When the joke doesn't travel.



01 / THE PROBLEM

Explain what the audience is meant to enjoy

A joke can fail in another language even when every word is translated correctly. Its pleasure may depend on a double meaning, a familiar phrase, a rhythm or a relationship the new version has not established. The first task is to identify that dependency. Asking for an equally funny translation gives a writer a desired result without explaining the mechanism.

Humor is not compulsory. A clear, interesting demonstration may serve the brief better than a strained joke. Sullivan and Boches discuss the need to choose an appropriate tone and intended response, and distinguish having a joke from having an advertising idea. This guide starts there: what should the humor help the audience understand about the offer?

Invented teaching scenario: Spare makes a folding chair that can be stored flat when not in use. The brief is to show why an occasional extra seat is useful in a small living room. We will compare a weak wordplay route with a short film built on exaggerated planning and a simple resolution. The example makes no claim about how a particular culture entertains guests. Its characters, product and situations are invented for the exercise; all real product dimensions and performance claims would need confirmation.

02 / THE MECHANISM

Separate the setup from the wording

Describe the joke without repeating its line. Use five questions as a working diagnosis. They do not guarantee laughter; they reveal which parts another writer or director must preserve, replace or discard.

01 Expectation: what does the audience initially think is happening? In Spare's film, two people appear to be solving a serious logistical problem.

02 Reversal: what changes that interpretation? Their elaborate plans are for one visiting friend's seat, and a folding chair resolves the problem immediately.

03 Knowledge: what must the audience understand for the contrast to register? One additional person is coming, the room lacks an extra seat, and the chair stores flat.

04 Target: whose behavior is being exaggerated? The hosts' overcomplicated planning, not a guest's identity, accent, body or background.

05 Brand role: why is this a Spare advertisement? The product supplies the practical resolution. Removing it would remove the reason the scene ends as it does.

Now mark which elements depend on words. A diagram, a solemn pause and an unfolding action can carry much of this mechanism. Dialogue may still improve the scene, but it does not have to perform a pun. That gives each language version room to find a natural exchange while retaining a shared story.

03 / THE ROUTE CHOICE

Keep the useful surprise

Invented weak route: a product photograph carries the headline 'A chair-ful welcome.' The phrase tries to make a furniture word do the work of a feeling. It explains little about storage or occasional use. An adaptation could find another pun, but matching the presence of wordplay would not necessarily improve the advertising idea.

A second route shows the chair folded and unfolded with the line 'An extra seat when you need it.' It is clear, useful and easy to adapt. Keep this route in the discussion. The humorous route must earn its extra complexity by making the product's role more memorable or enjoyable, not merely by giving the team something clever to present.

The selected film route exaggerates the effort of making room for one more person. Its pleasure comes from disproportion: diagrams and solemn deliberation meet a simple chair. The product resolves the scene without claiming to solve every space problem. A viewer should still understand the offer if the performance makes them smile rather than laugh.

Do not insist that the final line contain the joke. Let the action carry the reversal and let the endline name the useful benefit. Separating those jobs can make an adaptation more flexible while keeping the film recognizably the same idea.

04 / THE SCRIPT

The seating committee

Invented twenty-second film. The room and chair must be shown at believable scale. No cut should imply that a folded product occupies less space than it actually does.

Image and sound rough

0-4 seconds: a phone message reads, 'One more joining us tonight.' Two hosts look from the phone to the two chairs at the table. One produces a measuring tape. Sound: an unnecessarily solemn pencil tap.

4-10 seconds: overhead view of a hand-drawn room plan. A pencil moves a tiny chair shape through three impossible positions. One host considers a lampshade with grave concentration. Dialogue: 'If the lamp goes here...' The other studies the plan, then steps out of frame.

10-15 seconds: the second host returns carrying a folded Spare chair, opens it in the available space and sits. The first host looks at the chair, then at the diagram. Second host: 'Or this.' Hold the silence long enough for the contrast to register.

15-20 seconds: one host quietly folds the elaborate plan. Product view shows the chair folding for storage. Endline: 'An extra seat. A smaller place to keep it.' The real product must support the comparison shown. Endcard identifies Spare and directs viewers to dimensions and product details.

The scene gives each language version a short dialogue task, while the measured behavior, reveal and reaction carry the mechanism. Timing still matters; a word-light idea is not automatically a culture-free one.

05 / ADAPTATION

Change the part that carries the dependency

Give the new-language writer the script, rough timing and mechanism diagnosis, not only a column of dialogue. Explain the hosts' overcomplication and the second host's matter-of-fact interruption. The Arabic line replacing 'Or this' can take a different shape if it performs that same conversational move in the specified setting.

An English gloss can explain the intended interruption, but it cannot demonstrate comic timing or the right degree of familiarity. Hear the exchange with performers who understand the context. If a version needs an extra beat to establish the relationship, adjust the edit. Do not speed the speech until the line fits the English duration.

If the joke fails, identify where. Did the audience miss the missing-seat problem? Did the room plan look like serious renovation rather than playful overplanning? Did the reveal happen before the setup was understood? Did the reaction make the second host seem cruel rather than dry? Each diagnosis suggests a different repair.

Do not treat language adaptation as the only possible cause. Casting, camera distance, an unclear product silhouette or a badly timed cut can flatten the same scene in every language. Conversely, a shared visual does not exempt a scene from contextual review. The social relationship and performance still need to be intelligible for the intended audience.

06 / PRACTICE

Build a second mechanism

Invented exercise: a calendar app lets someone move a personal reminder to another time. The proposed English line is 'Give your plans a rain check', over a cloud icon. The adaptation becomes a literal weather message. Write a short alternative that demonstrates rescheduling without needing the idiom. Avoid promising that the app changes other people's schedules.

Model script: a person carries an enormous handwritten sign reading 'WATER THE PLANTS AT SIX'. A phone rings; they need to leave. They attempt to squeeze a new time into the sign, run out of space, and turn it over to start again. Cut to the actual app: the reminder moves from six to eight with the product's real supported controls. The person sets down the cumbersome sign. Endline: 'Move the reminder. Keep the plan.'

The mechanism is an exaggerated physical version of a small digital task. It does not depend on rain, an idiom or a joke about forgetfulness as a personal defect. The app's actual interaction must remain accurate; do not animate a gesture the product does not support.

Why this works: it changes the premise while keeping the useful benefit. A simpler screen demonstration could also be right. The comic route earns consideration only if the physical exaggeration remains legible and the product resolution is easy to follow. Do not preserve a weak joke merely because adapting it took effort.

07 / WORKSHEET

Map the laugh before rewriting

Use this for one line or scene. Describe the mechanism in plain language, without saying merely that it is funny. If you cannot explain the role of the product, revisit the route before asking another writer to solve its translation.

Audience expectation and the moment that changes it

Knowledge, language or social relationship the joke depends on

Who or what is the target, and what makes that fair here?

Product role and the useful understanding that must survive

What may change, revised script and one specific test question

Keep the original and revised versions together. Note whether you translated words, rebuilt the mechanism or deliberately chose a clearer non-comic route.

08 / REVIEW

Listen for understanding as well as laughter

Show the rough execution without explaining the joke first. Ask what happened, what surprised the viewer and what the product contributed. A laugh without the intended brand connection may reveal an entertaining sketch rather than useful advertising. No laugh from one person does not automatically invalidate a route, but it gives you a reason to inspect the setup and delivery.

+ The necessary situation is established before the reversal arrives.
+ The comic target is a behavior or situation the work has earned the right to exaggerate.
+ The product has a causal role, and its actual capabilities remain accurate.
+ Each language version has been heard or seen at its intended pace.
+ A clear non-comic route remains available if the joke repeatedly obscures the offer.

Small qualitative reviews can reveal misunderstandings, unwanted readings or delivery problems. They cannot predict how a whole audience will respond or provide a reliable commercial score for humor. People also change their reactions when watched, asked to judge or shown an explanation. Record what you observed and the limits of the setting.

Leave with the mechanism brief, a complete revised script and a reason for the adaptation. The aim is not to prove that a joke travels everywhere. It is to know what your particular audience needs to understand, which part can change and whether the resulting work still has a useful reason to exist.

READING / PRACTICE / CONTEXT

Where the thinking starts

The methods, teaching scenarios, exercises and worksheets here are original synthesis. The books below inform particular decisions; their authors do not endorse this guide. Page references locate the supplied PDF editions and may differ from printed page numbers.

Luke Sullivan and Edward Boches / Hey, Whipple, Squeeze This

PDF pp. 355-360

The radio discussion distinguishes choosing an appropriate tone from assuming humor is required, and a joke from an advertising idea. The guide's mechanism questions and scripts are original synthesis, not copied radio exercises.

Pete Barry / The Advertising Concept Book

PDF pp. 8-11

The focus on the underlying concept before execution informs the comparison between a pun, a demonstration and a comic scene. None of the source's campaign examples is reproduced or reskinned.

Jon Steel / Truth, Lies, and Advertising

PDF pp. 13-18

Audience involvement and the relationship between creative means and commercial ends inform the response questions. Small reactions are not treated as proof of commercial effectiveness or a universal cultural response.

Make the tools your own

Read the worked example, try the exercise before its model response, then use the worksheet on a real assignment. Print the worksheet at 100% or annotate a copy digitally. Check your actual product facts, audience context and production conditions before applying the advice.

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