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'Harry Potter is funny' - The tricky task of translating humour and character voices into Spanish

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INTRODUCTION[1]

In 2003 the highlight of the International Federation of Translators conference was their UNESCO Literary Translators Committee Round Table devoted to the translators of J.K. Rowling's work as contributors to her popularity. This round table raised several issues, in particular cultural boundaries and contractual constraints set by Warner Bros. A major concern seemed to be the pressure for speed translation. The phenomenon of online translation has become a threat for publishing companies. Pirate translations are produced much faster, as they are done by several unqualified translators. Their quality often leaves a lot to be desired, but a text offered as a translation is readily acknowledged as accurate (Toury, 1995: 26). Harry Potter (hereafter HP) fans are eager to read the new book and the abundance of these online translations has made readers aware of the process of translation and critical of the translator's decisions, as Klaus Fritz,[2] the German translator, has declared. Máire Nic Mhaoláin, the Irish translator, explained when I interviewed her: 'An older girl from secondary school […] was very positive but she did have a few negative points […]. She didn't like the fact that Hagrid spoke perfect grammatical Irish'.

Publishing companies are in a hurry from the publication date of the original. In the case of co-official languages, such as Catalan, the speed needs to be doubled because their translation competes with the original as well as the Spanish versions. All this translates into tighter deadlines, which do not allow the analysis that a literary translation entails.

My own translation started as a pirate one. My nephew was eager to read the fifth book and I translated some chapters for him. The trigger for this research was my nephew's comment about the official translation: 'Harry Potter is funny, but this book is boring'. I decided to carry out a comparison between my version and the official one in order to explain how exactly the humour had been lost. I looked for the translators' interviews to verify if they had the same problem with humour. The only reference I found to Gemma Rovira Ortega (the Spanish translator) is an article in which she says that she 'did not want the reader to notice the change in translator in the fifth book'.[3] The previous three Spanish books had been translated by a team of two translators and the first book by a single translator, who collaborated later in the following books.

HP translators do not go into detail about the treatment of humour in their translations. They gloss over the techniques used to translate the way in which the characters speak. Fries Gedin has commented on her difficulty with anagrams, funny names and dialect, especially for the character of Hagrid. In our interview Sumalee Bumroongsook, the Thai translator, claimed that humour is untranslatable.

In addition, there was a tendency by translators to overlook the comic aspects of the books. Some of J.K. Rowling's critics acknowledge the need to explore the issue of humour in her novels (Granger, 2002: 317). Rowling explained in an interview that she really wrote it entirely for *herself*; it is *her* quirky sense of humour in the book Talking about how the idea came to mind, she declared that she 'could just see a lot of comic potential in the idea that wizards walk among us and that we are foolishly blind to the fact that the reason that we keep losing our car keys is that wizards are bewitching them for fun'. Elsewhere, she has been quoted as 'someone who collects funny names'.[4] There is much more to the books than just humour, but her declarations prove that humour is a conscious and essential element of her novels.

This article focuses mainly on the issues of the translation of humour in Chapter 4 of *The Order of the Phoenix* by comparing the Spanish translation by Gemma Rovira Ortega with my own. It throws some light on the issues of translatability and highlights the importance of analysis for the translation of literary texts and the influence of professional concerns.

Oring states that 'dialogue seems a particularly suitable mode for joke punch lines' (1992: 92). Chapter 4 in *The Order of the Phoenix* is full of dialogue and humour. Characterisation depends on the comic elements that the characters use throughout the series (Nash, 1985: 70). Based on a close analysis of this chapter, the main obstacles to translation, in addition to the translation of humour, seemed to be the use of repetition and recurrence; the purpose of riddles and mysteries; the list of invented terms; word choice – or avoidance; and the use of linguistic variation.

Both humour and mystery solving are based on the concept of shared knowledge (Nash, 1985: 9). The use of repetition and recurrence strengthens this bond. In most cases in J.K. Rowling's books this shared knowledge is intrinsic to the world that she has created. The presence of riddles that let the reader guess what is actually happening through a 'careful arrangement of well-timed emphasis' typical of the structure of jokes (Nash, 1985: 25) and 'breaking the normal expectations of language use' (Ross, 1998: 3) reinforce the bond between the reader and the writer. This bond is the basis of the effectiveness of humour.

The closer the bond between the reader and the writer, the more predictable the response can be. Ross (1998: 2) suggests that 'the response is an important factor in counting something as humorous'. According to Nida, this response depends on the decoding ability (2001: 132). Nida and Taber's principle of equivalent effect states that the response of the receptor to the target text (hereafter TT) 'must be compared with the way in which the original receptors presumably reacted to the message in its original setting' (Nida and Taber, 1969: 1).

Rovira's target audience varies not only in terms of geographical and cultural background but also age, sex, social class, education, profession and religion. The source text (hereafter ST) audience reflects the same variation. There is no unified response in either source or target reader group. As a translator for my nephew the effect of most of my words could be predictable, but the professional translator needs to rely on the language resources 'to create wit, amusement and laughter' (Nash, 1985: 1) and not only on presumed equivalent effect. However, the effect of humour is the first hint for the translator to pay attention to a comic element. In this way, 'translators always play a double role' (Nida, 1981: 20). As a reader, the translator relies on the effects of the words on him or her. As a writer, s/he tries to reproduce it. The translator is receiver and sender at the same time and has to understand the text in order to understand the language resources and the shared knowledge required to perceive the jokes, and then has to make tdecisions as to how to re-create them in the target language.

Let us now turn to the analysis of the sources of humour and linguistic variation in this chapter. There are two important things to bear in mind when dealing with the fundamental dialogic form. First, we have the personifications of humour in the series: Fred and George Weasley. Secondly, the dialogue is structured like a joke. Nida points out that in describing meaning it is crucial to differentiate between two elements: the form and the content (1981: 6). My classification of the meaning of jokes follows this criterion: 1) Content-dependent and 2) Form-dependent.

1. CONTENT-DEPENDENT

1.1. Classic Visual Humour

J.K. Rowling uses images of sheer bedlam from cartoons twice in this chapter. They are based on the superiority theory: 'there is an urge to laugh at the downfall of another' (Ross, 1998: 53). They do not constitute a challenge to the translator.

1.2. Oddity: the principle of incongruity

Osgood defined humour as based on the principle of incongruity (1971: 4). This theory focuses on the element of surprise, produced by the contradiction between language and meaning or facts about the real world (Ross, 1998: 32).

> 'The words tumbling over one another'
> > (PA, Pilar Alderete) Las palabras se le tropezaban las unas con las otras como con prisa
> > (GRO, Gemma Rovira Ortega) Las palabras salieron atropelladamente de su boca

There is no sense of incongruity in Rovira's sentence because 'salir atropelladamente' is a common collocation in Spanish. My translation tries to create a funny image through the personification of 'words'.

2. FORM-DEPENDENT

2.1. Classic British Humour

Humour is culture-specific. Although transliteration is possible, it is not necessarily as meaningful as substitution for the natural equivalent (Chiaro, 1992: 87). Among characteristic British comic strategies are:

2.1.1. Overstatement

> 'Hermione was going spare'
> > PA: Hermione se estaba pasando de rosca
> > GRO: Hermione estaba volviéndose loca

This form of humour is less challenging to translate because colloquial Spanish exploits the use of hyperbole. My translation tends to use more colloquiallism, as is consistent with the character of Ron, who utters this sentence.

2.1.2. Understatement

> 'She's been in a right state – said Ron'
> > PA: Ha estado estupenda – dijo Ron
> > GRO: Estaba muy enfadada - explicó Ron

In this example Rovira tones down the humour in the sentence because Spanish does not use understatement as frequently as English.

2.2. Metafictional humour

Jokes can be based on another text to establish a divergent relationship between the joke and the original. In the pattern of jokes, there is a zonal sequence and a point of reference (Nash, 1985: 172). The joke reaches its summit in the punch line. The last sentence in this chapter works as a punch line, marked by its isolation and change of rhythm (Nash, 1985: 172).

> '"Hello Harry', he said grimly, 'I see you've met my mother'"
>> PA: Hola, Harry - dijo sombrío - Veo que ya has conocido a mi madre
>> GRO: - Hola, Harry – lo saludó con gravedad - Veo que ya has conocido a mi madre

2.3. Humour in Characterisation
Nida acknowledges that correspondence in terms of register or style is one of the challenges in translation (in Mayoral, 1999: 47). He distinguishes five levels of stylistic variation: 1. ritual, 2. formal, 3. informal, 4. colloquial and 5. private (Nida, 1996: 14). In Rowling's works, many different styles are used in terms of narration and characterisation.

2.3.1. Description
The ways in which the characters are described contribute to mould their personalities.

> 'He thought he heard someone, who was lurking out of sight, snigger'
>> PA: tuvo la sensación de oír a alguien al acecho, riéndose a escondidas.
>> GRO: le pareció oír a alguien que, escondido, reía por lo bajo.

Rovira has kept the structure of the source text with the adjectival clause in front of the verb. My translation probably foregrounds the meaning of 'lurking' for 'acecho' to clarify that this 'someone' is probably Kreacher, a house elf, making the TT clearer than the ST.

2.3.2. Speech
In this chapter the translation of individual speech is more important than ever, due to the fact that Rowling omits the reference to the subject who utters the words at several points in the dialogue. Her characters mainly acquire their distinctive features by the way they speak.

Formal vs Colloquial
The juxtaposition of these different registers, called bathos (Ross, 1998: 44), needs to be acknowledged in the translation of this chapter, because it gives the narrative a distinctive style and it aids in distinguishing between the different characters.

> 'CAN'T'VE WANTED TO THAT MUCH, CAN YOU?'
>> PA: ¡¡Muchísimo!! ¡¡ ¿no?!!
>> GRO: NO CREO QUE ESO OS PREOCUPARA MUCHO

In this example, the ST spelling is substandard. This gives the narrative a realistic effect. Rovira's translation lacks these colloquial connotations. My translation attempts to emphasize the impact of Harry's retort.

> 'I SUPPOSE YOU'VE BEEN HAVING A REAL LAUGH, HAVEN'T YOU'
>> PA: ¡¡¡ Supongo que os habréis estado echando unas risas ¿no?!!!
>> GRO: SUPONGO QUE OS HABRÉIS REÍDO DE LO LINDO

In this instance the colloquial feel of this conversation is lost in Rovira's translation. She uses the phrase 'reírse de lo lindo', which sounds unusual for Harry's speech.

Characterisation: Harry

> 'Nicking papers out of bins'
>> PA: mangando periódicos de los cubos de basura
>> GRO: robando periódicos de los cubos de basura

Given that colloquialisms are by and large circumscribed by geographic location, Nida advises against using a 'democratic' method in which words from different dialects are put together or standardising every informal item in the text (1981: 43). My choice of 'mangar' is consistent with the casual register that Harry is using throughout his rant.

Characterisation: Hermione

Hermione uses a slightly more formal style. The humour in this case springs from the fact that it often precludes a respondent. In this chapter Rowling places Harry on the spot and Hermione is the unintentional 'joker'.

> 'Well, you'd need to read it cover to cover to pick it up but they – um - mention you a couple of times a week'
>> PA: Bien, tendrías que leerlo de la primera página a la última para encontrarlo, pero ellos… em… ellos te mencionan un par de veces a la semana
>> GRO: - Bueno, tendrías que haberlo leído de cabo a rabo para pillarlo, pero... Bueno, el caso es que te mencionan un par de veces por semana

Hermione uses less formal speech in this example in an attempt to reduce the painful effect of her words on Harry. My translation does not use a colloquialism like 'pillar', because I have deemed it more appropriate for the Weasleys.

Characterisation: The Weasleys, Ron, Fred and George and Ginny.

Ron has a unique style. Hatim and Mason argue for the need to translate idiolects, since they reflect personal choice of dialect and contain sociocultural meaning (Mayoral, 1999: 72). Ron uses more slang and can be characterised by his tendency to repeat phrases such as 'wicked' and 'bloody hell'. One of these phrases is

> 'Don't be thick'
>> PA: No seas burro
>> GRO) No seas idiota

The issue with these clichés in Ron's speech is the fact that as translators we have to keep repeating them in the book and throughout the series. Ron's character often loses his unique personality in translation.

> 'Mum found out and went berserk'
>> PA: Mi madre las pilló y se subía por las paredes
>> GRO: Mamá nos descubrió y se puso hecha una fiera

My translation uses 'subirse por las paredes' to convey the meaning of 'berserk' for two main reasons. First, it is a colloquial idiom used when someone is angry or nervous. Secondly, it produces a comic effect. Due to the

suspension of disbelief that the reader subscribes to while in the Wizarding World, Mrs. Weasley might as well literally be 'up the walls'.

> 'Keeping tabs on them, you know'
>> PA: siguiéndoles los pasos, y eso …
>> GRO: están siguiendo a conocidos mortífagos, vigilándolos..

Rovira omits tags and gap-fillers, which convey the conversational feeling of this text.

> 'Said Ron, with a look of dawning comprehension'
>> PA: con una mirada de haberse desayunado justo en ese momento.
>> GRO: como si acabara de comprenderlo.

My translation uses a very local colloquialism: 'desayunarse'. The unusual reflexive verb conveys the meaning of sudden realization of an obvious idea, together with the fact that there is a reference to early morning, 'breakfast' and 'dawning' as in the ST.

Ron's colloquial speech abuses the word 'mate'. In the first case Rovira prefers the neutral use of the proper name. My translation uses the colloquialism 'tío'.

> 'We did, mate – said Ron'
>> PA: Dijo Ron- Lo hicimos, tío
>> GRO: Contestó Ron -Se lo dijimos, Harry

Fred and George represent a traditional duet of jokers. In their case humour also represents a mode of attack and a line of defence (Nash, 1985: 1). They are representative of the 'three-actor' framework, a commonplace in comedy. The trio - including the person who tells the joke, the addressee and the victim of the joke - have been shaped in dyadic traditions, such as Laurel and Hardy, through the use of sarcasm and boasting, in which I have used a cultural equivalent:

> 'With distinction'
>> PA: Matrícula de honor
>> GRO: Con muy buena nota

GRO chooses a neutral explanation of the phrase, because it is unlikely that the different school systems in the Spanish American world use the same grade system.

Their speech is also full of colloquialisms, when dealing with a serious matter:

> 'Percy ought to have realized Crouch was off his rocker […] But you know Percy, Crouch left him in charge, he wasn't going to complain'
>> PA: Percy tendría que haberse dado cuenta de que Crouch estaba de remate […] Pero ya sabes cómo es Percy. Crouch le dejó al cargo, no iba a ir a quejarse...
>> GRO: Percy debería haberse dado cuenta de que Crouch estaba chiflado […] Pero ya conoces a Percy: Crouch lo había dejado al mando, y él no iba a protestar.

The colloquialisms in my translation reinforce the conversational rhythm. The omission of 'loco' in the collocation 'loco de remate' and the addition of 'ir' in 'iba a ir' are examples of creative colloquialism.

They use mockery as well:

'She's got a job at Gringotts to eemprove 'er Eeenglish'
>
> PA: Consiguió un trabajo en Gringotts para mejogag su anglées
>
> GRO: Ha aceptado un empleo en Gringotts para << pegfeccionag>> su inglés

Fred is mocking the French accent of his eldest brother's girl-friend. Rovira decided to base the mockery on one word: 'improve'. In the ST the joke extends to three words. I decided to play with all three words.

Ginny's style is intimate and colloquial, slightly imitating her brothers' speech. I have added colloquialisms to reflect the family's speech.

> 'It's a no-go with the Extendable Ears, she's gone and put an Imperturbable Charm on the kitchen door'
>
> PA: No vais a llegar a ningún sitio con las orejas extensibles, ha ido, y ¡hala!, ha puesto un encantamiento impasibilizador en la puerta de la cocina.
>
> GRO: No vais a conseguir nada con las orejas extensibles. Mamá le ha hecho un encantamiento de impasibilidad a la puerta de la cocina.

CONCLUSIONS

This analysis of the differences between Rovira's translation and my own has led me to question the purpose of humour and the possibility of translating it. The presupposition that the HP books belong to the genre of children's literature, even though the statistics show that 48% of her readers are over 13 years of age, has guided translator's decisions. Translated children's literature in Spanish tends to use a fossilised style, full of clichés and 'comic strip' artificial language.

This research has led me to conclusions about the role of humour in the process and product of translation. In terms of the process, humour, perhaps more than any other narrative genre, is located in the present time and place and typically develops in dialogue in order to create a surrounding present chronotope in which the reader becomes, in some sense, another character. As Ross explains, 'a joke is something that is happening to the hearer at the moment of telling' (Ross, 1998: 92). In this way, Rowling uses humour in order to involve the reader in the narrative. She also uses colloquial speech to develop the bond between reader and writer and the characters that she has created.

In terms of product, readers respond to the translated text depending on the effect that this text has on them. This idea is related to Nida's principle of equivalent effect. The principle of equivalent effect is impossible to measure in terms of the official translation because the audience varies in terms of country, age and education, but it is still essential for the translation of humour. Nida resolves the question of immeasurability by defining the task of the translator as the 'reproduction of the meaning as understood by the (ST) writer' (Nida and Taber, 1969: 8). This fact is the basis of complaints voiced by several translators about the lack of help on the part of Rowling and the breeding ground for intentional fallacies. The author's understanding of the book can only be ascertained by public statements.

Contradictorily, Nida and Taber believe that absolute communication is unattainable and no two people may ever 'understand words in exactly the same manner' (1969: 4). My analysis has proved that the principle of equivalent effect is useful as a tool for the surveying of the ST, in terms of the translator as an 'especial' reader. The effect of the text is subjective and therefore different for every reader but, as Newmark states in his commentaries, 'a sense of humour is individual as well as universal and/or cultural' (1995: 18). The effect of humour works as a pointer for the translator to analyse how the effect has been achieved in the text through the language resources available to create laughter (Nash, 1985: 1). It is important for the translator to realise that humour is 'the manipulation of language and logic' (Nash, 1985: 110), systems that also participate in the universal and as a result, are perfectly translatable (Newmark, 1995: 22). This study shows that humour depends significantly on

the context and the amount of shared knowledge. This is the reason why humour is culturally bound. Translators need to understand these linguistic strategies and the amount of shared knowledge required, and to use the flexibility of language to translate it into the target language through similar techniques.

The next challenge humour poses to the translator is its poetic function. The meaning of humour is bound up in content and form. The more form-bound a joke is, according to Nida, the more formal is the necessary equivalence; but the more content-bound, the more dynamic (1964: 43). In terms of content, Rovira's translation tends to simplify the incongruity of the images and collocations. Her translation is more explanatory. Consequently, it assists in the narration of the story and the amount of shared knowledge required is smaller. This weakens the bond between reader, writer and characters. My translation attempts to reproduce the unusual arrangement of elements in creative language and to enhance the reader's understanding ability.

This article has also focused on the way Rowling exploits linguistic variation for comic effect and characterisation. The social code switching in the ST forces the translator to choose a geographical variety in order to translate these formal/informal contrasts. Nida and Taber (1969: 199) argue for contextual consistency. In other words, translating the source language by the target language which best matches each context. The possibility of editing different versions in the Spanish spoken in different countries would not be very beneficial for the translator because there would be internal competition within one language, which would translate into tighter deadlines. The wealth of linguistic variation and word choice in Rowling's narrative may lead to a break with translating conventions, such as Máire Nic Mháolain's use of words that do not appear in dictionaries but which are currently used.

As a writer, the translator is a speaker of his/her own variety. S/he might be educated enough to be able to work with diverse social registers, but it is unlikely s/he would be able to move along the geographical continuum of language varieties. The translation of sociolect in Rowling's texts is essential in terms of content and character identity. Without this variation, there are no individual characters; without individual characters, there is no fictional world; without a fictional world, there is no sense at a textual level. Here lies the danger of sense-for-sense translation at the level of sentence –and book!-, especially in dialogue. Nida (1997: 105) states that content must be preserved at any cost. The intrinsic relation between form and content in humour and idiolect renders form equally important since it also carries essential meaning, which can only be understood through a time-consuming process of analysis. The speed required of HP translators needs to be reviewed in view of this need for analysis. Teams of translators engaging in analysis, composition and editing could speed up the process; however, the dangers of the inconsistency that this teamwork could lead to should be solved by the coordination of efforts and tools such as translation memories recording the terminology and colloquialisms previously used in other books.

This study argues against the impossibility of translating humour. As Nida and Taber affirm, if our goal is the 'exact mirroring of discrete items', then translation is definitely impossible (1969: 98). However, if we want to find an explanation in functional terms, translation – or transformation - is quite possible (1969: 99). In this sense, creativity, a good command of linguistic resources and an awareness of the flexibility of language are the best allies for the translation of humour.

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For a complete list of the articles on the web used in this article see the *Vida Hispánica* page of the ALL website: **http://www.all-languages.org.uk/publications/journals**.

NOTES

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[2] See **http://german.about.com/library/weekly/aa011112a.htm//**.

[3] As note 2.

[4] See **http://www.angelfire.com/mi3/cookarama/bbcintaug99.html//**.