriented research focuses on the translated text as the outcome of the translation process and examines how the source text is represented in the target language. In more recent discussions, DTS continues to be considered relevant for analyzing translation phenomena in contemporary contexts. Asscher (2024) argues that DTS still has strong explanatory power for understanding translation practices, even in the era of rapidly developing technologies and machine translation.

## 2.3 *Humour*

Humour is considered one of the most challenging elements to translate in audiovisual texts because it often relies on linguistic forms and contextual interpretation. Arief (2024) explains that humour based on wordplay, cultural references, and contextual meaning is particularly difficult to transfer into another language. As a result, translators frequently apply strategies such as adaptation, substitution, or reformulation in order to recreate the humorous effect for the target audience. However, differences in language structure and cultural background may still cause certain humorous elements to experience shifts or partial loss during the translation process.

## 2.4 *Previous Studies*

Previous studies have also examined the translation of humour in television series. Quirós (2023) analyzed the translation of humorous and cultural references in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* by comparing the source text and the translated version. The findings show that while some humorous expressions can be maintained in translation, others undergo modification or loss due to linguistic differences and cultural adaptation.

A related study focusing on *SpongeBob SquarePants* was conducted by Xia et al. (2023), who examined the loss of humorous elements in the English–Chinese translation of the animated series. Their findings reveal that humour based on wordplay, cultural references, and linguistic ambiguity may experience changes or partial loss during the translation process. However, the study is limited to the English–Chinese language pair, indicating a need for further research in other linguistic contexts. Therefore, the present study examines the translation of humour in the English–Indonesian version of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, focusing on whether the humorous effect is preserved, adapted, or lost.

## 3. **Method**

### 3.1 *Descriptive Qualitative Methods*

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method. According to Villamin et al. (2025), descriptive qualitative research aims to provide a clear and straightforward description of a phenomenon based on textual or narrative data. This method focuses on interpreting meanings and explaining patterns found in the data rather than using numerical analysis. In this study, the descriptive qualitative method is applied to analyse humour translation in the Indonesian dubbing of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. The researcher examines humorous dialogues in the English version and compares them with the Indonesian version to explain how the humour is maintained, modified, or lost in the translation process.

The approach used in this research is the product-oriented approach in translation studies. Holmes (1988) explains that product-oriented research focuses on the translated text as the outcome of the translation process. This type of study analyzes the characteristics of the translated text to understand how translation results are formed in the target language. By applying this approach, the study focuses on the Indonesian translated dialogues in *SpongeBob SquarePants* as the translation product and examines how humour from the English version is rendered in the Indonesian dubbing.

### 3.2 Data Collecting

The data in this study were collected using purposive sampling. Makwana et al. (2023) state that purposive sampling is a technique in which data are deliberately selected for their relevance to the objectives of the study. Using this technique, several episodes of the animated series *SpongeBob SquarePants* were selected as the data source. The selected episodes include Season 2 Episode 18, Season 3 Episode 9, Season 4 Episode 17, Season 5 Episode 12, and Season 11 Episode 17. These episodes were chosen because they contain humorous dialogues that can be analysed in terms of humour translation.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed through several stages. First, the researchers identified humorous dialogues in the selected episodes of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Then, the English version was treated as the source text (ST) and compared with the Indonesian dubbed version as the target text (TT). The comparison aimed to examine how humorous expressions in the original dialogue were translated into Indonesian. A similar comparative procedure between ST and TT has been applied in audiovisual translation studies, such as the study conducted by Violita et al. (2022), which analysed the equivalence of speech acts in movie subtitles. Finally, the findings were interpreted to explain whether the humour was maintained, modified, or lost in the translation.

## 4. Result and Discussions

The following section presents a detailed analysis of the humour shifts identified in the Indonesian dubbing of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. As humour is widely acknowledged as one of the most challenging elements to translate in audiovisual media, this study employs a product-oriented approach to examine the translated text as the final outcome of the translation process. The analysis focuses on whether the intended humorous effect is maintained, modified, or lost through various translation strategies.

### 4.1 Data 1



Figure 1 & 2. *SpongeBob SquarePants* Season 2 Episode 18 (08.43)

In the episode *Sailor Mouth* (Season 2, Episode 18), *SpongeBob* expresses intense fear of punishment, stating, "We'll probably get 40 lashes". The Indonesian dubbed version translates this line as, "*Mungkin akan tumbuh 40 bulu mata*". This instance represents a significant occurrence of humour shifts during the dubbing process. In English, the humour is based on the polysemous word "lashes," which refers to both eyelashes and a physical punishment (whipping).

- English (SL): "We'll probably get 40 lashes."
- Indonesian (TL): "*Mungkin akan tumbuh 40 bulu mata.*"

By translating "lashes" literally into "*bulu mata*" (eyelashes), the translator prioritizes the anatomical meaning but removes the connotation of punishment, leading to humour loss. As noted by Xia (2023) in a similar study on *SpongeBob* dubbing, humour loss frequently occurs due to linguistic and cultural

differences, as well as technical constraints such as lip synchronization and timing. This suggests that the Indonesian translator may have been constrained by the need to follow the timing and phrasing of the original dialogue, even if it meant producing a translation that is disconnected from the humorous context.

#### 4.2 Data 2



Figure 3 & 4. SpongeBob SquarePants Season 2 Episode 18 (08.43)

In this scene, Patrick is seen talking to SpongeBob on the side of the road. Patrick sadly informs SpongeBob that he no longer owns his "boatmobile". When SpongeBob asks why, Patrick explains that the vehicle simply stopped working, so he decided to throw it away. The core of the humor lies in Patrick's reasoning: he saw the fuel gauge needle pointing to "E" and, rather than recognizing it as "Empty," he misinterpreted the letter as "End". This scene criticizes how a lack of basic knowledge can lead someone to take drastic, unnecessary actions, in this case, discarding an entire vehicle just because it ran out of fuel. In the Indonesian version, the humor experiences a slight shift in linguistic relevance. While the English version perfectly aligns the letter "E" with the word "End", the Indonesian subtitle translates this as "*Selesai*".

- English (SL): "The needle was on E; I figured that must mean End."
- Indonesian (TL): "*Jarumnya berada di E, kupikir itu pasti berarti Selesai.*"

Even though "*Selesai*" starts with the letter "S," the Indonesian translation maintains the humorous intent by focusing on the contextual meaning of finality that Patrick perceives. As argued by Zabalbeascoa (2020), in audiovisual translation, the "visual channel" often compensates for linguistic losses, the humour remains effective for the Indonesian audience because they understand the universal symbol of the fuel gauge to bridge the gap between the letter "E" and the concept of finishing. This demonstrates what Cintas & Remael (2014) describes as a priority for pragmatic effect over literal constraints, ensuring that the comedic "punchline" evokes the same response in the Indonesian audience by prioritizing Patrick's distorted logic over phonetic matching.

#### 4.3 Data 3





Figure 5, 6, & 7. SpongeBob SquarePants Season 11 Episode 17 (05.24)

The episode Mustard O' Mine (Season 11, Episode 17) features a rapid-fire exchange where SpongeBob and Patrick list types of miners: "coal miners," "sulfur miners," and finally the punchline, "unaccompanied minors". The Indonesian version translates these as "*penambang batubara*," "*penambang belerang*," and "*anak kecil tanpa pendamping*". This comparative procedure between ST and TT is a standard method in audiovisual translation (AVT) studies to examine equivalence in translated media.

- English (SL): "Coal Miners, Sulfur Miners, Unaccompanied Minors."
- Indonesian (TL): "*Penambang batubara, penambang belerang, anak kecil tanpa pendamping.*"

Technically, the original humor is a phonetic pun based on the homophonic relationship between "miners" and "minors," a linguistic feature that does not exist in Indonesian. While the phonetic pun is lost, the humor survives through what Prasojo & Bustam (2024) describe as the interaction of conversational implicature and the visual context of the animation. As Alohaidd & Altuwairesh (2023) argue, audiovisual translation requires strategies that maintain both meaning and viewer comprehension. The Indonesian audience finds the scene amusing due to the "disruption of logic", the visual incongruity of characters dressed in mining gear discussing a formal social services term, ensuring that the humorous intent remains functional even without the phonetic match.

#### 4.4 Data 4



Figure 8 & 9. SpongeBob SquarePants Season 3 Episode 9 (04.29)

In the episode Krab Borg (Season 3, Episode 9), Squidward tells a joke about an eleven-year-old being unable to see a pirate movie because it was "Rated-R". The Indonesian dubbing recreates this joke by changing the punchline to: "*Karena dia belum menerima rapor!*". This shift addresses the central research issue of whether humour is lost or successfully recreated in a different yet effective form.

- English (SL): "Why couldn't the eleven-year-old get into the pirate movie? It was Rated-R!"
- Indonesian (TL): "*Kenapa anak umur 4 tahun tidak boleh ikut film bajak laut? Karena dia belum menerima rapor!*"

This is a successful instance of humour recreation using the strategy of substitution and adaptation. The American "Rated-R" system is a culture-specific reference that lacks a direct equivalent for Indonesian children. According to Cintas & Remael (2014) in such cases, translators often prioritize the "perlocutionary effect", the laughter of the audience, over formal linguistic accuracy. By substituting the movie rating with "*rapor*" (school report card), the translator utilizes a phonetic similarity while invoking a local cultural

context familiar to the target audience. This demonstrates that some jokes are creatively adapted into new forms of humour to conform to Indonesian linguistic norms and cultural expectations.

#### 4.5 Data 5



Figure 10 & 11. SpongeBob SquarePants Season 3 Episode 9 (04.29)

In this scene, Squidward is shown holding an ancient artifact in a museum while speaking to SpongeBob and Patrick about the discovery of the "Atlantean Amulet". The humor stems from paronymy or wordplay that exploits the phonetic similarity between two words with vastly different meanings, as SpongeBob mishears the term as "Atlantean Omelet". As noted by Chaume (2020) in his research on audiovisual translation, humor based on acoustic puns often presents the greatest challenge for translators, as the linguistic "closeness" of the original words must be reinvented for the target audience. In this case, using "omelet," a food item, instead of "amulet," a mystical object, creates a ridiculous incongruity that reinforces SpongeBob's recurring trait of failing to grasp the serious terminology used by Squidward.

- English (SL): "You boobs found the missing half of the Atlantean amulet?" "What's an Atlantean omelet?" "Amulet, not omelette!"
- Indonesian (TL): "*Kau telah menemukan potongan jimat Atlantis?*" "*Omelet Atlantis?*" "*Jimat bukan omelet!*"

The translator chose to retain the word "Omelet" even though the Indonesian translation for amulet, "*Jimat*," bears no phonetic resemblance to it. This makes SpongeBob's reason for mishearing less linguistically grounded compared to the original version. However, the humor remains effective through the visual context and the contrast between Squidward's gravity and SpongeBob's food-oriented mind. This decision reflects a transcreation approach, where, according to Zabalbeascoa (2016), the translator prioritizes the perlocutionary effect (the laughter of the audience) over formal linguistic accuracy. This illustrates that in humor translation, the comedic impact of the target word is sometimes prioritized to maintain the narrative flow, even if the original phonetic connection is lost.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined humour shifts in the Indonesian dubbing of the animated television series SpongeBob SquarePants using a descriptive qualitative method and a product-oriented approach within Descriptive Translation Studies. The study compared humorous dialogues in the English source text and the Indonesian dubbed version to examine whether the humorous effect is maintained, modified, or lost during the translation process. The findings show that humour translation in audiovisual media is affected by several factors, including linguistic differences, cultural references, and technical aspects like timing and synchronization. In several cases, humour based on wordplay or phonetic similarity can't be directly reproduced in Indonesian, resulting in partial humour loss. However, the analysis also indicates that translators sometimes apply adaptive strategies to recreate the humorous effect in the target language.

The analysis further reveals that the Indonesian dubbing employs both literal translation and adaptation strategies. While some humorous expressions are adapted to fit the linguistic and cultural context of Indonesian audiences, many dialogues are translated directly from the source language. This suggests that literal translation remains the dominant strategy in the Indonesian version. These findings indicate that humour translation in the English–Indonesian dubbing of SpongeBob SquarePants involves various forms of

translation shifts, as translators balance linguistic constraints with the need to produce clear and contextually appropriate dialogue in the target language.

## References

- Arief, Y. A. (2024). Integrating Local Culture into Foreign Language Learning through Humour: A Systematic Literature Review. *Pedagogy: Journal of English Language Teaching*, 12(2), 213-227. <https://doi.org/10.32332/joelt.v12i2.9547>
- Alohaidb, S., & Altuwairesh, N. (2023). Subtitling Strategies of Verbal-Visual Components in The Social Dilemma. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v13n1p1>
- Asscher, O. (2024). The Explanatory Power of Descriptive Translation Studies in The Machine Translation Era. *Perspectives*, 32(2), 261-277.
- Baños, R. (2013). ‘That is so cool’: Investigating The Translation of Adverbial Intensifiers in English-Spanish Dubbing Through A Parallel Corpus of Sitcoms. *Perspectives*, 21(4), 526–542. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2013.831924>
- Bartolomé, A. I. H. & Cabrera, G. M. (2005). ‘New Trends in Audio-Visual Translation: The Latest Challenging Modes. *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies*, (31), 89-104.
- Chaume, F. (2020). *Audiovisual Translation: Dubbing*. Routledge.
- Chiaro, D. (2009). Issues in Audiovisual Translation. In *The Routledge Companion to Translation studies* (pp. 155-179). Routledge.
- Cintas, J. D., & Remael, A. (2014). *Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling*. Routledge.
- Holmes, J. S. (1988). *The Name and Nature of Translation Studies*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Luyken, G.T., et al. (1991) *Overcoming Language Barriers in Television: Dubbing and Subtitling for European Audience*. European institute for the Media, Manchester.
- Makwana, D., Engineer, P., Dabhi, A., & Chudasama, H. (2023). Sampling Methods in Research: A Review. *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development*, 7(3), 762-768.
- Prasojo, T. I., & Bustam, M. R. (2024). Conversation Implicature in Spongebob Squarepants: Your Shoe’s Untied Animation. *Mahadaya: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Dan Budaya*, 4(2), 331-338. <https://doi.org/10.34010/mhd.v4i2.13807>
- Quirós, J. T. (2023). Translation of Humor and Culture: Examples from The Big Bang Theory. *Revista de Lenguas Modernas*, (37). Doi: 10.15517/RLM.V0I37.47745
- Violita, V., & Cholsy, H. (2022). Speech Acts Equivalence of Audiovisual Translation on Enola Holmes Netflix Movie Subtitle. *IDEAS: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature*, 10(1), 209-225. <https://doi.org/10.24256/ideas.v10i1.2589>
- Xia, C., Amini, M., & Lee, K. F. (2023). Humor translation: A case study on the loss of humorous loads in SpongeBob SquarePants. *Cadernos de Tradução*, 43, e89705. <https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-7968.2023.e89705>
- Zabalbeascoa, P. (2016). Translating jokes for dubbed television situation comedies. In *Wordplay and Translation* (pp. 235-257). Routledge.
- Zabalbeascoa, P. (2020). Multilingual Humour in Audiovisual Translation: Multilingual Realities, Humour and Translation in an Ever-Changing Mediascape. In *Humour Translation in The Age of Multimedia* (pp. 116-135). Routledge.