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TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

Verbal Humor, Irony and Equivalence in Translation:  
Coping with the Understatement

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## ABSTRACT

Translating humorous texts involves specific demands and challenges resulting from the need to provide dynamic and formal equivalence for verbal humour in the target language. The aim of this graduation paper is to highlight such aspects of verbal humour, irony and understatement as are particularly relevant for translation purposes as well as to point at a number of strategies and methods that may yield the desired equivalence. Following an overview of key concepts developed in published theoretical sources, we shall apply our findings to the Spanish translation of two kinds of English texts pervaded by verbal irony and understatement and respectively represented by a comical sketch taken from Gerald Durrell's *Encounters with Animals* (1958) and a series of cartoons drawn from published sources.

**Keywords:** Humour, irony, understatement, translation, Gerald Durrell, cartoon scripts.

## RESUMEN

La necesidad de proporcionar una equivalencia dinámica y formal entre el idioma de origen y el idioma de destino a la hora de traducir textos humorísticos implica ciertas exigencias y retos. El objetivo de este Trabajo Final de Grado es destacar esos aspectos de humor verbal, la ironía y el 'understatement' que son particularmente relevantes para la traducción, así como elaborar una serie de estrategias y métodos que puedan llevarnos a conseguir la equivalencia deseada. Tras una visión general de los conceptos clave desarrollados en fuentes teóricas publicadas, aplicaremos nuestros hallazgos a la traducción al español en dos tipos de textos ingleses impregnados de ironía verbal y 'understatement' que están representados, respectivamente, por una escena cómica que forma parte del libro *Encuentros con Animales* de Gerald Durrell (1958) y unas tiras cómicas procedentes de fuentes publicadas.

**Palabras clave:** Humor, ironía, understatement, traducción, Gerald Durrell, tiras cómicas

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*‘La ironía es el humor de la inteligencia.’*

Rafael Humberto Moreno-Durán.

## **1. Introduction**

Humour is a difficult term to define. Every person has a particular sense of humour and even in ordinary, non-technical language we often refer to these several styles of humorous discourse by using labels such as ‘ironic’, ‘sarcastic’, ‘black’... Every time somebody hears or sees something and laughs, we are confronted with a communicative situation that hinges on humour, even though exactly explaining why this is so may prove a lot more difficult than simply *feeling* the humour in the communicative experience. Human beings seem to be naturally equipped for humour and we can hear laughter frequently in most societies. Laughter does not depend on age, sex, social or economic status, culture or epoch; when you find something funny you laugh at it. On the other hand, humour can be interpreted in different ways. The same thing may be funny for a group of people sharing either the same kind of humour or similar contexts and experiences while it may strike others as boring or even rude. However, everybody can appreciate and enjoy humour: it is a universally shared experience (Raskin 1-3)

The translation of humour is a challenging task. In this graduation paper we will suggest methods and strategies that may be employed to translate verbal humour, irony and understatement. Before focusing on a couple of practical cases, we need some grounding on theory. This is why we will start by briefly outlining some theoretical notions on our main topic such as the six Knowledge Resources suggested by V. Raskin and S. Attardo (1991) in their *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GTVH); the pragmalinguistic framework of humour translation as described by Hickey; and a few translation strategies suggested by several scholars.

Secondly, we will immerse ourselves in the topic of verbal irony. Mention will inevitably be made of D. C. Muecke and his studies on the subject. In modestly trying to get to grips with the concept of irony, we shall rely on authors like W. C. Booth or A. Pollard to introduce terms as ‘incongruity’, ‘inversion’, ‘insinuation’ or ‘omission’ which are essential in descriptions of irony. After defining the latter, we shall turn to a

range of issues involved in its translation. Since it is risky to generally formulate methods for equivalence-driven translation without taking account for the specific frame of reference of particular assignments, we shall turn to Newmark's eight-type classification of translations to clarify the goals and approaches involved, while E. A. Gutt's comments on the foreign translation of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) will help us put a spotlight on the critical connection between linguistic form and ironical effect.

In the third part of this paper we will more particularly approach the understatement against the broader context of irony. We shall try to describe our subject in a way that is flexible enough to suit our purposes without departing from standard accounts. Additionally we shall provide a list of formal traits that are involved in this modality of humour (often presented as typically 'English' or even 'British') with a view to the challenges involved in its rendering in another language.

Finally, we shall concentrate on two different practical cases: a comical sketch taken from Gerald Durrell's *Encounters with Animals* (1958) and a series of cartoons drawn from published sources. Alternative translations for particular excerpts (or captions in the case of the comic strips) will be considered in the light of our description in the preceding chapters. A brief set of conclusions will put an end to our graduation paper.

## **2. Translating humour**

While a comprehensive account of the general problem of translating verbal humour no doubt exceeds the scope of this graduation paper, it may well be justified to set the broader scene for a more specific discussion of irony and understatement in the framework of translation. It is practically inevitable, in this context, to briefly turn to the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GTVH) by V. Raskin and S. Attardo (1991). Based on the *Semantic Script Theory of Humour* (SSTH) developed earlier by Raskin himself (1985), this theory focuses on the linguistic analysis of humour. Even though it heavily relies on the specific typology represented by jokes, we believe that it provides a suitable backdrop for other classes of language-dependent humour. Of particular

relevance to our purposes is their authors' concept of Knowledge Resources, which they claim constitute the underpinnings of verbal humour. These KRs are:

- Language (LA): Ultimately responsible for the verbalization of a humorous message—and therefore a key component in any translation process involving humour—it involves 'the actual wording of the text and [...] the placement of the functional elements that constitute it' (Attardo, *Humorous Texts* 22). A central fact in connection with this resource is that it is possible to reformulate a stretch of verbal humour (let's say a joke) via paraphrase without having any change in its semantic content. Needless to say, we may perfectly substitute 'translation' for 'paraphrase' in the preceding claim.
- Narrative strategy (NS): Attardo states that 'any joke has to be cast in some form of narrative organization, either as a simple narrative, as a dialogue (question and answer), as a (pseudo) riddle, as an inside conversation, etc.' As regards the semantic translation of humorous texts, the concept of NS draws our attention to the fact that total or nearly total equivalence should take into account this parameter, which we can see as roughly a counterpart to the notion of 'genre' or 'format' in literary studies (*Humorous Texts* 23).
- Target (TA): An optional element in this scheme, 'The target parameter selects who is the 'butt' of the joke.' It is the person or group that constitutes the passive subject in the joke (Attardo, *Humorous Texts* 24).
- Situation (SI): 'The situation of a joke can be thought of as the 'props' of the joke: the objects, participants, instruments, activities, etc.' (Attardo, *Humorous Texts* 24). As we shall see when we deal with the specific examples that make up the central part of this paper, every one of those texts is framed by a situation that is sometimes explicitly articulated, but also, quite often, elliptically suggested or even provided by extralinguistic means (this is very clear in the case of our examples from graphic humour). We shall argue, however, that even in those cases, and as regards the particular typology of humour we are concerned with, the linguistic component remains central to the humorous effect and its rendering into another language.

- Logical Mechanism (LM): The foregrounding and distortion —even the ‘perversion’— of logical thinking has often been attributed a key role in humorous genre like satire (Pollard 67), but one may safely say that ‘a ‘local’ logic, i.e., a distorted, playful logic, which does not necessarily hold outside of the world of the joke’ (Attardo, *Humorous Texts* 25) is also a relevant feature in milder varieties of verbal irony like the ones we are concerned with.
- ‘Script Opposition (SO): While the term is admittedly complex, and at the risk of oversimplifying things, we may benefit from the notion that humorous texts (and this is particularly obvious in the case of irony) present us with alternative ‘scripts’ or readings that are mutually incongruous or incompatible. Resolving that contradiction is central to the humorous effect: clearly so (we may anticipate) in the case of the understatement. While this is easier said than done, translation should neither fall too short (through misinterpretation or a muddled rendering) nor go too far (by being too explicit or explanatory) conveying this contradiction. Otherwise the issue of incongruity, as we shall see when we deal with irony, recurs in many formal descriptions of verbal humour:

[...] humour results when the perceiver meets with an incongruity and then is motivated to resolve the incongruity either by retrieval of information in the joke or from his/her own storehouse of information. According to this account, humour results when the incongruity is resolved; that is, the punch line is seen to make sense at some level with the earlier information in the joke (Suls 42).

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On the basis of the above theoretical framework, Attardo himself attempted to more specifically apply the idea of Knowledge Resources to translation proper in a 2002 paper titled *Translation and Humour. An Approach Based on the General Theory of Verbal Humour*. There the Belgian-born scholar makes a point that may well provide us with an interesting point of departure: if possible —and at the simplest level of formulation— the so-called Knowledge Resources must be preserved unaltered in translation, with the obvious exception of Language which of course changes from the SL into the TL for Language (Attardo, *Translation and Humour* 187).

Having said that, however, he hastened to accommodate exceptions to this rule, since Narrative Strategies (i.e., genres or formats), Targets (in the context of jokes and

in the sense explained above) or Situations may not be all that readily available. Of particular interest is his claim about the translatability of language-dependent Logical Mechanisms and his emphasis on not changing the type and level of incongruity or dual reading (Script Opposition) that we see as central to some types of verbal irony (Attardo, *Translation and Humour* 184-189). His golden rule is formulated thus: ‘if possible, respect all six Knowledge Resources in your translation, but if necessary, let your translation differ at the lowest level necessary for your pragmatic purposes’ (183).

Other scholars dealing with the translation of humour adopt a pragmalinguistic stance. Hickey explains that some subcategories of verbal humour are more impervious to translation than others and interestingly produces a threefold classification of humour: the one that depends exclusively on behaviour or universal knowledge; the one that originates itself in something specific to a society or culture; and the one that stems from language proper (Hickey, ‘Aproximación Pragmalingüística a la traducción del humor’). It follows that in assessing or practising humour in translation —as indeed translation in general— we need to understand that universal, culture-free and non-self-reflective language translates better than particular, culture-bound and metalinguistic (e.g. puns) verbal discourse.

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What then are the most common strategies employed by translators facing these dilemmas? Hickey himself warns against what we may call an ‘explanatory’ approach: ensuring at all costs that readers, in the case of a written text, *understand* the humorous allusion (in extreme cases by embedded glosses or even footnotes) at the risk of spoiling true appreciation and enjoyment. Far from recommending this ‘murdering to dissect’ approach, he seems to rather favour, there where equivalence is harder to attain, adaptations and modulations which however less literal are surely more effective.

Hickey’s approach is based on pragmatic equivalence insofar as verbal humour manifests itself in speech acts that have specific perlocutionary effects. The first question that the translator must ask himself is, what humorous effect does the text produce and which linguistic means have contributed to produce this effect? If a particular combination of words produces a fully equivalent humorous effect, no additional strategies should be deployed. In more difficult cases, a more detailed



analysis of the text is in order so as to identify textual and pragmatic elements responsible for humour yet not amenable to interlinguistic rephrasing, and thus effect what Hickey himself calls 'recontextualisation'. This is particularly relevant when cultural factors enter the picture of humour, even though we often come across welcome, sometimes unexpected coincidences that facilitate equivalence.

In more specific terms, and in order to finish off this no doubt incomplete overview, some authors provide more or less detailed lists of strategies employed in the translation of humour. A relatively simple example of this kind of account is provided by translation Marta Mateo (171-178) in a 1995 contribution to the specialized journal *The Translator*. Before focusing more closely on the translation of irony and the understatement, we shall take the liberty to paraphrase it here, but not before clarifying that not all of these procedures apply to the examples that we shall discuss in the central part of this paper:

**ST** humour becomes **TT** humour by means of literal translation  
**ST** humour becomes **TT** humour by means of an 'equivalent effect' translation  
**ST** humour is enhanced or intensified in **TT** by means of some word/expression  
**ST** humour is replaced by a 'synonym' in **TT**  
**ST** humour becomes **TT** sarcasm (i.e. more overt criticism)  
The hidden meaning of **ST** humour comes to the surface in **TT** (no humour in **TT**)  
**ST** humour is explained in footnote in **TT**  
**ST** humour has literal translation with no humour in **TT**  
Humorous **ST** is completely deleted in **TT**  
No humour in **ST** becomes humour in **TT**

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Despite the complexity and high level of sophistication of some theoretical models formulated in order to get to grips with the problem of translating humour, it may not be completely unwise to suggest that when their authors become prescriptive (i.e. when they suggest norms or strategies aimed at achieving the best possible equivalence in translation) , these can be often boiled down to the well-known dictum according to which "translation should be as literal as possible and as free as is necessary" (Newmark 12). We will no doubt encounter this old tension between freedom and fidelity as we further explore and illustrate the problem of translating one breed of verbal humour clearly marked by irony and, more specifically, by understatement.

### 3. Irony

#### 3.1. Defining irony

Since some understanding of irony is central to our purpose, and even though the topic is admittedly too huge to develop here in depth (philosophical or heavily conceptual treatments of the subject like Kierkegaard's famous dissertation on Socratic irony obviously fall beyond our competence and scope), we may devote some space to at least modestly trying to position the concept in the context of our aims.

What is irony? A universal, not particularly technical definition equates it with 'saying one thing but meaning the opposite'. In more specific terms, we should almost inevitably turn to D. C. Muecke, who claims that 'The principal obstacle in the way of a simple definition of irony is the fact that irony is not a simple phenomenon' (Muecke, *Irony* 8). English-speaking countries tend 'to stretch the concept of irony to the point of making it the essential or distinguishing quality of imaginative literature', and on the other hand, they also have 'a tendency to restrict the concept to this or that form of 'pure' irony' (10). Irony can be used to create humour but this is only one of its purposes. According to Attardo, the ideas of irony and humour overlap, but are certainly not the same (qtd. in Van Limpt 19). Both, irony and humour aim at an unexpected outcome and that is where the overlap lies. It is the element of surprise in irony that may trigger off humour (Attardo, *Humorous Texts* 122).

In truth, verbal irony takes very different forms and is difficult to identify. There is not just one kind of irony with specific characteristics but irony depends on the context and it has 'an endless series of subversive interpretations' (Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* 31). Verbal irony typically involves a conflict —a mismatch— between an expression and a situation, whereas situational irony involves the irony in the situation itself (Colston 44). Thus, verbal irony is deliberate, the ironist creates it intentionally. Booth argues, on the other hand, that irony is 'finite' (*The Rhetoric of Irony* 26), in the sense that its discursive, its communicative context is central to its proper functioning and narrowly defined: the ironic is accessible only to an ironic interlocutor, who shares the keys and clues to appreciating and tuning up to the above-mentioned 'mismatch' or double sense ('incongruity' or 'inversion' are terms that are likely to occur in descriptions of irony, as we shall see). In the case of literature, that ironic interlocutor

may well be the ‘implied reader’ —another notion coined by Booth himself (*The Rhetoric of Fiction* 429). We can already anticipate that rendering irony in translation involves re-creating all the conditions that make that communicative context possible by paying close attention to those (ultimately linguistic) clues or markers of irony.

Cleverness —ingenuity— is, in this sense, an essential tool that ironists and translators of ironical texts should share. It involves, to borrow the terms in Arthur Pollard’s description, responsiveness to the mechanisms of ‘inversion’, ‘implication’, ‘insinuation’ and ‘omission’, since the ironist does not affirm, but question.

Irony uses distortion as its weapon of total distortion in the form of inversion. It is not simply inversion, either. It includes in its effect implication, insinuation and omission. It requires a select and responsive audience to recognize its peculiar direction of meaning (Pollard 67).

The ironist resorts to complex techniques to create irony which are not always easy to recognize. Irony is (and this is particularly relevant as regards translation) context-bound: by themselves individual words or phrases do not imply irony, but are rather embedded in a ‘context of situation’ (Halliday and Hasan). Irony, in short, is within the pragmatic category. The good news, as far as English>Spanish translation is concerned, is that while the cultural dimension may as usual prove more resistant to equivalence, the purely verbal component (quite central, as we shall see, to subtypes like the understatement) presents a large number of homologies. But let’s not rush to hasty conclusions before dissecting the mechanisms of irony in greater depth.

Muecke elaborates on the pragmatic aspect of irony by referring to three key elements (*Irony* 19-20):

- A two-storey phenomenon, where a lower level encompasses the situation as it appears to the so-called ‘victim’ of irony deceptively presented by the ironist and an ‘upper level’ presents the situation as it appears to the observer or the ironist.
- Some opposition between the two levels involving ‘contradiction, incongruity or incompatibility’.

- The element of 'innocence': either a victim is confidently unaware of the very possibility of there being an upper level or point of view that invalidates his own, or an ironist pretends not to be aware of it.

These three elements may lead to a successful communication of irony, but also a failed or incorrect perception thereof. The effective or unsuccessful handling of ironical implicatures depends on a number of factors that, at the risk of being prolix, we reproduce here again in Muecke's terms (*Irony* 38) given their important bearing on the translation of irony, since the translator is first and foremost a (privileged) receiver in an act of communication:

- The sender's capacity for irony and the receiver's personal sensitivity to irony.
- The community rules relating to irony of both sender and receiver and the degree of coincidence between the two sets of rules.
- The receiver's knowledge of the sender and of his ironical technique.
- The receiver's familiarity with the rules of the sender's speech community.
- The probability of ironic intention and of assumption of irony.

Again helpful in our grappling with the phenomenon of verbal (especially literary) irony is the same author's classification of irony types depending of the ironist's role (*Irony* 61-93)

- Impersonal irony: we are unaware of the ironist, and the irony lies in what he says rather than in the fact that it is a particular person saying it.
- Self-disparaging irony: the ironist presents himself as an ignorant and becomes a guide to our judgment.
- Ingénu irony: the ironist withdraws using a character, an ingénu, for his irony.
- Dramatized irony: the ironist withdraws completely and presents an ironic situation.

### 3.2. Translating irony

Let's turn more specifically to how this conceptual and descriptive framework requires particular translation approaches and strategies. The global aim is a fair enough if not complete equivalence: the preservation in the target text of the original ambiguity, tone, function and style of the source text. Easier said than done, of course, but let us put it differently in line with some of the notions developed above: the translator's (hopefully invisible) role would be that of recreating the same incongruity that is involved in the ironical situation presented in the original text while providing the same interpretive clues to its resolution without either making it unsolvable (incoherent) or clarifying what is meant to be ambiguous or contradictory.

Two complementary conclusions may be drawn from the previous claim. In the first place, and generally speaking, the translation modality that best suits the demands of ironical texts of the kind we shall be presenting in the second part of this paper (fully accessible, yet requiring a certain finesse) is — to rely on Newmark's well-known eight-type classification (Newmark 45-47)— faithful, insofar as it attempts to 'reproduce the precise contextual meaning of the original' while not straining in excess the TL grammatical structures, but also semantic, in the sense that it should take account of the aesthetic component (syntax, rhythm and, in short, style) which is inextricably linked to the markers of irony as we shall see next). There where verbal irony includes culture-bound elements, some form of more 'imaginative' adaptation may additionally be required, just as puns or dialectal markers if these (as for example in the case of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*'s innocent narrator) are a substantial part of the ironical idiom. On the other hand, it appears that word-for-word or overly literal translation would be unable to cope with the subtleties and insinuations of some ironical texts, just as a purely communicative approach would fall short of rendering the full semantic value of the ST.

Secondly, a sound ability to detect the linguistic markers of irony, at sentence and paragraph level, will be more than necessary in the competent translation of texts marked by complex forms of verbal irony. Following the suggestion of this paper's supervisor, I would like to briefly illustrate this point by mentioning one very well-known and more than once quoted example proposed many years ago by translation

scholar E.A. Gutt (138-139)<sup>1</sup> in connection with the foreign translations of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* and, more particularly, of his anthological opening paragraph:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way-- in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. (5)

Gutt argued that translations that 'simplified' the syntactic structure of this text by merging every pair of juxtaposed contradictory sentences and making them into a simple statement with a double subject complement ("It was the best and the worst of times, it was the epoch of belief and incredulity...") spoilt or at least made difficult the perception of irony in Dickens' description of a period about which there was no contemporary consensus: it was the best and the worst depending on whether one was wealthy and a member of the privileged classes or indeed disastrous if one happened to be part of the oppressed majority of people. Dickens echoes opposing views in a way that is incongruous, but at the same time provides, through syntax, clues to the ironical interpretation of this incongruity: he is not contradicting himself but ironically imitating discordant voices. The emphatic, exaggerated (overstated) construction that opens the novel is so noticeable that it prevents a literal reading and elicits our ironical complicity as readers. Perhaps the same effect can be achieved by the opposite means of understatement, which we propose to focus on next. And if this is so, the same keen eye for formal detail in language continues to be necessary in translating texts clearly loaded with irony.

## 4. Understatement

### 4.1. From irony to understatement

Simple dictionary definitions of the term 'understatement' insist on the element of underemphasis or restraint (exactly the opposite of exaggeration/overstatement). Thus

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Herrero Quirós, Carlos. "Análisis estilístico y traducción literaria de textos en prosa: Algunas orientaciones", *Hermēneus. Revista de traducción e interpretación de la Universidad de Valladolid*: 83-90.

the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* describes it as ‘A statement that is not strong enough to express how good, bad, impressive, etc. something really is’ or ‘the practice of making something seem to have less of a particular quality that it really has’. We could surely add more such non-specialised definitions that point in the same direction before commenting on further rhetorical and discursive nuances, but first and foremost we need to clarify a couple of things: a) the way we understand the term is necessarily in connection with the deliberate aim of producing an ironical effect; in the literal sense of the term, a low-keyed or restrained mode of expression does not necessarily produce humour, but this is beside the point; and b) as a purposefully humorous, textual device, understatement can be used to describe a single construction or a collection of individual sentences, but also, in a broader sense, it can represent a more comprehensive tone, style and attitude in literary texts and even a format of subgenre of humour.

Although we have come across descriptions that underline the differences between irony and understatement and even refer to them as opposite terms, we believe that the understatement, in the sense described above, is a kind or subtype of irony (this is also in tune with a number of standard definitions), a technique in the service of ironical purposes, so that the same requirements that we proposed for the translation of irony apply in coping with this particular modality. Having said that, it may be interesting to outline and quickly refer to similarities and differences in this regard.

In literary contexts, both irony in general and understatement in particular present reality in distorted ways. Although the methods may differ, in both cases the effects can be quite similar. In understatement, the distortion of reality is achieved when an idea is portrayed as less great, good or important than it really is. Besides, the effect produced is milder (perhaps subtler too) because there is no complete contradiction or incongruity between apparent and intended meaning. By contrast, in other types of irony the humorous distortion of reality is often brought about by depicting things in a way that is totally at odds with that reality or with our genuine judgements on that reality: rhetorically, the effect is more forceful and stronger. Yet in both cases, the receiver/reader cannot take what he gets at face value without being misled into a wrong or even incoherent interpretation. Colston and O’Brien (1957) explain that ‘verbal irony and understatement perform similar pragmatic functions because they both make use of

a potential contrast between expected and experienced events'. This contrast is precisely where humour stems from.

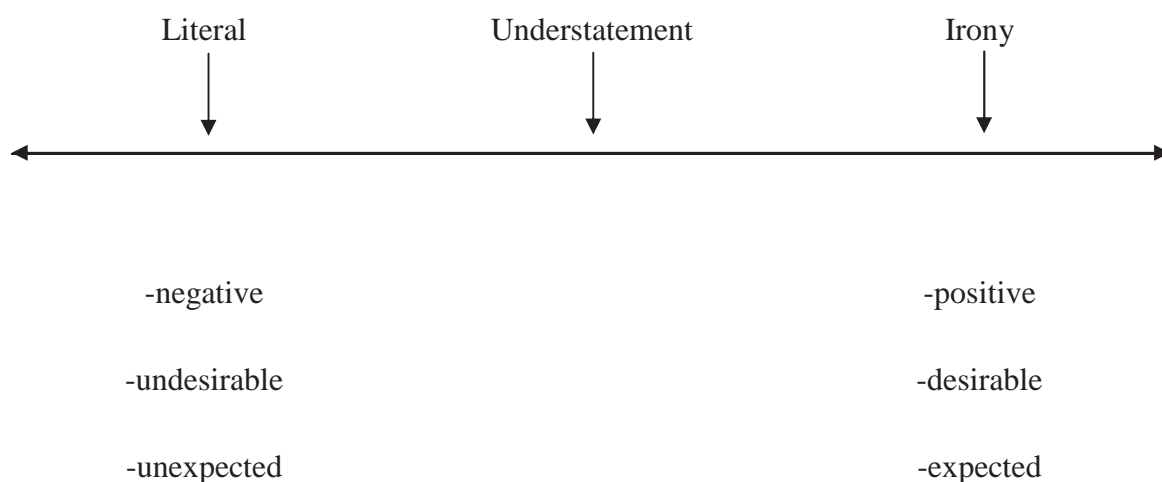
An example may underline these contrasts and help us highlight the unique features of the understatement:

**Literal intended meaning:** There are *many people* in the library.

**Understatement:** It seems that there are *not a few people* in the library.

**Irony:** There is *nobody* in the library.

In this example we can see that the understatement is nearer the literal meaning than irony. To express an unfortunate or unpleasant situation, irony resorts to an assertive mode of expression, while the understatement typically uses indirection and frequently (though not always) negates the opposite of what is meant (litotes) —a rhetorical and grammatical strategy for which, by the way, there is close equivalence in Spanish. Let's borrow the following diagram from the same authors as we quoted a few lines above:



Variation between irony, understatement and literal remarks (Colston/O'Brien 1564)

## 4.2 Understatement

An understatement —or the understatement technique in a larger sense— attenuates the impact of a truth that may be upsetting or inconvenient. There is a stereotype that the English people tend to use the understatement a lot in verbal communication. And there is a tradition of British humour strongly associated with this rhetorical device. As T.H. Pear (93) once said not without irony (notice our own



understatement!): ‘[...]an Englishman who employs gentle irony of understatement, when speaking to a foreigner who thinks he understands English, runs the risk of being taken seriously’ (qtd. in Hübler 2). G. Mikes (24), on the other hand, also has something to say about the understatement as a typically English trait of character: ‘Foreigners have soul; the English haven’t... they have the understatement instead.’ And Leonhardt (304) includes the understatement in his list of seventy-seven phenomena that distinguish the peculiar English character. H.M. Stanley’s famous question ‘Dr Livingstone, I presume?’ with its incongruous pedantic politeness and its elliptic statement of the obvious (David Livingstone was the only white European in central Africa at that time) may well embody this cliché (even though, strictly speaking he was Welsh).

What is interesting about these reports (often ironical themselves) of the understatement’s ‘Englishness’ is that quite often they are phrased in translation-related terms. It would appear that this type of polite rhetorical attenuation is culture-bound and requires some form of translation-adaptation even for non-British speakers of English as their first language. This is of course not really serious, but it points at an alleged problem of communication that could have consequences for translation. Here’s an excerpt from a table that recently became an Internet hit (and which we came across in the online edition of *The Telegraph*):

<b>What the British say</b>	<b>What the British mean</b>	<b>What foreigners understand</b>
That’s not bad	That’s good	That’s poor
I almost agree	I don’t agree at all	He is not far for agreement
I only have a few minor comments	Please rewrite completely	He has found a few typos
Could we consider some other options	I don’t like your idea	They have not yet decided

In the field of Angloamerican literature, mention must be made of the fact that the understatement is more than an occasional literary device. Instead, it is quite central to robust traditions that involve nearly all genres. Examples abound, to begin with, in fiction. The unreliable narrators in Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) or Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) —who refers to his 'tiny little tumour on the brain' requiring an operation that 'isn't very serious'— often understate harsh realities that are in this way made to stand out in the eyes of the reader. Henry James is often praised for his handling of 'concealment, restraint and understatement' ('The Visitor' *Mantex.co.uk*). The plays by Oscar Wilde or Bernard Shaw also feature understatements as part of both playwrights' arsenal of verbal irony (Bocanegra 399-421). And in poetry, just to give an example, Robert Frost's 'Fire and Ice' ends in an effective understatement that sharply contrasts with the elevated topic and produces an ironical letdown<sup>2</sup>.

But if there are two formats which represent the understatement technique if not at its best at least at its clearest and most characteristically 'British', these are the English short comic sketch where negative experiences are delivered in a deliberately phlegmatic, deadpan manner, and a specific brand of cartoon or comic strip that is also typically Anglo-Saxon. Essays and short stories collected, for example in Michael Barsley's compilation *A Book of Wit and Humour* (1949) or Gerald Durrell's sketches on animal subjects in *My Family and Other Animals* (1956) or *Encounters with Animals* (1958) are representative examples of the former typology<sup>3</sup>, while the particular type of non-political, timeless humour practised by cartoonists represented in the collections

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<sup>2</sup> Fire and Ice

Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.

Frost, Robert. "Fire and Ice." *Harper's Magazine* Dec. 1920: 67. Web.

<sup>3</sup> H.F. Ellis's short piece 'For Men in Aprons', included in *A Book of Wit and Humour (the Phoenix Book of Wit and Humour)* is a case in point. Consisting of a set on instructions in order to prevent milk from boiling (an apparently impossible pursuit at least for male practitioners), it can be read as a parody of newspaper advice columns. The minute, nearly scientific observation of the physical laws that govern milk-boiling, the pedantic tone, the polite restraint which at the same time suggests the feeling of being on the brink of exasperation are all incongruous with the experience that is being alluded to and this is what makes irony so effective.

*Cartoonstock.com*<sup>4</sup> and *Jantoo.com*<sup>5</sup> exemplifies, in extremely short captions, the many facets of ironical understatement.

Before approaching a limited set of examples from these sources and their possible translations into Spanish, let us complete our formal characterization of this modality of humour (we are using the term ‘understatement’ as a broad inflection or ironical style rather than one specific construction) by listing in advance some concurring traits that we have been able to observe while we conducted our analysis:

1. Litotes: an affirmative statement is made by negating its opposite.
2. Hedges: calculatedly noncommittal or evasive statements.
3. Diminutives: a formation of a word that indicates a smaller size.
4. Euphemisms: the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant.
5. Detailed, meticulously, nearly scientific descriptions of actions or processes.
6. Ellipsis: the omission of one or more words that are obviously understood but must be supplied by the reader to either make a construction that is grammatically complete or fill a gap in sense or narrative.
7. Restrained, civilized, well-meaning tone. Affected naivety.
8. Pedantic, overformal language to refer to commonplace, vulgar situations.
9. Periphrases and circumlocutions
10. Sudden changes in sentence and paragraph length often associated with ellipsis.
11. Circular arguments, statement of the obvious.
12. Reliance on logic (even though this may be faulty at some point) and judicious common sense.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Understatement Cartoons and Comics.’ *Funny pictures from Cartoon Stock*. Web. 25 May 2014. <<http://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/u/understatement.asp>>.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Understatement Cartoons.’ *Understatement Cartoons*. Web. 25 May 2014. <<http://www.jantoo.com/cartoons/keywords/understatement>>.

As far as the effective translation of these and other features in the context of the ironical idiom are concerned, what we have suggested in the two preceding sections still applies. We shall argue that equivalence is fully attainable in Spanish inasmuch as the understated ironical voice is made up of linguistic, discursive elements that do have neat enough counterparts in the latter language. To put it in a nutshell, closely following the ST without lapsing into unidiomatic language or a cramped grammar could be, as usual, a golden rule, but surely there is sufficient room for fine tuning and ingenuity. Such problems and deficits as may derive from ‘culture bumps’<sup>7</sup> context, unresolvable ambiguities or untranslatable wordplay will require a more creative approach.

Let us tackle a few practical illustrations.

## 5. Practical Case

### 5.1. Gerald Durrell’s *Encounters with animals*

Gerald Durrell is probably among the best-selling authors in English. His expeditions to Africa and South America inspired him to write about his anecdotes and experiences with animals. Consistently keeping his characteristic touch of British traditional humour, he wrote collections of short sketches like *Encounters with animals* (1958), where he describes landscapes, draws characters, tells anecdotes and analyses the peculiarities of animal life while ultimately (and humorously) commenting on human nature. More particularly, this book gathers talks originally given as part of a radio programme produced by the BBC where Durrell recounted his experiences in Argentina, the east coast of Africa and Guyana with a fresh and original (though fully comprehensible) idiom where the kind of verbal humour we referred to in our previous chapter constitutes a prominent feature. It is for this reason, together with the fact that we have been able to rely on both a published translation and an alternative, partial, unpublished one produced in the context of a seminar on literary translation taught at the

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<sup>6</sup> Notice that some of these features, e.g. numbers 5, 7, 12, are also characteristic of the satirical idiom.

<sup>7</sup> A culture bump occurs when an individual finds himself or herself in a different, strange or uncomfortable situation when interacting with persons of a different culture. I have extended the use of Carol Archer’s term to translation, for a situation where the reader of a TT [target text] has a problem understanding an ST (source text) cultural allusion. Such an allusion may well fail to function in the TT, as it is not part of the TL [target language] reader’s culture. Instead of conveying a coherent meaning to TT readers, the allusion may remain unclear and puzzling (Leppihalme 4).

University of Valladolid, that we have chosen a single sketch from this book in order to illustrate our point. This particular sketch is the introduction to the volume's third part: 'Animals in Particular' (107-109)<sup>8</sup>.

Many works by Durrell have been translated into Spanish, Basque and Catalan. A glance at Spain's ISBN database shows no fewer than 114 entries, including his best known sketches on animal life that have become a fixture of British humour. *Encounters with animals*, more particularly, has been translated into Spanish at least twice. The first Spanish published translation goes back to 1981 and it was signed by Fernando Santos Fontela. The book must have been popular among Spanish readers during the 80s and 90s, since it was reprinted several times. It is this Spanish translation by Santos Fontela that we have mainly used in its 1995 edition (2009 reprint)<sup>9</sup>. The book is divided into four parts and the short sketch that we shall be focusing on is, as we have just pointed out, the introduction to part three, where Durrell ironically describes the pros and cons (rather the latter than the former) of keeping wild animals as pets<sup>10</sup>.

Let us reproduce both the original text and the corresponding published translation in Spanish:

English	Spanish
<p>Keeping wild animals as pets, whether on an expedition or in your own home, can be a tedious, irritating, and frustrating business, but it can also give you a great deal of pleasure. Many people have asked me why I like animals, and I have always found it a difficult question to answer. You might just as well ask me why I like eating. But, apart from the obvious interest and pleasure that animals give me, there is another aspect as well. I think that their chief charm lies in the fact that they have all the basic qualities of a human being but with none of the hypocrisy which is now</p>	<p>El tener animales silvestres con uno mismo, sea en una expedición o en casa, puede ser un asunto tedioso, irritante y frustrante, pero también puede resultar muy agradable. Mucha gente me ha preguntado por qué me gustan los animales y siempre me ha parecido una pregunta difícil de contestar. Es igual que si me preguntan por qué me gusta comer. Pero, aparte del interés y del placer evidentes que me proporcionan los animales, existe otro aspecto. Creo que su principal encanto reside en que tienen todas las cualidades básicas de un ser humano pero sin la hipocresía que</p>

<sup>8</sup> Durrell, Gerald. *Encounters with animals*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963. Print.

<sup>9</sup> Durrell, Gerald. *Encounters with animals*. Trans. Fernando Santos Fontela. 5th ed. Madrid: Alianza Editorial S.A., 1995. Print.

<sup>10</sup> The same sketch is used as the main text in one didactic unit in a practical course book of English for advanced students of English language and literature published by the University of Valladolid: Pilar Garcés García, Carlos Herrero Quirós, Berta Cano Echevarría, María José Carrera de la Red, *Between the lines Text-based activities for the study of English in the University*, Secretariado de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Valladolid, 1997, pp. 13-20.

apparently such an essential in the world of man. **With an animal you do know more or less where you are: if it does not like you it tells you so in no uncertain manner; if it likes you, again it leaves you in no doubt.** But an animal who likes you is sometimes a mixed blessing. Recently I had a pied crow from West Africa who, after six months' deliberation, during which time he ignored me, suddenly decided that I was the only person in the world for him. **If I went near the cage he would crouch on the floor trembling in ecstasy, or bring me an offering (a bit of newspaper or a feather) and hold it out for me to take, all the while talking hoarsely to himself in a series of hiccupping cries and ejaculations.** This was all right, but as soon as I let him out of his cage he would fly on to my head and perch there, first digging his claws firmly into my scalp, **then decorating the back of my jacket with a nice moist dropping** and finally proceeding to give me a series of love pecks on the head. **As his beak was three inches long and extremely sharp, this was, to say the least, painful.**

Of course, you have to know where to draw the line with animals. You can let pet-keeping develop into eccentricity if you are not careful. I drew the line last Christmas. For a present I decided to buy my wife a North American flying-squirrel, a creature which I had always wanted to possess myself, and which I was sure she would like. The animal duly arrived, and we were both captivated by it. As it seemed extremely nervous, we thought it would be a good idea to keep it in our bedroom for a week or two, so that we could talk to it at night when it came out, and let it grow used to us. This plan would have worked quite well but for one thing. The squirrel cunningly gnawed its way out of the cage and took up residence behind the wardrobe. At first this did not seem too bad. We could sit in bed at night and watch it doing acrobatics in the wardrobe, scuttling up and down the dressing-table, carrying off the nuts and apple we had left there for it. Then came New Year's Eve when we had been invited to a party for which I had to don my dinner-jacket. All was well until I opened a drawer in my dressing-table, when I discovered the answer to the question that had puzzled us for some time: where did the flying-squirrel store all the nuts, apple, bread and other bits of food? My brand-new cummerbund, which I had never even worn, looked like a piece of delicate Madeira lacework. The bits that had been chewed out of it had been very economically saved and used to build little nests, one on the front of each of my dress shirts. In these nests had been collected seventy-two hazel nuts, five walnuts,

aparentemente es hoy día tan indispensable en el mundo del hombre. **Con un animal sí se sabe más o menos a qué atenerse: si no le gustas, te lo dice de forma que no deja lugar a dudas;** y si le gustas tampoco te permite ninguna duda. Pero el gustarle a un animal algunas veces también plantea sus problemas. Hace poco tuve yo un cuervo pintado de África occidental que, tras seis meses de deliberaciones, durante cuyo tiempo no me hizo ni caso, decidió de repente que yo era lo único importante del mundo. **Si me acercaba a su jaula se agachaba en el suelo, temblando de éxtasis, o me traía un regalo (un pedacito de periódico o una pluma) que sostenía en el pico para que yo lo agarrase, mientras todo el tiempo hablaba solo con una serie de gritos entrecortados y exclamaciones hipadas.** Eso estaba muy bien, pero en cuanto lo sacaba de la jaula se me venía volando a la cabeza y se quedaba allí, con las uñas bien metidas en mi cuero cabelludo, **después me decoraba la espalda de la chaqueta con un buen chorro húmedo** y por último procedía a darme una serie de picotazos amorosos en la cabeza. **Como tenía un pico de ocho centímetros de largo y muy fuerte, lo menos que cabe decir era que resultaba doloroso.**

Desde luego, con los animales hay que saber dónde poner un límite. Si no se anda uno con cuidado se puede llevar lo de tener animales hasta la excentricidad. Las Navidades pasadas puse el límite. Decidí comprar de regalo para mi mujer una ardilla voladora norteamericana, animalito que yo siempre había querido tener y que estaba seguro de que le iba a gustar. El animal llegó como estaba previsto y ambos nos sentimos cautivados por él. Como parecía estar nervioso, pensamos que sería una buena idea tenerlo una o dos semanas en nuestro dormitorio, para que pudiéramos hablarle por la noche, cuando salía de la jaula, y dejar que se fuera acostumbrando a nosotros. El plan habría salido bastante bien de no haber sido por una cosa. La ardilla, astuta, se abrió camino a dentelladas, rompió la jaula y estableció su residencia detrás del guardarropa. Al principio esto no nos parecía grave. Nos podíamos sentar en la cama por la noche y ver las acrobacias que hacía por el guardarropa, mientras se subía y bajaba a toda prisa por la cómoda, llevándose las nueces y la manzana que le habíamos dejado allí. Después llegó Nochevieja, para la que estábamos invitados a una fiesta a lo que yo tenía que ir vestido de smoking. Todo fue muy bien hasta que abrí un cajón de mi cómoda y descubrí la respuesta a la pregunta que nos veníamos planteando desde hacía algún tiempo: ¿dónde guardaba la ardilla voladora todas las nueces, manzanas, el pan y otras cosas de comer? Mi chaleco nuevo, que todavía no había estrenado, parecía un pedazo de delicado encaje de

<p>fourteen pieces of bread, six mealworms, fifty-two bits of apple and twenty grapes. <b>The grapes and the apple had, of course, disintegrated somewhat with the passage of time and had left most interesting Picasso designs in juice across the front of my shirts.</b></p> <p>I had to go to the party in a suit. The squirrel is now in Paignton Zoo.</p> <p>The other day my wife said that she thought a baby otter would make a delightful pet, but I changed the subject hurriedly.</p> <p>(Gerald Durrell, <i>Encounters with Animals</i>, Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1963)</p>	<p>Madeira. Los trocitos que le había ido arrancando a mordiscos estaban económicamente puestos de lado y se habían utilizado para construir niditos, uno en la pechera de cada una de mis camisas de etiqueta. En esos niditos había reunido 72 avellanas, cinco nueces, 14 pedazos de pan, seis gusanos, 52 pedazos de manzana y 20 uvas. <b>Naturalmente, las uvas y la manzana se habían desintegrado un tanto con el paso del tiempo y habían dejado unos dibujos de jugo interesantísimos, de lo más picassiano, en la pechera de mis camisas.</b></p> <p>Tuve que ir a la fiesta con un traje corriente. Hoy día, la ardilla está en el zoo de Paignton.</p> <p>El otro día me dijo mi mujer que sería muy divertido tener en casa una cría de nutria, pero yo cambié de tema a toda velocidad.</p> <p>(Durrell, Gerald. <i>Encounters with animals</i>. Trans. Fernando Santos Fontela. 5th ed. Madrid: Alianza Editorial S.A., 1995).</p>
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Durrell's sketch encapsulates many of the characteristics of irony and verbal humour that we pinpointed in previous chapters. Arguably the author deploys a narrative strategy where he is at the same time the narrator and a character/victim in the tale/joke. The choice of a dramatic mask and a voice —an *ingénu*— is instrumental to his purpose, and it so happens that this voice is impregnated by over-polite, over-patient understatement. Practically all twelve specific traits that we listed in our chapter on the latter (see above p. 16) can be traced in the above fragment. Last but not least, there is Script Opposition in the mildly incongruous minuteness of detail with which this somehow naive, self-effacing observer comments on unpleasant, banal facts.

Santos Fontela's rendering appears to be balanced and extremely faithful, and no important objections <sup>11</sup> can be raised against it. If anything, one may ask for that tiny bit more of comic sharpness in the recreation of Durrell's phlegmatic voice. But this is of course questionable and certainly much easier said than done. Be it as it may, while verbal

<sup>11</sup> EFE's Fundación del Español Urgente recommends the adapted spelling "esmoquin" instead of the native English term.

humour, irony and understatement unequivocally colour the whole piece, it is worth zooming in on a number of fragments where these characteristics, both in the ST and in the Spanish translations, can hopefully be isolated and glossed. Henceforth, we shall use the acronyms ST, TT1 and TT2 respectively to indicate the source text, the translation published by Alianza Editorial and the alternative translations that were produced for purely didactic purposes in the context of the above-mentioned seminar.<sup>12</sup>

#### A)

At its most typical, and when considered as an individual utterance rather than a broader pervasive tone, the understatement is likely to show in the form of litotes: a variety of rhetorical attenuation that resorts to double negatives (the latter understood in the broad sense of the term). Negating the opposite of what one means sometimes denotes politeness or restraint, but it can also provide a source of ironical distance: both things particularly suit the implied author's self-controlled and phlegmatic voice in *Encounters with Animals*. Outside the realm of verbal humour, litotes are for example highly typical of Anglo-Saxon epic poetry, where they probably sound foreign and opaque, but with the comic import they carry in mildly ironical understatements of the type we are confronted with, there is nearly always a choice of equivalent constructions in Spanish (despite divergences between the two languages in their treatment of negative constructions). In this sense, we would argue that preserving an identical architecture in the ST and TT constructions may not always be desirable for purely idiomatic reasons. Let us see one example from Durrell's sketch:

#### ST

*With an animal you do know more or less where you are: if it does not like you it tells you so in no uncertain manner; if it likes you, again it leaves you in no doubt.*

#### TT1

*Con un animal sí se sabe más o menos a qué atenerse: si no le gustas, te lo dice de forma que no deja lugar a dudas; y si le gustas tampoco te permite ninguna duda.*

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<sup>12</sup> "Traducción Literaria I (Inglés>Español): Prosa", Grado en Estudios Ingleses, Universidad de Valladolid. Academic Year 2013-14. Materials supplied by this paper's supervisor, Dr Carlos Herrero Quirós.



**TT2**

*Con los animales siempre sabes más o menos a qué atenerte: si nos les caes bien te lo hacen saber sin que haya lugar a equívocos; y si les gustas tampoco te dejan dudas al respecto.*

Both translations of the ST litotes avoid a word-by-word strategy for the above-mentioned reasons, yet both are effective in transposing the understatement, although we would perhaps suggest that the repetition of the word *duda* in TT1 somewhat impairs the text's fluency and balance.

**B)**

There is humour, for example, in the minute, somehow pedantic description of the animals' behaviour:

**ST**

*If I went near the cage he would crouch on the floor trembling in ecstasy, or bring me an offering (a bit of newspaper or a feather) and hold it out for me to take, all the while talking hoarsely to himself in a series of hiccuping cries and ejaculations.*

**TT1**

*Si me acercaba a su jaula se agachaba en el suelo, temblando de éxtasis, o me traía un regalo (un pedacito de periódico o una pluma) que sostenía en el pico para que yo lo agarrase, mientras todo el tiempo hablaba solo con una serie de gritos entrecortados y exclamaciones hipadas.*

**TT2**

*Cada vez que me aproximaba a la jaula, el animal se agachaba tembloroso en el suelo, como embargado por el éxtasis; o me traía un regalo (un trocito de periódico o una pluma) que me acercaba en el pico a modo de ofrenda mientras emitía sin cesar un ronco monólogo compuesto de jipidos y exclamaciones.*

While our alternative translation may possibly strike the right chord as far as the fastidious tone of the ST is concerned, it may also be a little overdone and is certainly less economical than Santos Fontela's.

Unmistakably humorous is also the long enumeration of food items that the flying-squirrel had collected: 'seventy-two hazel nuts, five walnuts, fourteen pieces of bread, six mealworms, fifty-two bits of apple and twenty grapes'. Here the two translations that we have handled (Santos Fontela's and the one negotiated in class) are practically identical, save for the fact that the published translation chooses numerical digits instead of words to convey figures.

C)

A number of allusions in the sketch illustrate the "two-storey phenomenon" or incongruity that is so characteristic of ironical accounts (see above p. 8). On one level the narrator/victim appears to be presenting a fascinating natural phenomenon, while on another the reader perceives a nasty or unpleasant experience. Durrell chooses a mode of expression that is at odds with the latter and definitely understates the situation. Understatement and indirection are the keys that allow the reader to easily solve the contradiction, and in solving it humour is produced.

**ST**

*... then decorating the back of my jacket with a nice moist dropping...*

**TT1**

*...después me decoraba la espalda de la chaqueta con un buen chorro húmedo...*

**TT2**

*...para seguidamente decorar la parte posterior de mi chaqueta con un tierno excremento de hidratado aspecto...*

The euphemistic approach and the odd contrast between the word 'dropping' and the adjective 'nice' is possibly weakened in Alianza's translation, while our alternative version, somewhat freer, may once again be more effective, yet perhaps a little prone to

verbosity. Even so, the seminar's translation makes one distinctly visualize the scene and is probably more comical. A similar example, and a clear understatement, can be found next:

**ST**

*As his beak was three inches long and extremely sharp, this was, to say the least, painful.*

**TT1**

*Como tenía un pico de ocho centímetros de largo y muy fuerte, lo menos que cabe decir era que resultaba doloroso.*

**TT2**

*Teniendo en cuenta que lo hacía con un pico de siete centímetros y medio e incisivo en extremo, aquellas muestras de afecto eran, por decirlo suavemente, dolorosas.*

The comical *diminutio* and the pedantic voice are captured in both translations, but TT2 possibly intensifies the latter and is perhaps less literal, since it employs amplification ('aquellas muestras de afecto') and a more redundant, cohesive style. Both, incidentally, introduce a cultural adaptation in the sense that they convert inches to centimeters, although the alternative rendering is fussier about accuracy—perhaps in tune with the meticulous tone of the original.

Here is yet another illustration of the same kind of hilarious contrasts:

**ST**

*The grapes and the apple had, of course, disintegrated somewhat with the passage of time and had left most interesting Picasso designs in juice across the front of my shirts.*

**TT1**

*Naturalmente, las uvas y la manzana se habían desintegrado un tanto con el paso del tiempo y habían dejado unos dibujos de jugo interesantísimos, de lo más picassiano, en la pechera de mis camisas.*

**TT2**

*La manzana y las uvas —no hace falta decirlo— se habían desintegrado un tanto con el paso del tiempo y su jugo había impreso unos curiosos diseños picassianos por toda la pechera de las prendas.*

Meiosis or understatement that ironically belittles the consequences of an event or an action combine here, once again, with painstaking, fascinated observation and the incongruous pedanticism of an art critic to produce a comic effect. Santos Fontela's translation is witty enough and even engages a slight touch of the vernacular (*de lo más picassianos*). The choice in both translations of the adjective 'Picassian' is particularly apt, since a flatter rendering ('in the style of Picasso') would have been less effective. The style is equivalent and both translations successfully convey the elegant irony of the original text, the reason being perhaps (leaving aside the question of the translators' respective skills) that in this kind of formal register English and Spanish share a lot more by way of sentence structure, modality, lexical range, etc. than may appear at first sight. No cultural barriers (despite the understatement's reputation as a British 'brand') hamper the translatability of our ST and the operation is ultimately linguistic. Verbal humour of this kind travels well across cultures.

## D)

Finally, paragraph structure, associated with narrative ellipsis, plays an important part in the comic denouement of this little story. The terse brevity of the two final paragraphs forces the reader to reconstruct the understated (if not muted) narrative transitions and resolve the Script Opposition. What is implied is so much more eloquent than words and the sharp contrast between the lengthy and meticulous reporting of the main two paragraphs and the abrupt elliptical ending is delightfully incongruous, i.e. ironical.

As for the translation of this final stretch, we may take it for granted that there is no justification here for any change in paragraph structure, and indeed this is the principle successfully followed by both TT1 and TT2 (which makes it unnecessary for us to reproduce the texts here). This may seem self-evident, but it would not be the first time a

literary translation inexplicably tampers with the source text's layout and punctuation, often with disastrous consequences.

## 5.2. Cartoons

### Cartoon strips

Cartoon strips are blends of images and text. They appeared for the first time by the late 19th century in North America. Cartoons and comic strips have been developing since then to become artistic and cultural depictions of reality in their own right. Given the conciseness (sometime cryptic) of the linguistic component in cartoons —i.e.: the captions— as well as the fact that they often to very specific cultural, national and political contexts, their translation can prove quite difficult. The translation of these cartoons is very complicated and may well involve adaptations around culture-bound allusions, idiomatic expressions and wordplay (Cabrerizo 144). Additional challenges that could be profitably dealt with in another graduation paper are for example the translation of onomatopoeia in comic strips, the space limitations, the interaction with the non-verbal elements, etc.

Having said that, there is also a subtype of cartoons that deploy a more universal, timeless type of humour: they generally provide an ironical glance on human nature, for example or simply revolve around situations that are not connected with breaking news or current political affairs that may be too domestic or topical for humour to survive in translation. Within this category, the understatement is often used to the point of constituting a popular subgenre in the Anglo-Saxon world. It is to this variety that we shall briefly turn for our second set of illustrations drawn from the following two websites: *Jantoo.com* and *Cartoonstock.com*<sup>13</sup>. The (unpublished) Spanish translations that we shall provide were once again produced as didactic materials in the context of a workshop on the translation of humour.<sup>14</sup>

Luckily for us, T. S. Young (1986) provides a humour translation checklist (specifically for cartoons) that we have found helpful in organising our ideas about the

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<sup>13</sup> See above, footnotes 4 and 5.

<sup>14</sup> See above, footnote 12.

translation of this text-type against the general backdrop of irony and understatement. This checklist provides the frame of reference for any specimen of graphic humour and includes both external and internal factors that have a bearing on the passage from the ST into the TT:

### **External Factors**

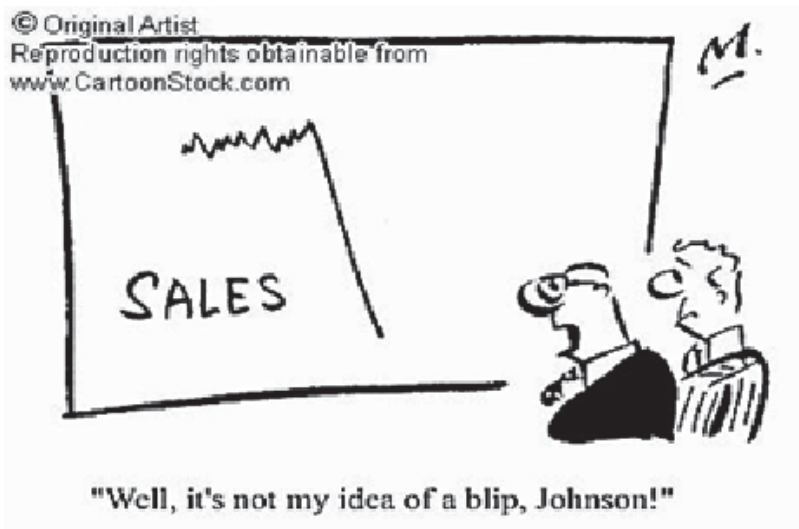
- Time Frame Considerations (TFC)
- Social Class and Educational Considerations (SEC)
- Cultural Awareness Decisions (CAD)
- Publication Background Information (PBI)

### **Internal Factors:**

- Language (LA)
- Narrative Strategy (NS)
- Target (TA)
- Situation (SI)
- Logical Mechanism (LM)
- Script Opposition (SO)

Let us have a close up of a few examples from the above-mentioned corpus:

1.



**SUGGESTED TRANSLATION: “¿Ha dicho usted ‘un pequeño bache’, Quintanilla?”**

### **External Factors**

- Time Frame Considerations (TFC): The scene could be read as a timeless, context-free narrative or it may reflect a recent or contemporary financial downturn or a period of losses in a particular company or business sector. Whichever way, it may be translated as a relatively universal piece of irony/understatement.
- Social Class and Educational Considerations (SEC): All references may appeal to the general public, notwithstanding some additional sense of complicity with people in the business sector, both employers and employees. While the caption does not contain specialized or learned allusions or language, the sense of humour that it projects is best suited to an educated readership capable of tuning up with the mild kind of irony that the piece displays.
- Cultural Awareness Decisions (CAD): The adaptation of the surname ‘Johnson’ as Spanish ‘Quintanilla’ may somehow enhance the comic effect in ways that are difficult to explain. While transposing the whole scene to a Spanish-speaking setting, thus making it less foreign and more domestic (and possibly breaking

down cultural barriers in the transmission of humour), the choice of a particular Spanish surname ending in a diminutive could have a specifically comic potential that is hard to pin down, but which audiences may relate to.<sup>15</sup>

- Publication Background Information (PBI): The SL readership is unknown and the translation is fairly straightforward, yet with that wink of complicity for a potential Spanish audience. The understatement is unquestionable, both in the ST and in the TT.

### **Internal Factors:**

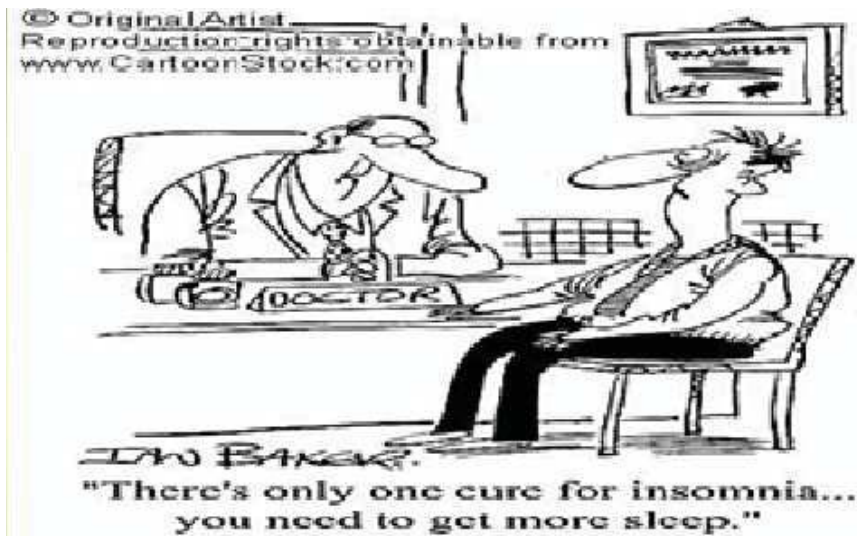
- Language (LA): There is meiosis ('blip' for a crash-down), which travels well into the TL by choosing a similarly colloquial term. Notice again the choice of a proper name which, contrary to standard usage in communicative and even literary translation, replaces the TL designation.
- Narrative Strategy (NS): Elliptically presented —as is often the case with this kind of format— the referential framework of the embryonic story hinted at in the cartoon does not contain any cultural component. It matches perfectly the target culture and language.
- Target (TA): Data not available, but see above “Social Class and Educational Considerations”.
- Situation (SI): Economic recession. Equivalent situation existing in potential Target Culture (Spanish).
- Logical Mechanism (LM): Transparent in both ST and TT. Fully equivalent.
- Script Opposition (SO): The contradiction/incongruity between reality as perceived by readers (visually, through the chart) and the extremely understated verbalization of it by one of the characters is perfectly available in the target language.

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<sup>15</sup> 'Quintanilla' is the name of a couple of comical characters, both played by José Luis López Vázquez, in Luis García Berlanga's filmography. See <http://www.miradas.net/2007/n61/estudio/articulo5.html>



2.



**SUGGESTED TRANSLATION: ‘Solo hay una forma de curar el sueño...**

**Tiene usted que dormir más.’**

### **External Factors**

- Time Frame Considerations (TFC): The non-verbal component (which obviously requires no translation) makes it clear that the scene is a physician’s office where a long sleepless patient is being examined.
- Social Class and Educational Considerations (SEC): Same as in the previous example. The Spanish more formal mode of address (*usted*) seems to be in order here: a decision that in this case is specific to the TL.
- Cultural Awareness Decisions (CAD): The setting (the doctor’s office) does not present any item that may hamper cultural equivalence. If anything, the word “doctor” (otherwise fairly transparent for a Spanish audience) could possibly be replaced by the acronym Dr + a Spanish proper name, so as to enhance identification with a Spanish potential readership).
- Publication Background Information (PBI): Target readership hypothetical: Spanish readers of a national or local daily.

**Internal Factors:**

- Language (LA): No special difficulties in translation, both as regards vocabulary or sentence structure. Punctuation can likewise be preserved (which is not always the case: if the caption had included a dash instead of dots, careless handling of that feature could have resulted in a typographic Anglicism).
- Narrative Strategy (NS): The ‘story’s’ setting is practically universal and travels unhampered into the TL. Both in English and in Spanish there are many jokes and anecdotes that take place in the course of a visit to a doctor and inside the doctor’s surgery. Simply by faithfully and idiomatically translating the caption, the elided parts in the (short) narrative fall in place.
- Target (TA): Again data not available. Possibly targeted at the general public with an average level of education that would make them responsive to this kind of mild, elegant humour. (People who suffer insomnia may have additional reasons to relate to the humour embodied in this cartoon!).
- Situation (SI): No detectable gaps or conflicts between SL and TL cultures.
- Logical Mechanism (LM): The particular type of understatement encapsulated in this cartoon rests on the principle of ‘stating the obvious’. A circular argument or tautology that falls short of any performative consequence and is nevertheless uttered as if was significant truth. 100% translatable.
- Script Opposition (SO): Dependent on the statement of the obvious, and humorously pointing at the professional’s failure to provide any real help, the ironical incongruity of the joke as well as the clues that allow a perceptive reader to bring sense to what may otherwise appear as a contradictory statement are fully available in Spanish by producing what is actually a pretty literal translation.

3.



**SUGGESTED TRANSLATION: ‘Vamos a tener que agrandarle un poquito la cintura, señor.’**

### External Factors

- Time Frame Considerations (TFC): Victorian (clearly ‘English’) setting that precludes cultural adaptations or too idiomatic or contemporary renderings). The sample has the additional consideration of being a historical document: the author is the reputed cartoonist John Leech (1817-1864).
- Social Class and Educational Considerations (SEC): Same as above, perhaps demanding an awareness of the social setting depicted in the cartoon. Humour here is quite nuanced and mild, which excludes an audience keen on the type of humour to guffaw at.

- Cultural Awareness Decisions (CAD): For the translator it requires awareness of traditional forms of address and social differences which may be reflected in speech.
- Publication Background Information (PBI): The target is unknown and the translation is straightforward.

### **Internal Factors:**

- Language (LA): The word ‘trifle’ has interesting (formal, old-fashioned) idiomatic connotations. While the suggested translation is not particularly literal, the Spanish diminutive may possibly provide a similarly colourful equivalence and an apt way of conveying the obvious understatement.
- Narrative Strategy (NS): The Victorian setting of the micro-narrative encapsulated in this cartoon does not require any special treatment. The linguistic component prevails and in this case the piece of dialogue embodied by the caption has been rendered somewhat more freely than in the previous example, making the narrative situation a little bit more explicit than in the original. Pragmatically, however, the equivalence is —we believe— successfully attained.
- Target (TA): Victorian readers. Conversely, contemporary readers, also in languages other than English, with an interest in Victorian caricature.
- Situation (SI): Dated, but with enough of a universal appeal to travel well in translation.
- Logical Mechanism (LM): No faulty or perverse logic. Clearly understating the obvious is the key factor and the contradiction between the picture and the caption is the main source of irony. The Spanish diminutive, once again, is quite functional in this context.
- Script Opposition (SO): Between the verbal and the visual evidence.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the translation of verbal humour, irony and understatement is a complicated, but certainly feasible task that requires great subtlety by the translator. Theoretical models and concepts related to humour translation —like the ones mentioned in the first part of our paper— provide us with revealing insights into these aspects, while the examination of individual cases (perhaps with the help of checklists like the one used in the previous section) can certainly enrich our understanding of the problem in more practical ways.

Despite its cultural and idiosyncratic character, the understatement is a universal feature of discourse (and a literary device) that remains largely translatable. Insofar as it is a subtype of irony, it has to be seen as embedded in a communicative, pragmatic context. Cultural factors may interfere with the job of the translator, and indeed a sound cultural awareness is as usual a must for the competent professional of translation faced with rephrasing ironical texts into a second language, but at least in the examples that we have approached, no drastic recontextualisation was required for the translation to attain standards of equivalence and acceptability, and the purely interlinguistic operations largely steered the process.

A literal enough but also sensitive, more fully semantic translation seems to be the general strategy of choice, even though occasionally a touch of the idiomatic or colourful, if handled with care, may enrich the comic effect without veering into the picturesque or the bizarre, as I think our examples were able to prove.

There may indeed be deficits in transposing the typically Anglo-Saxon comic restraint of the understatement, but such gaps can be largely bridged by the translators' skills and craft in the understanding that 'the art of translating humour is, ultimately, a gift rather than a science (Annemarie van Limpt 63).

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