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## The translation of onomatopoeias in comics: linguistic and pedagogical implications

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The present paper aims to compare and analyse three versions of Garfield comic strips, the original and two different translations into Spanish (from the United States, Spain and Argentina, respectively). More specifically this case study focuses on the treatment of onomatopoeias and interjections in the translations, with the purpose of examining the degree of influence of culture and context in the different linguistic equivalents. Finally, some pedagogical implications of the use of comic strips in the foreign language classroom are also discussed.

**Keywords:** comic, strip, onomatopoeia, interjection, translation, *Garfield*

### 1. Introduction

When reading comics, readers face a written show, a stage in which characters appear and leave while telling their own story. Image, text, colour, letter font, and other symbols are all part of the *atrezzo* (i.e. the set of adornments and stylistic devices decorating the cartoon). For this reason, readers must also be aware of the meaning of non-verbal signs as these are part of the story. In the case of comic translators, the respect for this *atrezzo* may imply a reformulation of the original language in order to adapt it to the target context. The main features to take into account in a comic contrastive study are linguistic and cultural. In this way, not only the comic linguistic codes are analysed but also the cultural context in which it is read. Onomatopoeias and interjections are interesting cartoon elements placed between the linguistic and the cultural spheres, sharing features of both and representing the language and culture of the linguistic system they belong to (Taitz et al. 2018).

Comic stories offer a particularly relevant source of onomatopoeias, idioms and interjections that can be compiled and analysed. Up to now, research on this field has focused

on a linguistic and translation approach, comparing source vs. target texts on phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic bases. The aim of this article is to present a different approach to these comic elements, focusing on their etymological function within a language. Secondly, their different contexts will be analysed as well as their similarities. Finally, considering them as cultural mediators between two languages, some pedagogical implications are also suggested.

Steven Pinker (1994: 152) rejected onomatopoeias as worthy of linguistic analysis when he defined them as elements “of no help, because they are as conventional as any other word sound”. But at the same time, he raised them up to the level of word category finding a feature of *conventionality* in them. Evidence shows that they carry semantic features that are interesting to analyse and compare with interjections and the way both are translated. In this analysis, interjections are all those expressions uttered or thought by a living entity – animals and human beings – in which some positive or negative feeling is implied. On the contrary, onomatopoeias do not show that emotive content, but are only a reflection of a noise. In this article, selected *Garfield* comic strips are the research object.

## 2. Object of research

Jim Davis has created the most special cat within the comic genre. The fact that I have chosen cartoon strips for this study is due to their medium extension, something suitable for the average lesson time. They are not long stories and teachers can change their length according to the students’ needs and timing. In this case, I compare original *Garfield* strips (Davis 1997) with two Spanish translations from Spain and Argentina (Davis 2002, 2007). A comic is full of iconic, literary and narrative components. As Barrero defines it, “a comic is a verbal-iconic language based on sequence and narrative ellipsis” (2002). To this definition I should add that there is a special relationship of simultaneity between cartoon words and images, though in some cases texts precede image and vice versa. In the same way, laws of proportions and perceptions play a crucial role in comic design and reading. According to Pantaleo (2018), comic design rules are responsible for size configuration, visual effects, scenic composition (volumes, space and time), information codification, vertical and horizontal lines, concave and convex forms, and other types of lines that compose the image. Colour choice also captures certain emotions in the image (cold colours, warm colours, primary/secondary colours), and the placement of figures throughout the comic space helps to separate crucial information from unnecessary items in the same space.

When reading a narrative passage, the reader is imagining where the action takes place, characters’ physical appearance, their placement on the scene, and even their narrative voices. In the case of comic reading, due to the illustrations, all readers receive the same amount of visual information that depicts the story as a starting point. However, not all readers perceive comic stories in the same way or with the same attitude; as Bohn-Gettler et al. (2018) state, reading processes and preferences play a role here, and elements such as interjections and onomatopoeias help to contextualise the story.

Focusing on *Garfield* and his creator, we can say that comic strips are a good opportunity to know both the author who writes them and the society they try to reflect. This character is a good instrument to teach English as a second/foreign language because it represents Anglo-Saxon culture as well as the standard version of this language. The author, Jim Davis, is North American and that is reflected in word spellings and idioms, which can be used in a language classroom for comparative studies of different English varieties and usages.

Jim Davis's humour creates a very strong link between image and text, so that one could not exist without the other; both are complementary in most cases, though there are some strips in which readers cannot find any linguistic elements apart from onomatopoeias and interjections. Humour creation can take place at different levels: linguistic, graphic and a combination of the two (Kellner & Benedek 2017). In these strips, divided into three steps, conflicts are often solved out in the second picture, the last one being an afterthought. Davis does not allow freedom of interpretation, but he guides readers through the reading process until they get the gist of the story that makes them laugh.

This paper, in the form of a case study, tries to offer a different vision of the linguistic elements and graphic resources that readers can find in comics, focusing on these elements' functions in language. I will analyse in which contexts they occur, their differences and the importance of making them part of the curriculum in foreign language teaching, since they are not only linguistic issues but also cultural instances that contribute to differences among languages. I would like to compare the translations of interjections and onomatopoeias with the aim of contrasting the cultural and emotional load in them, if any.

Since most of *Garfield's* characters are animals, I would take as interjections all those expressions which are thought and pronounced by any living entity (animal or human). In opposition to onomatopoeias, interjections always show some feelings involved. After this contrastive study between the English, Spanish and Argentinean versions of the comic, it seems that there is a coincidence between Spanish and English onomatopoeias, and a separation from the Hispano American translation. Regarding characters' interjections, there is a parallelism between the Spanish and the Hispano American versions, which implies a link between interjections and language culture. Interjections uttered by the characters show more differences among the different versions than onomatopoeias made by noises or sounds. Consequently, the former are part of a specific culture and society, while the latter are more standardised (Hinton et al. 2006).

This relationship of mutual influence between language and culture is reflected in the so-called Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Regier & Xu 2017): expletive expressions, apparently far from all grammatical conventions, carry strong emotional and cultural information. If this assumption is made regarding foreign language teaching, this evidence shows that in order to learn a language, students must learn about its culture too. Learners have to comprehend that culture is a tool that actually influences every language.

One of the key features in Jim Davis's cartoons (1997, 2002, 2007) is the difference in form between animals' and other characters' dialogue. *Garfield's* and other animals' comments are represented as thoughts rather than as speech, being their word bubbles

different from, for example, Jon, the human protagonist. Garfield does not utter words but he thinks them instead, therefore, there is not a direct verbal communication between the cat and his owner. Garfield can hear and understand what his friend says, but the latter reacts according to the cat's gestures and actions, without actually hearing his thoughts. This phenomenon gives Garfield a superiority that can be paralleled to the one omniscient narrators have in prose writings. In the case of interjections and onomatopoeias, and confirming the aforementioned hypothesis, the former contain linguistic information, and consequently are treated as normal dialogue. Onomatopoeias, as representations of noise, are heard by all characters.

### 3. Comparative methods

From all *Garfield* comics edited by Jim Davis, I have made a selection of strips from the works *Garfield Thinks Big* (1997) and its corresponding Argentinean translation *Garfield piensa en grande* (2002). At the same time, both have been contrasted with the versions published in Spain (2007), which was published in the form of a 2008 calendar. In this section, I present the comparative analysis of the three versions mentioned above. The English version goes first, followed by the strip edited in Spain; the third one corresponds to the Argentinean translation. Linguistic differences (phonological, orthographic and semantic features) and cultural characteristics are the elements this contrastive study is focused on.

In these first strips there are two types of expletive elements: on the one hand, a word that represents the sound of the spider falling down from above; on the other hand, those ones which refer to the characters' exclamative interjections. In this case, there is no distinction among onomatopoeias in the three translations. However, interjections are translated differently, depending on the language: "Who!" (English version), "¡Uauh!" (Spanish version) and "¡Uhhh!" (Argentinean strip). In the three strips, that expression refers to a certain degree of euphoria or to an emotional state – after a party in this case – and the translator has decided to make a minimal adaptation.



Picture 1. English version (Davis 1997: 50)



Picture 2. Spanish version (Davis 2007: 9)



Picture 3. Argentinian version (Davis 2002: 50)

This analysis confirms the hypothesis mentioned above, showing a narrower link between the two versions in the Spanish language (in the case of interjections), and which depart from the original English version. In the following example, the match takes place between the English and the Spanish version, with the Hispano American translation diverging.



Picture 4. English version (Davis 1997: 50)



Picture 5. Spanish version (Davis 2007: 9)



Picture 6. Argentinian version (Davis 2002: 50)

In just three steps, Davis tells a story in which words are not crucial. In the central part, always out of frame, readers find the sound of Garfield stepping on a couple of spiders. Curiously enough, there is a correspondence between Spanish and English onomatopoeias, which are different from the Argentinean version, “PUM”, which in other contexts, would refer to the sound of a shot.

The similarities or differences between onomatopoeic sounds, as shown in the examples, are more arbitrary, since these do not possess the implicit cultural or emotional meaning of an interjection. In the following example, the translator chose not to change the original onomatopoeic word:



Picture 7. English version (Davis 1997: 51)



Picture 8. Spanish version (Davis 2007: 13)



Picture 9. Argentinian version (Davis 2002: 51)

The onomatopoeic sound that Davis employs to describe Garfield's patting on the snow (PAT) coincides in the three versions of the comic. As we can see, it is a sound that represents no emotions or subjectivity, as in the case of interjections, where some differences do apply. There are some cases in which similarities between the translations are determined by an almost literal translation of sentences from the original text, maybe influenced by the geographical proximity between Argentina and the United States:



Picture 10. English version (Davis 1997: 53)



Picture 11. Spanish version (Davis 2007: 15)



Picture 12. Argentinian version (Davis 2002: 53)



In the example above, even though no onomatopoeic expression is present, the dialogues show the evident socio-linguistic proximity between the English version and the Hispano-American translation. The geographical separation of Spain and the American continent implies a greater linguistic distance regarding the source text, especially in the last picture. Obviously, lexicon varies; therefore “vicinity” is translated as “vecindario” in the Argentinean version, but as “casa” in the Spanish translation. In the same way, Garfield changes the interjection of surprise “¿qué?”, used in the Argentinean version, for another one with greater semantic and lexical load in the Spanish translation: “¿os-tras!”.

The separation between the English and the Spanish versions can be due to a greater degree of freedom and objectivity in the translation, representing the source text intention and meaning with higher fidelity. The Hispano-American version, on the other hand, seems too much influenced by the English original, being limited to literal translations of expressions which have Spanish equivalents. Ironically, it is in interjections where these rules vary. A new example is the following set of cartoons:



Picture 13. English version Davis (1997: 53)



Picture 14. Spanish version (Davis 2007: 19)



Picture 15. Argentinian version (Davis 2002: 53)

In this case, cultural influences in the translations are reversed: the Hispano-American version is still the more literal one in the dialogues but it inserts invented onomatopoeias (“PUM”), while the Spanish version uses the same onomatopoeia (“BONK”), but keeps more distance from the original dialogue. The onomatopoeia used in the Hispano-American version also appears in other strips making a similar reference to a hard and quick beat, while peninsular Spanish prefers keeping the original word.

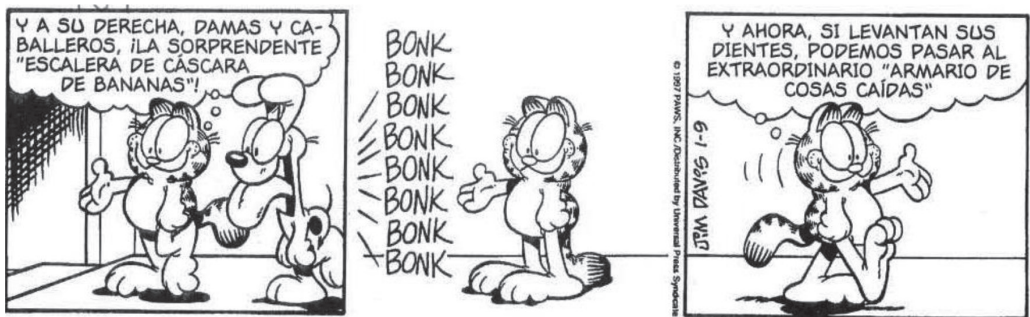
The last two cases of this analysis corroborate and sum up what we have seen in this section so far. Onomatopoeic sounds tend not to be translated, coinciding with the original source (however, some exceptions appear, with the Argentinean version being the one which differs the most). In some other examples, translations are notably different, sometimes even with alterations in meaning, interjections, terms of endearment and sentences showing states of mood. The following strips are a copy of the dialogues between the two versions which are closer geographically:



Picture 16. English version (Davis 1997: 54)



Picture 17. Spanish version (Davis 2007: 59)



Picture 18. Argentinian version Davis (2002: 54)

This strip of cartoons above proves the fact that there is uniformity when representing the onomatopoeic sound “BONK”, and that the Hispano-American text resembles the original version with words such as: “bananas”, “levantan” and “armario de cosas caídas”; the last expression being less descriptive and more detached from the source meaning than the Spanish option: “armario escupe-cacharros”.

Finally, the analysis of the last example validates again the initial hypothesis:



Picture 19. English version (Davis 1997: 55)



Picture 20. Spanish version (Davis 2007: 25)



Picture 21. Argentinian version (Davis 2002: 55)

These last three strips, specially the second one, corroborate the starting hypothesis. In opposition to onomatopoeias, interjections and terms of endearment vary considerably from one language to another. In this case, the form of addressing cats is what makes a difference between the three versions adding a particular cultural load: “mittens”, in English, “michi”, in the Argentinian strip and “minino” in Spanish.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

As we have seen, a comic translator must solve several problems which may not exist in other types of translation activities. Firstly, there is a physical limitation in the space available since it is a translation that is subordinate to extra textual elements: the text is enclosed by images and interrelated with them. This relationship plays a crucial role in the translation and therefore must be cohesive. Scharffenberger (2002: 430) highlights that this cohesive relation “determines the synthetic character of language and an economy of expression”.

On the other hand, and since it is an eminently visual humour, not only image is important but also font type and text labels, which become a key part in the story. The translator's task is interpretation rather than mere translation; intonation, volume and characters' attitudes are implicit within the typography (upper case letters indicate high volume, letters that become smaller point out the opposite, shaking lines shows fear and capital letters or underlining put emphasis on certain elements).

In the same way, in a comic strip there are icons that contain a high symbolic load that, on some occasions, need subtitles if their meaning is culturally specific for the source language (i.e. in *Asterix*, lit candles instead of stars surrounding a character after falling down or being beaten). These icons can refer to sounds or music, which the translator has to adapt based on the phonetic reality.

As part of the initial objectives in this paper, we can see a difference between the translation of onomatopoeias and interjections. The former, as emitted by a non-living entity, are consistent in terms of translation regardless the country where the text is published and translated. On the contrary, interjections contain a higher load of emotional and human meaning, and that is reflected on the fact that translations vary depending on the cultural context.

Undoubtedly, translators' main task is to translate the humorous tone of the reading, respecting the linguistic licenses that the author may have taken. Carmen Valero (1995), in one of her multiple studies on humour, points out the special difficulty of translating this genre due to the heavy cultural load that is implicit between the lines and the pictures. Frequently, jokes lose their essence when they are translated into another culture, making the process an adaptation more than a translation. In some cases, it becomes a new joke in the target language, but that is valid as long as they have the same functional equivalence.

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