Last year, an Australian news anchor who was interviewing the Dalai Lama with the aid of an interpreter opened the exchange with a joke: “The Dalai Lama walks into a pizza shop and says, ‘Can you make me one with everything?’” His Holiness’s baffled stare, viewed by nearly two million people on YouTube, presents a lesson in the risks of translating humor.

But among the polyglots who convened this month in Rochester for the annual meeting of the American Literary Translators Association — where the topic was “The Translation of Humor, or, the Humor of Translation” — there is a sense of cautious optimism. At least some measure of levity, these dedicated professionals believe, must be able to migrate between languages. The French, after all, seem to appreciate Woody Allen.

“It takes a bit of creativity and a bit of luck,” said David Bellos, a professor of French and comparative literature at Princeton, who, as he prepared his keynote speech for this year’s conference, confessed to finding a disconcerting shortage of jokes beginning: “A pair of translators walk into a bar.”

“The received wisdom that you can never translate a joke is worth examining a bit more closely,” Bellos told me. The trick to translating humor, Bellos argues in his book, “Is That a Fish in Your Ear?: Translation and the Meaning of Everything,” is to abandon the idea of perfect fidelity and instead try to find a joke that rings some of the same bells as the original. By this standard, many simple punch lines, from the morbid to the absurd, are not that much harder to translate than the weather.

When complications do arise, they are usually caused by one of two tricky areas: cultural references and wordplay, according to those seasoned in the art. Culture-bound humor often presents a dilemma: you can either lose readers with a cryptic allusion or you can burden the text with explanatory footnotes. In an increasingly English-speaking world, the best solution is sometimes to let it stand. To take one recent example, the Danish edition of Gary Shteyngart’s “Super Sad True Love Story,” a satirical novel set in near-future New York, leaves untouched such chat acronyms as timatov (“think I’m about to openly vomit”) and roflaarp (“rolling on floor looking at addictive rodent pornography”).
“Nothing is worse than killing the joke by over-explaining,” said Shteyngart, who has patiently replied to requests for clarification of terms like “Negra Modelo” and “stomach stapling” from scrupulous interpreters, particularly the Scandinavian ones.

Puns can be especially treacherous. To translate Hervé Le Tellier’s “Quelques Mousquetaires,” a surreal French story about a man plagued by self-incrementing numbers, Daniel Levin Becker, the youngest member of the French literary society known as Oulipo, had to dig deep. Corruptions of famous titles like “The Postman Always Rings Thrice” and “The Four Musketeers” were easy to render faithfully; numerical puns like quatorze intéressant (the whimsical sum of très intéressant + 1) required a little more sweat. Devising an entirely new set of English puns was “the only way to stay afloat as the narrator sinks ever deeper into his numberplay,” Levin Becker writes in the preface to his translation, “and the only way to retain the spirit of learned absurdity that makes the story infectious.”

But outright jokes are not the holy grail of comedy, as any stand-up comedian will tell you. It is harder to recreate the seductive humorous tone of a Dickens or a Twain — or for that matter, a Cosby or a Pryor — than it is to render a one-liner into Mandarin. To really make people snort milk out their noses, you need to earn their trust with a convincing persona that summons an atmosphere of ambient hilarity.

For the foreign translators of David Sedaris, the elusiveness of comedic tone is no laughing matter. Sergio Flaksman, who brought “Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim” into Brazilian Portuguese, found that in early drafts, Sedaris came off as a whiny, melodramatic wreck. After listening to the nasal deadpan of Sedaris’s radio broadcasts, Flaksman was able to contrive a kind of Brazilian surrogate whose “relentless mean humor could show its smiling fangs” in Portuguese.

Might some funny bits actually get funnier in translation? In the title story of George Saunders’s “Pastoralia,” a character is paid to impersonate a cave man at a theme park, his employers providing a freshly-killed goat to roast daily, until one morning he goes to the usual spot and finds it “goatless.” Among the many possible renderings of this made-up word, Saunders’s German translator chose ziegenleer, a lofty-sounding melding of “goat” and “void” with no exact equivalent in English.

“The German translation is accurate, but the word combination tickles some kind of orthographical, sound-receptive funny bone,” explained the Latvian translator Kaija Straumanis, the editorial director for Open Letter Books, the University of Rochester’s literature in translation press and one of the conference organizers. “The more high-minded you make it sound in your head, the funnier it gets, implying a rusted-out box into which this
man is staring and seeing a severe and disconcerting lack of goat.”

Deliberately skewed translation can also lead to a kind of mischievous comedy. The game of making one language sound like another has been a verbal pastime at least since Renaissance poets managed to concoct lines that made sense in both Hebrew and Italian. The midcentury Hollywood actor Luis van Rooten revived the practice by phonetically transcribing nursery rhymes into brilliantly nonsensical French. (His “Humpty Dumpty” begins “Un petit, d’un petit” — if you’re perplexed, read the French aloud slowly.) Bilingual high jinks continue with the current YouTube craze for misheard lyrics, including a remarkably convincing misconstrual of “Carmina Burana,” whose dire invocation, “O Fortuna,” becomes the only slightly less solemn exhortation “Gopher Tuna!”

In the real world, of course, translators have a certain kind of shadowy power. Jimmy Carter learned this the hard way in Poland when his nonnative interpreter turned a perfectly wholesome remark of his into “I desire the Poles carnally.” And shortly after he left office, Carter was perplexed to find his opening anecdote in a speech to a college in Japan greeted with uproarious laughter. When he asked why the joke had gotten such an extraordinary response, he received this reply from his Japanese interpreter: “I told the audience, ‘President Carter told a funny story; everyone must laugh.’ ”

But all kidding aside, what makes a good translator of humor?

“We talk about the cerebral difficulties, but at some point you have to become an artist, and just work with what you can find,” said Roger Sedarat, an associate professor of English at Queens College who has translated the 14th-century Persian poet Hafez and the modern Iranian poet Nader Naderpour, and moderated a panel at this year’s convention on rendering the lighter side of Persian verse.

As with serious prose, it’s no coincidence that the best translators are among the most enthusiastic readers. “I feel that when the translator is laughing, the humor will manage to get across,” the Greek translator Myrsini Gana said, adding: “One of the biggest difficulties when translating David Sedaris’s humor is that you laugh so hard that it is almost impossible to concentrate.”

No matter how resourceful the translator, though, there are limits to what can be faithfully done to elicit a laugh. “You try to save as much as possible without driving yourself crazy,” said Ingo Herzke, who has rendered Shteyngart into German. But, he admitted, “More often than not you have to let a joke go.”