

Linguistic and cultural aspects of the translation of swearing: The Spanish version of *Pulp Fiction*¹

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In every language and culture there exist words and expressions judged, usually subjectively, as *bad language*. Vulgar and colloquial expressions, incorrect or inaccurate uses of lexis, grammar and pronunciation, malapropisms, sloppy speech, slang, jargon and swearing are just some examples of this universal phenomenon. Considered discourteous, bad-mannered or just improper, bad language is assumed to be dangerous and certainly something to be avoided. This is particularly true for swearing or ‘foul’ language: “one of the most obvious forms of ‘bad’ language” (Andersson and Trudgill 1990:14). However, it is an undeniable fact that when we hear native speakers talking, we hear bad language and we hear swearing.

It is difficult to define what swearing is, but swear words are known and recognised by all or the majority of the speakers of a language. Many people try to avoid it on the grounds that it is offensive, rude, vulgar and just unnecessary. However, people swear precisely in order to shock and offend, to be aggressive or provocative and to draw attention to themselves (Andersson and Trudgill 1990:14). Swear words are strong words, emotion-loaded language which has the power to express anger, annoyance, contempt and a great range of strong emotions and attitudes. They have a function, they are necessary and, although in some situations they are unacceptable, in others they may be the appropriate thing to say.

There has been in the last years a general tendency towards the liberalisation of this kind of language. Swearing and other forms of bad language, for a long time banned from the cinema, the literature and the mass media, have relatively recently entered these domains of public language as something natural. Not so long ago, the presence of a swear word in the media was considered shocking and sometimes even outrageous. Nowadays, we are used to the use and sometimes even abuse of swear words not only in the cinema but also in the radio and television broadcasts.

Writers and directors introduce in their works a much more informal and colloquial language, on behalf of naturalness and realism. Their main purpose in doing so is not so much to shock but to make their characters behave and talk as real people do.

A clear example of this tendency is the screenplay of the American movie *Pulp Fiction*. Written and directed by Quentin Tarantino this film was awarded the Best Original Screenplay Oscar in 1995. At that time, the script produced much impact not only because of the writer's brilliant combination of humour, absurd and violence, widely recognized with a considerable number of prizes and awards, but also because of the language used. The main characters in this movie are "a bunch of gangsters doing a bunch of gangsters' *shit*" (Tarantino 1995: scene 77), who speak and swear as real gangsters are supposed to speak and swear. Words such as *fuck*, *shit*, *ass* or *damn* appear with repeated frequency throughout the film. Together with other forms of bad language, they play a major role in the description and presentation of the characters, emphasising the most exciting moments of the film. It is impossible not to notice the widespread use of swearing in every scene and its impact in the style and register of the script.

A text of this nature represents a major challenge to the translator, who has to adapt the original script to a foreign language public. When the use of swearing or any other form of bad language is so frequent that it becomes a stylistic marker of the text, the equivalence of style becomes as important as the semantic equivalence. The stylistic register of the source text, its degree of informality and the frequency of swearing need to be retained in the target text in order to produce on the audience of the translation the same effect the original text produces on its audience, Newmark's 'equivalent effect' principle (Newmark 1988: 48).

The translation of swearing is, however, quite a complex task. In an attempt to define swearing, Andersson and Trudgill suggest that it is "a type of language use in which the expression (a) refers to something that is taboo and/or stigmatised in the culture; (b) should not be interpreted literally; (c) can be used to express strong emotions and attitudes" (Andersson and Trudgill 1990: 53). These defining features account for much of the problematicity involved in its translation.

Swearing is culture-specific. It is related to those subjects which are considered taboo in a particular culture and a good reflection of the values and beliefs of the society to which it belongs (Andersson and Trudgill 1990: 57). The differences existing between cultures in what is regarded as taboo are therefore directly reflected in the swearing they use. Subsequently, the range and frequency of swear words vary considerably from one language to another and even among different varieties of the same language.

Most western societies share taboos related to subjects such as sex, religion, intimate bodily functions and concealed parts of the body. In fact, most of the

English and the Spanish swear words make reference to these areas. This does not mean, however, that there are no significant differences between the two languages. For instance, whereas Spanish speakers tend to play around with language and to strive for originality in their use of swearing, English seem to prefer to rely on established formulas (Hughes 1991). The lack of exact equivalence in the translation of many swear words as a result of this and other cultural differences raises difficult translational problems.

As Andersson and Trudgill (1990) also point out, swearing words and expressions are not used in a literal sense but in an emotive one. Their function is not referential but expressive and even though they have a literal meaning, this has usually faded away or been completely lost. Different expressions with very different literal meanings may be used with the same expressive function, such as the English expletives *shit!* and *fuck!*, and the very same expression or word can be used with different and sometimes even opposed senses. An expression such as *son of a bitch* can be both an insult or an affective term, depending on the context and the tone in which it is uttered, and an expletive like *fuck!* can express a relatively wide range of feelings, such as anger, surprise, agreement or disagreement.

Swear words from different languages, such as English and Spanish, which share their literal meaning do not always share their expressive function and, even when they do, there are usually differences in frequency, register or emphasis (Chiclana 1988: 91). It also happens quite often that an English swearing expression has many different possible translations in the Spanish language — several target language forms can carry the same expressive meaning — and usually none of them keeps exact equivalence with the original one. There is always some kind of difference, semantic or pragmatic, which prevents the translation from functioning in exactly the same manner as the original text.

On account of this lack of exact equivalence and the impossibility of a literal translation of most swear words, some authors affirm that swearing is untranslatable. Although it is obviously true that none swear word is completely equivalent to a swear word in another language, this does not necessarily mean swearing is untranslatable. Newmark argues that “everything without exception is translatable” even though “there is no such a thing as a perfect, ideal or correct translation” (Newmark 1988: 6). It is the task of the translator to look for the highest possible degree of equivalence between the source and the target language swearing forms, bearing in mind that “source language texts and items are more or less translatable rather than absolutely translatable or untranslatable” (Catford 1965: 93).

The aim of this paper is to pay attention to the range of problems posed by the translation of swearing and to the different possibilities available for the translator in order to cope with them. The translation into Spanish of the original script of *Pulp Fiction* will be used for illustrative purposes.² The present study focuses

on the translation of those swear words, with no direct equivalence in the Spanish language, which appear with repeated frequency in the original text. Comparative analyses of the effects that different solutions produce are carried out. It is, however, not the intention of this work to make a critical analysis of the translation of this text or to pass any kind of judgement on the techniques adopted by the translator, but simply to contribute to the study of a translational issue which has not always received the attention it certainly deserves.

1. The F-word: are you talking about sex?

In the language or bad language of swearing there is one undoubtedly prominent word: *fuck*. The best known and probably the most frequently used English swear word is also “perhaps one of the most interesting and colourful words in the English language today” (Andersson and Trudgill 1990:60). *Fuck* means much more than ‘to have sex’. It can express pain and pleasure, hate and love, surprise and annoyance, trouble, confusion or difficulty. It can be used as a noun, *fuck* or *fucker*, a verb, *to fuck* as well as *to fuck up*, *to fuck about* or *to fuck off*, an adjective, *fucking*, *fucked* or *fucked up*, an adverb, *fucking*, and as part of a compound, *motherfucker* and *motherfucking*. It is described as “obscene” and “vulgar” (Merriam Webster’s *Collegiate Dictionary* 2001), “a taboo word” (Simpson 2002), and considered rude and offensive, but it is heard almost everywhere. None Spanish word can encompass this variety of meanings and match its frequency of use.

The verb *to fuck* is used in *Pulp Fiction* in a literal sense, meaning ‘to copulate’ (see example 1), and also in a figurative sense, conveying several different meanings, such as ‘to cheat’, ‘to maltreat’ or ‘to spoil’ (examples 2 and 3). *To fuck* has not a direct one-to-one translation in Spanish, since in this language there are two different commonly used taboo words to make reference to the act of copulation: *follar* and *joder*. Whereas *follar* is normally used in a literal sense (see example 1), *joder* has a wider range of meanings (Real Academia Española 2001) and can be used with most of the English word figurative senses (see examples 2 and 3). The lack of exact equivalence between the English and the Spanish language accounts for the translator’s alternation between the verbs *joder* and *follar* in the following examples. It also explains the unavoidable alteration and loss of impact of the original word play in example 4.

- (1) a. what’d he do? fuck her?
b. ¿qué hizo? ¿follársela?
- (2) a. that’s pride fuckin’ with ya
b. será el orgullo que intenta joderte

- (3) a. what's more chicken shit than fuckin' other man's vehicle, I mean, don't fuck with another man's vehicle
- b. qué podría ser más rastrero que joderle el coche a un hombre, en fin, no hay que joderle el vehículo a otro hombre
- (4) a. yes ya did Brett, ya tried to fuck 'im, Marsellus Wallace don't like to be fucked by anybody except Mrs. Wallace
- b. sí lo hiciste, Brett, intentaste joderle, a Marcellus Wallace no le gusta que pretenda follarle nadie salvo la señora Wallace

The English verb *to fuck* can also be constructed with different adverbs acquiring several different meanings. The derivative possibilities of the Spanish verbs *joder* and *follar* are, however, much more restricted. The phrasal verb *fuck up* and the past participle form *fucked up* are particularly frequent in the text. They are used with the meaning 'to injure' or 'to maltreat someone' in example 5 and 'to spoil' or 'to ruin' in example 6, both translatable into Spanish through the verb *joder*.

- (5) a. well, Marsellus fucked him up good
- b. pues que Marsellus le ha jodido y bien
- (6) a. I just want you to know how sorry we are that things got so fucked up between us and Mr. Wallace
- b. sólo quiero que sepas cuanto sentimos que las cosas se hayan jodido entre nosotros y el señor Wallace

In slang *fucked up* can also have a different meaning, 'intoxicated by drugs' (Chapman 1987:151), which cannot be directly translated into Spanish as *jodido* without losing part of the original content (see example 7). It is therefore necessary to find an alternative Spanish translation able of transferring both the meaning and the register of the original, such as *colocado* in example 8.

- (7) a. don't you be bringing some fucked up pooh- butt to my house!
- b. ¡no me traigas ninguna jodida pava a mi casa!
- (8) a. – are you deaf? you're not bringin' that fucked up bitch into my house!
- this fucked up bitch is Marsellus Wallace's wife
- b. – ¿estás sordo? ¡no vas a meter a esa zorra colocada en mi casa!
- esta zorra colocada es la esposa de Marsellus Wallace

Much more frequent is the use of *fuck* as an exclamation, either alone or followed by an object, usually a personal pronoun. Far away from its literal meaning, a *fuck* expletive may express pleasure (example 9), disappointment, annoyance or anger (example 10), or strong contempt for someone or somebody—more specifically

the fact that the speaker does not care about someone or something, as in examples 11, 12 and 13. There are in the Spanish language a wide variety of formulas to express these feelings, but none of them can be used in the same range of contexts as the English expletive. The translator needs to choose, among all the possibilities available, the most accurate one for each particular context or situation.

In examples 9 and 10 the translation of *fuck* as *joder* is not only possible, but also stylistically equivalent. *Follar* is never used as an expletive in its infinitive form, but both *joder* and *follar* can be used to express strong contempt, as we can see in examples 11 and 12. In fact, a literal translation of *fuck* as *joder* or *follar* is far more accurate from a stylistic point of view than the solution adopted in example 13. *Vete al cuerno* is a euphemistic variation of *vete a la mierda*, considered far less rude than the original expression (Luque Durán, Pamies Bertrán and Manjón Pozas 1997: 56).

- (9) a. oh fuck! Scotty, it's great news man, good news Scotty, real good news
b. ¡oh joder! Scotty, es una gran noticia, una gran noticia tío
- (10) a. fuck! fuck! fuck! motherfucker!
b. ¡joder! ¡joder! ¡joder! ¡cabrona!
- (11) a. fuck him! Scotty, he's a better boxer he still be alive
b. ¡que se joda! Scotty, si hubiese sido buen boxeador aún viviría
- (12) a. fuck you! fuck you two!
b. ¡qué te follen! ¡qué os follen a los dos!
- (13) a. – have you ever given a guy a foot massage?
– fuck you!
– how many?
– fuck you!
b. – ¿te importaría masajearle los pies a un hombre?
– ¡vete al cuerno!
– ¿has hecho muchos?
– ¡vete al cuerno!

However, neither *joder* nor *follar* can be used in the following contexts. In order to solve the problem the translator needs to resort to an alternative formula, such as *a la mierda* (see examples 14 and 15), which can express in Spanish a similar feeling than the original *fuck*.

- (14) a. fuck pride! pride only hurts, it never helps you, fight through that shit
b. ¡a la mierda el orgullo! el orgullo sólo hace daño, no te ayudará jamás, lucha contra esa mierda

- (15) a. fuck the bags! if we don't split now we'll miss our train
 b. ¡a la mierda con las maletas! si no nos vamos ahora perderemos el tren

English swear words are said to be far more versatile than Spanish ones. They may be combined with other words and used in a considerably wider range of syntactic and pragmatical contexts (Andersson and Trudgill 1990:58). This can be clearly observed in the following examples, where *the fuck* is inserted in an interrogative structure to function as a meaningless expletive. The syntactic possibilities of *joder* and *follar* are certainly much more restricted than those of the English form *fuck*. There is however, in Spanish, a considerable wide range of expressions which may be used in this kind of context, such as *qué coño*, *qué carajo*, *qué cojones* or *dónde cojones* (Carbonell Basset 1997:212)

- (16) a. what the fuck is goin' on out here?
 b. ¿qué coño está pasando aquí?
- (17) a. why the fuck didn't you tell us somebody was in the bathroom?
 b. ¿por qué coño no nos has dicho que había alguien en el baño?
- (18) a. yes it most definitely should be, but it's not here now, where the fuck is it?
 b. sí, desde luego que debería, el caso es que no está aquí ¿dónde cojones está?

An added problem for the translator is the use of swear words in fixed expressions, such as *get the fuck out of here*, *shut the fuck up* or *not to give a fuck*, which cannot be translated literally into the target language. Sometimes it is possible to find a Spanish expression of similar meaning and register than the English one (see examples 19 and 20). When a semantic and stylistic equivalent is not available, the loss of effect can be compensated by introducing a swearing expletive in another part of the sentence (see examples 21 and 22).

- (19) a. managers, they don't give a fuck
 b. al encargado le importa un carajo
- (20) a. get the fuck outta my face with that shit!
 b. vete a tomar por culo con esa mierda
- (21) a. when you can just shut the fuck up for a minute, and comfortably share silence
 b. puedes estar callado durante un puto minuto y compartir el silencio
- (22) a. if all I gave a fuck about was my watch, I should've told you
 b. si sólo me importaba el puto reloj debí decírtelo

The use of *fuck* as a meaningless expletive, for purely emphatic or euphonic purposes, is particularly common when it appears as a present participle, i.e. *fucking*, functioning either as an adjective or as an adverb. *Fucking* is frequently used in this movie, even to modify and intensify other swear words. It can be generally rendered into Spanish by a variety of adjectives such as *jodido* (see examples 23 and 24), *puto* (example 25), *maldito* (example 26), or *del carajo*, *de los cojones*, *de la hostia* and *de la mierda* (Carbonell Basset 1997: 212).

- (23) a. I sound like a sensible fucking man, is what I sound like
b. parezco un jodido hombre sensato, eso parezco
- (24) a. we should have fuckin' shotguns
b. deberíamos traer unas jodidas recortadas
- (25) a. knucklehead walks in a bank with a telephone, not a pistol, not a shotgun, but a fuckin' phone, cleans the place out, and they don't lift a fuckin' finger
b. un idiota entra en un banco con un teléfono, no una pistola o una escopeta, un puto teléfono, despluma el banco y nadie mueve un puto dedo
- (26) a. I thought you told those fuckin' assholes never to call this late!
b. creí que les habías dicho a esos malditos capullos que no llamasen nunca tan tarde

When used as an adverb, the lack of an equivalent form in the Spanish language forces the translator to alter the syntactic structure of the original. The adverb is sometimes translated as an adjective, as in examples 27 and 28. The translator makes then use of what Newmark calls a 'transposition strategy' (Newmark 1988: 85). In other situations the pragmatic effect is compensated in another part of the sentence, as in example 29. In this case a 'compensation strategy' is being used (Newmark 1988: 90).

- (27) a. I don't know if it's worth five dollars, but its pretty fuckin' good
b. no sé si valdrá cinco dólares, pero es una jodida delicia
- (28) a. we should be fuckin' dead! man
b. deberíamos ser jodidos fiambres tío
- (29) a. yes! I've fuckin' looked!
b. ¡sí joder! ¡he mirado!

These two different kinds of strategies allow the translator to convey in the target language both the meaning and the style of the source text. There is therefore no reason for a complete omission of the original swearing, as it has been done in examples 30, 31 and 32, with the unavoidable alteration of intensity and register.

- (30) a. Goddamn! that's a pretty fuckin' good milk shake
- b. ¡joder! este batido está riquísimo
- (31) a. I'm not fuckin' stopping' you
- b. hazlo, no te lo estoy impidiendo
- (32) a. we gotta be real fuckin' delicate
- b. tenemos que ser muy delicados

In English, as in many other languages, swear words achieve their highest degree of intensity, or at least of offensive intensity, when they are used to express emotions directed towards other people, i.e. to insult. For this purpose, speakers of every language make use of an endless range of abusive and derogatory terms. These expressions point directly to the values, prejudices and fears of the speakers who use them and the society to which they belong.

In American English *motherfucker* is considered one of the strongest and most offensive male epithets. In Spain, however, men are most intensively insulted through their women: by questioning the loyalty of their wives, *cabrón* in example 33 and *cabronazo* in example 34, or the morality of their mothers, *hijo de puta* in example 35 (Luque Durán *et al.* 1997: 61). Obviously, none of these terms is used in a literal sense. A translation of *motherfucker* into Spanish as *follamadres* makes little sense and the epithets *cuckold* and *son of a bitch* are certainly used in the English language, but with far less frequency and usually less intensity than the Spanish *cabrón* and *hijo de puta*.

- (33) a. die you! motherfuckers! die!
- b. ¡morid! ¡cabrones! ¡morid!
- (34) a. English, motherfucker, do you speak it?
- b. mi idioma cabronazo ¿sabes hablarlo?
- (35) a. motherfucker do that shit to me, he better paralyse my ass
- b. el hijo de puta me hace eso a mi y más vale que me deje paralítico

Relatively often abusive swear words are used in an affectionate manner. In certain contexts, by a mere change in the speaker's tone, the insult becomes a friendly or even complimentary term (Andersson and Trudgill 1990: 59; Luque Durán *et al.* 1997: 19). This phenomenon should not constitute a problem for the translation, since it occurs both in English and in Spanish. Thus, in the following examples, *motherfucker* is used among colleagues to show solidarity rather than offence. The Spanish expletives *cabronazo*, in example 36, and *hijo de puta*, in example 37, can fulfil the same function.

- (36) a. you feel better motherfucker?
 b. ¿te encuentras mejor cabronazo?
- (37) a. I think you're gonna find yourself one smilin' motherfucker
 b. creo que descubrirás que eres un hijo de puta muy feliz

This does not mean, however, that *motherfucker* and *cabron*, *cabronazo* or *hijo de puta* are perfectly equivalent. The English term *motherfucker* became popular among the American black community in the late 30s. It is nowadays also frequently used by white people, but is still a mainly American term which, therefore, characterises the speaker who uses it (Flexner 1976:159). This kind of cultural information is unavoidably lost in the Spanish translation.

Whereas *motherfucker* is the strongest contemptuous epithet for males in America, its female equivalent is *bitch*. Originally used to refer to a lewd or immoral woman, literally 'a prostitute', it is nowadays a generalised term of abuse for any despicable woman. Although not an f-word, it is directly related to the taboo area of sex.

The Spanish language is particularly rich in the range of offensive synonyms available for 'prostitute'. The Spanish Literature Nobel Prize Camilo José Cela affirmed to know more than 1,111 words to say 'prostitute' in Spanish (Cela 1964). However, only two of them are used in Spanish in a figurative sense with similar frequency and intensity of contempt than the English term *bitch*: *zorra* (see examples 38 and 39), and *puta* (example 40).

- (38) a. fuck you bitch!
 b. ¡maldita zorra!
- (39) a. the day I bring an O.D.ing bitch to your house, then I gotta give her the shot
 b. cuando yo lleve una zorra moribunda a tu casa, entonces lo haré yo, ponle la inyección
- (40) a. tell that bitch to be cool! say, bitch be cool! say, bitch be cool!
 b. ¡dile a esa puta que se calle! dile ¡puta cálmate! dile ¡puta cálmate!

2. The human body: concealed parts, functions and waste matters

Special attention deserves the semantic field of 'faeces', 'excrements' and 'defecation', a tabooed area in most western societies (Crystal 1988:49; Andersson and Trudgill 1990:15). It seems that there are in our culture things which can and have to be done by everyone everyday, but cannot be talked about in public. As Andersson and

Trudgill point out, words for faeces are typical taboo swear words in many European languages (Andersson and Trudgill 1990: 58) and *shit* is, literally, the ‘dirtiest’ of all ‘dirty words’ in English, like *Scheisse* in German, *merde* in French, *merda* in Italian or *mierda* in Spanish. The word *shit* is considered “vulgar” (*Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* 2001) and “not now in decent use” (Simpson 2002). It co-exists however with other words and forms of expression, related exactly to the same natural and routine bodily function, which are acceptable in most contexts, such as ‘excrement’ and ‘excretion’, ‘faeces’, ‘defecation’ and ‘to defecate’. There is obviously no semantic reason why *shit* and *to shit* have become vulgar and offensive whereas the other expressions have not, and the same happens with *piss* and ‘urine’, *to piss* and ‘to urine’.

Shit is, however, the most frequently used of all these expressions, either in a literal sense or with one of the many figurative meanings which it has acquired in the English language. When used as a swear word, the literal meaning of *shit* has been partially or totally lost. Subsequently, any disgusting or unpleasant person, thing or situation may be derogatorily qualified as *shit*. English speakers use *shit* to make reference to the very worst and the very best. A misfortune, a trouble or a difficulty may be a *shit* or *the shit* (Ayto and Simpson 1996: 212). *Shit* is something of little or no value, i.e. rubbish or trash (Ayto and Simpson 1996: 212; Chapman 1987: 383), but also one’s personal possessions (Chapman 1987: 383). Nonsense and pretentious talk is *shit* (Chapman 1987: 383) and so is a complaint or a criticism. Even drugs are *shit*: heroin, cannabis or marijuana can all be *shit* (Ayto and Simpson 1996: 212; Chapman 1987: 383).

Shit is most frequently used with a derogatory or contemptuous expressive value. Speakers use it to refer to what they do not like, to what they find of little or no quality, and to what they consider trivial and insignificant. *Shit* can therefore refer to the most diverse concepts and it is sometimes difficult to know whether the speaker is expressing their dislike, their disdain or both of them. Thus, in example 41 *shit* makes reference to pride, in 42 to body piercing, in 43 to robberies and in 44 to mayonnaise.

- (41) a. fuck pride! pride only hurts, it never helps you, fight through that shit
b. ¡a la mierda el orgullo! el orgullo sólo hace daño, no te ayudará jamás, lucha contra esa mierda
- (42) a. which one’s Trudi? the one with all the shit in her face?
b. ¿cuál es Trudi? ¿la que lleva toda esa mierda en la cara?
- (43) a. no, forget it, it’s too risky, I’m through doin’ that shit
b. olvídalos, es muy arriesgado, yo paso de esa mierda
- (44) a. I’ve seen ‘em do it, they fuckin’ drown ‘em in that shit
b. les ví hacerlo macho, las bañan en esa mierda

Shit is usually translated by *mierda*, quite a close equivalent in Spanish in terms of meaning, frequency, intensity and register. The Spanish word does also make reference to human faeces and at the same time is a vulgar and offensive word used to qualify or disqualify persons, objects and situations (Real Academia Española 2001). In fact, *mierda* and *shit* are so commonly used nowadays that they have lost much of their original intensity and vulgarity both in Spanish and in English.

Other possible translations imply a substantial alteration of the original register. *Cagadas* in example 45 and *caca* in 46 also mean *shit*, but they are far less common in everyday speech than *mierda*. *Rollos* and *cosas* in examples 47 and 48 point to exactly the same referent as the original *shit*, but in these translations most of the connotations, intensity and register of the original are certainly lost.

- (45) a. now all this other shit, you coulda set on fire, but I specifically reminded you not to forget the fuckin' watch
 b. todas esas cagadas podrías quemarlas, pero especifiqué que sobre todo no te olvidaras del puto reloj
- (46) a. when Bonnie goes shoppin' she buys shit, I buy the gourmet expensive stuff
 b. si Bonnie va a la compra, compra caca, yo compro este café de gourmet
- (47) a. in the garage or under the sink you got a bunch of cleaners and shit like that
 b. que en el garaje o bajo el fregadero debe tener detergentes o rollos de esos
- (48) a. and finds a bunch of gangsters doin' a bunch of gangsta' shit in her kitchen
 b. y encuentra unos gángsters en su cocina haciendo cosas de gangsters

However, as Chiclana points out, *shit* has in English a wider range of meanings and uses than *mierda* in Spanish (Chiclana 1988: 85–6). Therefore, a literal translation of the word is not always possible or at least desirable. In the following examples, *shit* and *bullshit* mean nonsense. They make reference to absurd, foolish, silly or simply untrue words. As it can be seen in examples 49 and 50, there is in Spanish a more specific vulgarism to make reference to this concept: *gilipollez*.

- (49) a. why do we feel it's necessary to yak about bullshit in order to be comfortable?
 b. ¿por qué creemos que es necesario decir gilipolleces para estar cómodos?
- (50) a. If that favour means I gotta take shit, he can stick his favour straight up his ass

- b. si el aguantar gilipolleces está incluido en el trato dile que se meta el favor por el culo y a otra cosa

When used in negative sentences, meaning ‘nothing,’ *shit* cannot be directly translated as *mierda* (see example 51). It usually appears with this sense in fixed expressions such as *not to give a shit* or *not to mean shit* (Partridge 1984:1053; Ayto and Simpson 1996:212). The translator needs to look for a Spanish formula of similar semantic and expressive value in order to minimise any possible loss of intensity and register (see examples 52 and 53).

- (51) a. – don’t do shit unless
 – unless what?
 – unless you do it first
- b. – que no hagamos nada si no
 – ¿si no qué?
 – si no lo hace usted
- (52) a. foot massages don’t mean shit
- b. un masaje en los pies no significa un carajo
- (53) a. I’m an American, our names don’t mean shit
- b. soy americano, nuestros nombres no significan un carajo

Curiously, or not so curiously, *shit* and *mierda* are both slang terms for drugs, initially used among addicts and nowadays extended to other non-marginal groups of speakers. Therefore, when *shit* refers to a drug, usually heroin, it can be directly translated into Spanish as *mierda* (see example 54).

- (54) a. white people who know the difference between good shit and bad shit, this is the house they come to; my shit, I’ll take the Pepsi Challenge with Amsterdam shit any ol’ day of the fuckin’ week.
- b. estás en mi casa, los blancos que conocen la diferencia entre la buena mierda y la mala mierda vienen aquí, a esta casa, y mi mierda dejaría que la compararan con esa mierda de Amsterdam cualquier día de la jodida semana

Finally *shit*, as *fuck* and as many other swear words, can also be used as an exclamation when something unexpected or undesirable has occurred or is about to occur. It appears as a pure expletive with no referential meaning, expressing anger, impatience, disgust, surprise, pleasure or disappointment. It can be directly translated as ¡*mierda*! (see examples 55 and 56), but also as any other Spanish meaningless expletive, such as, for instance, ¡*joder*! in examples 57 and 58.

- (55) a. shit!
b. ¡mierda!
- (56) a. let's go negro, shit!
b. venga negro, vámonos, ¡mierda!
- (57) a. shit yeah, I got my technique down man, I don't tickle or nothin'
b. joder sí, perfeccioné tanto mi técnica que apenas hago cosquillas
- (58) a. shit Negro, that's all you had to say
b. joder negro, eso es todo lo que tenías que decir

The taboos existing in our culture in relation to excretion and sex affect also to those parts of the body most directly involved in these activities. The most intimate and at the same time the most concealed parts of the body are to be mentioned in polite conversation only through euphemisms or roundabouts. However, the vulgar and offensive terms which make reference to them appear quite often in colloquial speech: *nuts* and *balls*, *cunt* and *pussy*, *dick*, *prick* and *cock*, or *ass* and *asshole* are just a few of them.

Particularly interesting from a translational point of view is the frequent use that American English speakers make of the word *ass*, *arse* in British English. In a literal sense, it makes reference to the posteriors, 'the hinder parts of the body' (Simpson 2002), and it is therefore equivalent in meaning to the Spanish *culo* (see example 59).

- (59) a. so he hid it in the one place he knew he could hide somethin', his ass, five long years, he wore this watch up his ass
b. así que lo escondió empleando el único lugar en que podía, su culo, cinco largos años llevó este reloj metido en el culo

However, as most vulgar or dirty words, it is much more frequently used in a figurative sense. In America *one's ass* has become a relatively common expression to make reference to a person and it is used in informal speech, for emphasis or euphony, with the same referential meaning as a personal pronoun or 'one's self'. The lack of a Spanish equivalent expression needs to be compensated somehow in the translation.

As it can be seen in examples 60, 61 and 62, it is sometimes possible to insert in the Spanish text the colloquial and informal word *culo*, thus retaining much of the stylistic register of the original.

- (60) a. I want you to let go your gun and lay your palms flat on the table, sit your ass down, but when you do it, do it cool
b. pongas las manos sobre la mesa y sientes tu culo ahí, pero cuando lo hagas, hazlo tranqui

- (61) a. – in the fifth, your ass goes down, say it!
– in the fifth my ass goes down
b. – en el quinto asalto tu culo irá a la lona, ¡dilo!
– en el quinto mi culo irá a la lona
- (62) a. get your ass outta here
b. saca tu culo de aquí

Far more often, part of the informal colloquial register is sacrificed in the translation in order to retain the referential meaning of the original (examples 63, 64 and 65).

- (63) a. sent a couple of guys over to his place, they took him out on the patio, threw his ass over the balcony
b. envió un par de tíos a su piso, le sacaron al balcón y le arrojaron al vacío
- (64) a. that's it for me, for here on in, you can consider my ass retired
b. pues que se acabó para mi, a partir de ahora puedes considerarme retirado
- (65) a. what I wanna hear from your ass is: you ain't got no problem, Jules
b. lo único que pretendo que digas es que no hay ningún problema Jules

It is however the task of the translator to find an alternative Spanish vulgarism, as in examples 66 and 67, or colloquial fixed expression, as in example 68, that may compensate for the lack of exact equivalence between the source and the target language.

- (66) a. the motherfucker who said that shit never had to pick up itty-bitty pieces of skull on account of your dumb ass.
b. el cabrón que dijo esa jilipollez nunca tuvo que recoger pedacitos de cráneo por tu puta culpa
- (67) a. that ain't right man, motherfucker do that shit to me, he better paralyze my ass
b. esa mierda no está bien, el hijo de puta me hace eso a mi y más vale que me deje paralítico
- (68) a. I'll bet ya ten thousand dollars, he laughs his ass off
b. te apuesto diez mil dólares a que se mea de risa

3. The heaven, the hell and their inhabitants

A typical and frequent form of swearing both in America and in Spain is blasphemy; that is, irreverent expressions which express disregard or contempt for religious and sacred things. The role that the Catholic tradition has historically played in these societies accounts for the existence of a considerable range of blasphemous expletives, both in the English and the Spanish language.

Jesus!, Jesus Christ!, Oh my God!, for God's shake!, heavens!, what the hell!, bloody hell!, damn!, damn it!, Goddamn! or Goddammit! and ¡cielos!, ¡santo cielos!, ¡Dios mío!, ¡Jesús!, ¡me cago en Dios!, ¡hostia!, ¡me cago en la hostia!, ¡demonios!, ¡maldición!, ¡maldita sea! or ¡vete al infierno! are just a few examples of varying intensity and offensive degree. Both American and Spanish speakers “swear by heaven and hell and their inhabitants” (Andersson and Trudgill 1990: 55).

Again the major problem the translator has to face is to choose, among all the possibilities available, the most accurate translation for each particular utterance and context. In the following examples some of these expletives are used as strong exclamations of surprise, annoyance, anger or frustration. The translations proposed constitute just an illustrative example of some of the solutions available.

- (69) a. oh! Jesus fuckin' Christ! you fu-! oh Jesus Christ! oh fuck me! fuck me!
 b. ¡oh! ¡me cago en Dios! ¡maldita! ¡dios mío! ¡estoy bien jodido! ¡estoy bien jodido!
- (70) a. – Jesus Christ!
 – don't blaspheme!
 – Goddamnit, Jules!
 – I said don't do that
 b. – ¡santo cielo!
 – ¡no blasfemes!
 – ¡hostia puta Jules!
 – he dicho que no hagas eso
- (71) a. I said Goddamn! Goddamn! Goddamn!
 b. ¡esto es la hostia! ¡la hostia! ¡la hostia!
- (72) a. hold it right there, godammit!
 b. no te muevas ¡maldita sea!

It is also possible to translate these interjections using some other expletive existing in the Spanish language to express surprise, annoyance, anger or frustration. In this movie both *damn!* and *Goddamn!* are frequently translated as *¡joder!* Much of the expressiveness of the original is thus transferred into the source text. However,

it is necessary to bear in mind that there are always subtle differences of intensity and frequency which are going to affect the translation. In fact *damn!* does not carry the same expressive force as *joder!* and *Goddamn!* is not as commonly used in English as *joder!* in Spanish.

- (73) a. damn!
b. joder!
- (74) a. Goddamn! that's a pretty fuckin' good milk shake
b. joder! este batido está riquísimo
- (75) a. Goddamn Jimmie! this is some serious gourmet shit
b. joder Jimmie! este café es una pasada tío
- (76) a. damn! this morning air is some chilly shit
b. esta mierda de aire matinal le congela a uno joder!

As it can be observed in most of the examples above, *damn* is a particularly frequent swear word among English blasphemous exclamations. The grammatical and combinatory possibilities of the word *damn* constitute another clear example of the great versatility of English swearing. It may appear as *damn*, *dam*, *dam'*, *damned* and *damn'*, and be used as a verb, an adjective or an adverb (Simpson 2002). The adjectival or adverbial form *damn* is usually employed in front of consonants, whereas *damned* tends to appear in front of vocalic sounds (Partridge 1984). It may as well get combined with *God*, as in *Goddamn!* *Goddammit!* or *God-damned*.

Literally, it means 'condemned', more specifically 'condemned to hell', 'to eternal punishment in the world to come' (Simpson 2002). But it is so frequently used in English everyday speech that it has lost not only part of its literal meaning but also much of its original intensity. When used in a modifying position, both *damn* and *Goddamn* have a purely expressive function. They are used by angry, shocked or frustrated speakers in order to emphasise what they are saying. Therefore, they fulfil the same function as any other vulgar intensifying adjective or adverb, such as the already mentioned expletive *fuckin'*. They can be translated into Spanish in their literal sense, i.e. as *maldito* or *maldita* — see examples 77 and 78. But they may be also translated by means of any other kind of equivalent emphatic modifier, as in example 79, or through a compensatory rude expression inserted in some other part of the sentence, as in example 80.

- (77) a. it's only one-thirty in the goddamn mornin'! what the fuck's goin' on out here?
b. ¡es la una y media de la maldita madrugada! ¿qué coño está pasando aquí?

- (78) a. I don't remember askin' you a goddamn thing
 b. no recuerdo haberte preguntado ni una maldita cosa
- (79) a. you forgot somebody was in there with a goddamn hand cannon?
 b. ¿olvidaste que había alguien ahí dentro que llevaba un puto cañón?
- (80) a. now you just wait one goddamn minute!
 b. oye espera un momento ¡maldita sea!

Finally, and as it has already been seen for many other English swear words, *damn* may be inserted in a variety of different syntactic structures and used as a fixed expression that cannot be literally translated into Spanish. Again, a corresponding target language formula needs to be looked for (see example 81), in order to avoid a complete omission of the original swearing in the translation, as it happens in example 82.

- (81) a. I don't give a damn if he does
 b. me importa una mierda que lo haga
- (82) a. I don't give a damn what men find attractive
 b. qué más da lo que los hombres encuentren atractivo

4. Conclusions

Neither English nor Spanish are different from other languages in having vulgar and offensive words and expressions which “no one is supposed to say but that everyone does say—or nearly everyone” (Andersson and Trudgill 1990:14). In fact, swearing and other forms of bad language are quite common in everyday speech and far more frequent than expected in public language. The examples taken from the original and the translated version of the screenplay of *Pulp Fiction* offer an idea of the most commonly used English and Spanish swear words, the important role they play in characterising both speech and speakers, and the attention they therefore deserve in the translation of natural colloquial and informal language. Swear words are, by definition, very emotionally charged expressions whose literal meaning has faded away or been completely lost. In the translation of swearing the literal and referential meaning of the original lexical item is therefore of little relevance. It is the emotional charge of the swear word what needs to be taken into account in order to express in the target language the same emotion and attitude the speaker intends to express in the source language and thus produce in the receptor of the translation the same impact the original swear word produces in the receptor of the source text.

In this process it is necessary to bear in mind the cultural differences existing between the speakers of the two languages in the range, frequency and emotional intensity of the expletives they use. The comparative analyses carried out in this study provide evidence of both differences and similarities existing between the English and the Spanish swearing systems, and the translational problems which may arise in the transference of English swearing into Spanish. The great versatility of English swear words on the one hand, and the richness and high creativity of the Spanish swearing system on the other, account to a great extent for the lack of exact equivalence between most English and Spanish expletives. The examples selected for the study also illustrate the range of translation strategies available for the translator in order to compensate for this problematicity and how, despite some unavoidable losses of cultural information and subtle alterations of register, English expletives may be rendered into Spanish with quite a satisfying degree of success.

The limits of a study of this nature do not obviously allow a comprehensive analysis of the endless possibilities of English swearing and its translation into Spanish, but the illustrative examples here analysed certainly provide quite an accurate overview of this translational issue which may be of interest for future translation works and studies.

Notes

1. The research carried out for the writing of this paper was partially financed by the Galician Ministry of Education (Secretaría Xeral de Investigación PGIDT00PXI20407PR).
2. Analyses are based on the actual text of the film, not on any written form of the screenplay. The film versions used for this purpose are included in the references section.

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Abstract

In this paper attention is paid to the translation of swearing, more specifically to the problems involved in the transference of English swearing into Spanish and the translational strategies available in order to cope with them. The original and translated versions of the screenplay of the American movie *Pulp Fiction* are used for illustrative purposes. The solutions adopted in the translation of this text provide evidence that, despite the lack of exact equivalence existing between the English and Spanish swearing systems, the emotional charge of English expletives may be generally rendered into Spanish without altering the stylistic register of the original, thus making possible to produce on the target audience the same effect the original produces on its audience.

Résumé

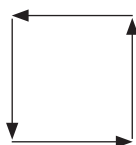
Dans cet article, nous prêtons attention à la traduction des jurons et, en particulier, aux problèmes que pose le transfert des jurons anglais en espagnol et aux stratégies de traduction que l'on peut utiliser pour les résoudre. Les versions originale et traduite du scénario du film américain *Pulp Fiction* sont utilisées à titre d'illustrations. Les solutions adoptées dans la traduction de ce texte prouvent qu'en dépit de l'absence d'équivalence exacte entre les jurons anglais et espagnols, la charge émotionnelle des jurons anglais peut généralement être transmise en espagnol sans altérer le registre stylistique de l'original, de telle façon que le texte cible produit le même effet sur le public espagnol que l'original sur son propre public.

About the author

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