

Relevance Theory and translation: Translating puns in Spanish film titles into English



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Abstract

The present paper aims to analyse the translation of puns from a Relevance-Theory perspective. Relevance Theory is a cognitive-pragmatic approach to communication proposed by Sperber and Wilson in the mid-1980s (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). According to such theoretical framework, the relation between a translation and its source text is considered to be based on interpretive resemblance, rather than on equivalence (see Gutt, 1998, 2000). The translator would try to seek optimal relevance, in such a way that s/he would use different strategies to try to recreate the cognitive effects intended by the source communicator with the lowest possible processing effort on the part of the target addressee. The analysis carried out in this study is based on one hundred and ninety titles of Spanish and Latin American film titles containing puns and their translations for the Anglo-Saxon or international market. The strategies used by the translators to render puns in the translated titles have been analysed. The selection of strategy is determined, among other factors, by the principle of relevance. In those cases in which there is a coincidence in the relation between the levels of signifier and signified across source and target language, translators normally opt to translate literally and reproduce a pun based on the same linguistic phenomenon as the source pun and semantically equivalent to it. In the rest of the cases, the translator will have to assess what is more relevant, either content or the effect produced by the pun.

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1. Introduction

When undertaking a translation, the presence of wordplay in the source text (ST) may be considered as a translation problem. A translation problem has been defined as “a (verbal or nonverbal) segment that can be present either in a text segment (micro level) or in the text as a whole (macro level) and that compels the translator to make a conscious decision to apply a motivated translation strategy, procedure and solution from amongst a range of options” (González Davies and Scott-Tennent, 2005:164). As stated by González Davies and Scott-Tennent (2005:164), translation problems are related to what Kussmaul had called “non-routine processes”, that is to say, processes which normally create problems and demand creativity (Kussmaul, 1995:39–40). Of course, in order to give a solution to the translation problem, or in other words, in order to opt for a given strategy, the problem will have to be noticed first. This phase has been called “problem-spotting” (González Davies and Scott-Tennent, 2005:163; González Davies, 2004:189). As highlighted by Nord (1997a:67),

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Some translation problems are specifically bound to one particular source text, as may be the case for certain figures of speech, neologisms or puns. Since solutions to these text-specific problems cannot be generalized and applied to similar cases, the translator must be prepared to act creatively.¹

Hatim and Mason (1990:3) point out that translation involves a process, a decision-making procedure and an act of communication between language users. Instead of considering only the product, in this paper attention will be paid to the process involving the decisions made by the translator. In that sense, “the resulting translated text is to be seen as evidence of a transaction, a means of retracing the pathways of the translator’s decision-making procedures” (Hatim and Mason, 1990:3–4). In this sense, following Gutt (2004:77), the approach is competence-oriented, as it tries to explain what the ability of expressing in one language what was before told in another language consists in.

This paper focuses on the translation of wordplay and analyses the different solutions or strategies adopted for the translation of Spanish puns into English in film titles from a Relevance-Theory perspective.² One hundred and ninety original titles in Spanish containing puns and their translations for the Anglo-Saxon or international market constitute the corpus of this study.³ The title of a film is an essential element to attract the potential audience’s attention and to give an idea about the plot of the film.⁴ In this connection, the use of wordplay in film titles serves a double purpose: firstly, it functions as an attention-getting device, and secondly, it allows at least two different meanings to be represented usually in the same portion of text. As highlighted by Dynel (2010b:189–190), in the case of film titles it is not always the semantic content that is most significant, but an attractive and memorable form as well as the title’s relevance to the film. This has an effect on the translation of this type of text, which very often requires a high degree of creativity. In this sense, Díaz-Cintas (2003:234–235) points out that, given that the essential idea is to attract the audience and that there are different devices to awaken these attraction stimuli, there is a great translation freedom when coining titles which pursue this aim. Two basic principles will have to be followed, as stated by Díaz-Cintas: firstly, the title will have to attract the viewer’s attention, and secondly, it has to be new in the target society. Before analysing the translation strategies employed by translators to tackle puns in the fourth section of this paper, section 2 will be devoted to a summary of some essential notions of Relevance Theory and to an explanation of translation from the point of view of that theoretical framework, and section 3 contains a general reflection on the translation of wordplay.

2. Relevance Theory and translation

Relevance Theory is based on the assumption that the addressee will make the effort to process a statement if s/he assumes it to be relevant, that is to say, if s/he considers it will be able to modify or improve his/her cognitive environment or, in other words, his/her assumptions about the world. The cognitive principle of relevance contains the formulation of this idea.

Cognitive principle of relevance

Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance. (Wilson and Sperber, 2004:610)

In the interpretation process, the addressee will try to identify the addresser-intended messages and, in doing so, he/she will be guided by the communicative principle of relevance, which reads as follows:

Communicative Principle of Relevance

Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance. (Wilson and Sperber, 2004:612)

An ostensive stimulus, for example an utterance, will not be relevant unless it modifies a person’s knowledge or cognitive environment. These modifications of any individual’s cognitive environment are technically called positive

¹ Elsewhere, Nord classifies this particular translation problem as a text-specific translation problem, or TTP, which she defines as follows: TTP are those problems which arise in the translation of one specific text and whose solution cannot be generalized, although it is also based on functional criteria. In this category we find the translation metaphors, similes, puns, rhetorical figures, etc. (Nord, 1997b:61)

² In Díaz-Pérez (1999b, 2010) the translation of puns in *Hamlet* into Galician and Spanish is analysed. Other analyses of the translation of puns in literary works may be found in Díaz-Pérez (1999a), Jing (2010) or Marco (2010). Sanderson (2009) considers instances of wordplay in English-speaking comedies in which one of the meanings is visually present on screen and analyses the dubbed TTs in Spanish. Díaz-Pérez (2008) focuses on the translation of wordplay in film titles in English and Dynel (2010b) deals with the translation of film titles from English into Polish, some of which include wordplay.

³ These 190 titles with their translated versions are contained in Table A1. Of these 190 analysed cases, 23 of them are explained in depth. The main sources consulted for data collection have been the Spanish cinema catalogue elaborated by the Spanish Ministry of Culture (<http://catalogocine.mcu.es/index.html>), the IMDb database (<http://www.imdb.com/>), Bentley (2008), Borau (1998), Labanyi and Pavlović (2012), and the webpages <http://www.diccionariosdigitales.net>, <http://www.sensacine.com>, <http://cine.estamosrodando.com>, <http://www.labutaca.net>, and www.filmaffinity.com.

⁴ In this sense, Nord (1995) refers to the phatic function and the referential function of titles. Although she deals with titles of books, short stories, poems, and articles, what she says about their functions could be applied to film titles as well.

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