Wordplay in film titles
Translating English puns into Spanish

Francisco Javier Díaz Pérez
University of Jaén

1. Introduction

The main aim of this article is to reflect upon the translation of wordplay as well as to analyse the solutions adopted for the translation of English puns into Spanish in film titles. The title of a film is an essential element to attract the potential audience’s attention and to give an idea about the plot. In this connection, the use of wordplay in film titles serves a double purpose: firstly, it functions as an attention-getting device, and secondly, it allows at least two different meanings to be represented usually in the same portion of text. The difficulty involved in the translation of wordplay is something obvious. This difficulty, as pointed out by Delabastita, is due to the fact that

the semantic and pragmatic effects of source text wordplay find their origin in particular structural characteristics of the source language for which the target language more often than not fails to produce a counterpart, such as the existence of certain homophones, near-homophones, polysemic clusters, idioms or grammatical rules (Delabastita 1994:223).

However, the position defended here is that puns are not untranslatable. As will be seen later on, several strategies have been used by translators for the translation of wordplay.1 Claiming that puns are untranslatable implies considering that those strategies are not good enough to be qualified as genuine translation. An unevaluative description will be delivered in section 3 in order to come to a better understanding of the problem and some testified solutions. The point of departure, therefore, is Toury’s (1995:32) famous statement, according to which a translation is any text which is accepted as a translation in the target culture. More than de-

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ciding whether such translation is correct or not, our main interest in section 3, therefore, will be to find out the strategies employed by the translator when facing a given problem. But before undertaking such description, section 2 will be devoted to a discussion of the nature of wordplay.

2 On the nature of wordplay

2.1 Definition

Among the existing definitions of wordplay, that offered by Delabastita has been adopted here, for being precise and at the same time general enough to cover all the different types of wordplay:

Wordplay is the general name indicating the various textual phenomena in which structural features of the language(s) used are exploited in order to bring about a communicatively significant confrontation of two (or more) linguistic structures with more or less similar forms and more or less different meanings (Delabastita 1996: 128).

This definition is broad enough to refer to a greater or lesser degree of formal similarity (of similarity between the signifiers), instead of referring to identity, which allows to cover phenomena like paronymy. As happens with the formal level, in the semantic level the degree of disparity can vary, which implies that for instance the difference between the literal and figurative senses of a word may give rise to a pun. Saying that puns are textual phenomena implies that for all the potential ambiguities and associations of words and structures to become effective, they need to be employed in particular textual settings. Saying that a pun is communica- tively significant means that it is intentional—which allows to distinguish puns from slips of the tongue or pen, malapropisms, unintentional ambiguities, awkward repetitions, etc.—and has a communicative effect, which can be humorous, attention-getting, persuasive, or of any other type.

2.2 Typology

Several criteria can be attended to carry out a classification of wordplay. I do not intend to offer an exhaustive classification. Among the many criteria, I have selected a formal criterion and the linguistic phenomenon which serves as basis of the pun. According to the formal criterion, two types of puns can be distinguished:

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2. In this section, as in the following one, I will follow Delabastita (1993) with a slight variation. For different classifications of wordplay see Heller (1980), Leech (1969), and Sherzer (1978).
1. **Vertical pun** is that in which the relationship between the components is established in a paradigmatic level, that is to say, the components are represented in the same portion of text. In the following title two different meanings are contraposed simultaneously in the word *dead*, namely, that of an adjective, “no longer alive”, and that corresponding to an intensifier in the set phrase *dead ringer*, used to refer to someone who looks exactly like someone else:

(1) **Dead ringer**

2. **Horizontal pun** is that in which the relationship between the components is of a syntagmatic type; the components are one after the other lineally in the sequence in which the pun is inscribed. In (2) the close occurrence of the signifier *diablo* twice gives rise to a pun. Whereas in the second occurrence *Diablo* has a literal meaning—“the most powerful evil spirit”—in the first one it has an idiomatic meaning in an expression used for telling somebody to go away or stop annoying you.

(2) **Al diablo con el Diablo**

As regards the **linguistic phenomenon** which serves as basis of the pun, we can distinguish the following types of puns:

- **The Phonologic pun** is formed by words which share several phonemes, although they are not related etymologically or semantically. The relationships established between the components of a phonologic pun can be:

  i. **Homophony**: two or more words are identical in their pronunciation but different in spelling. Thus, *two* (“number which follows one”) and *too* (adverb meaning “more than is necessary or acceptable”) in (3) are spelt in a different way but their pronunciation is exactly the same:

    (3) **Two much**

  ii. **Homonymy**: two or more words are identical in spelling as well as in pronunciation, as is the case of the two meanings of the signifier *lies* (“says something untrue” and “is on a horizontal position”) in (4):

    (4) **What lies behind**

  iii. **Paronymy**: two or more words are similar, but not identical, in spelling and pronunciation. In the next example, “legally blind” is apparently taken for *Legally blonde*:

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3. The part of the title which contains the pun appears in bold type in all the examples.
(5) Legally blonde

- *The Polysemic pun* involves the confrontation of the two or more different meanings which a given word has. The pun in (6) is based on the confrontation of two different meanings of the word *underdog* (“a person, team or group that seems least likely to win a game or competition” and “a person or group that has very little money, power, or social status”):

(6) Dodgeball: a true *underdog* story

- *The Idiomatic pun* is constituted by an idiomatic expression. In (7) a confrontation is established between the habitual idiomatic meaning of the sequence *What’s cooking* and its literal meaning:

(7) *What’s cooking*

- *The Syntactic pun* involves a statement which can be analysed syntactically in at least two different ways. The sequence *Darkness Falls* in (8) has two possible syntactic analyses. In one of them *Falls* has the syntactic category of verb and in the other it is a noun:

(8) *Darkness Falls*

- *The Morphological pun* is composed by words which can be related to other words by means of morphological mechanisms like derivation or compounding. In the following example, two different meanings are confronted in *Repli-kate*. On the one hand, *replicate*, spelt with a *c* instead of a *k*, means “produce a replica”, but, on the other hand, the title of the film is also a pun on the name of its main character, Kate.

(9) *Repli-kate*

3. The translation of wordplay

3.1. From pun to pun

Although often considered to be difficult, a pun in the source text (ST) can naturally be translated by means of a target text (TT) pun. The TT pun can be based on the same type of structural relations as the ST pun; it may or may not reproduce the formal structure of its original; and it can or cannot share the semantic organization of the ST pun.

The following English titles, which contain a pun, are literally translated into Spanish, and in the Spanish title exactly the same type of pun is being reproduced, with the same linguistic basis and the same confrontation of meanings:
(10) What’s cooking ¿Qué se está cociendo?
(11) Antz Hormigaz
(12) Orgazmo Orgasmo
(13) Dances with wolves Bailando con lobos
(14) At first sight A primera vista
(15) Against the ropes Contra las cuerdas
(16) Fatal attraction Atracción fatal
(17) Touch of pink Un toque rosa
(18) In the name of the father En el nombre del padre
(19) Saved! ¡Salvados!
(20) Stuck on you Pegado a ti
(21) Look who’s talking Mira quién habla
(22) Black knight Caballero negro

The title (10), as said above, is an idiom used to ask about something which is happening or is being planned, often secretly, and in fact in the film the viewer discovers the secrets and problems of four families from different cultures in Los Angeles. Moreover, the literal meaning of the sequence what’s cooking also suits the key action of the film, which takes place during the preparation and serving of the Thanksgiving dinner. The Spanish title of the film also contains a pun which reproduces the same confrontation of meanings of the original, because ¿qué se está cociendo? [lit. “what’s boiling?”] is also an idiom which means the same as what’s cooking? in English.

In the same way as (10), (14), (15), (17), and (20) also contain idiomatic puns both in the original and in the translation. At first sight is a pun, since in addition to the idiomatic meaning of this set phrase, the literal meaning is also present. Virgil, the main character of this film is blind since he was three years old. He undergoes a surgery treatment and regains his sight, but he is disoriented and must learn to process the new images he can now perceive. An exactly parallel pun is reproduced in the title of the Spanish version of the film. With regard to (15), against the ropes in its figurative sense means “near collapse or ruin”, but the literal meaning (“in boxing, forced to the end of the ring and near defeat”) also applies in this case, since the film focuses on the relationship between a Jewish woman who became a boxing manager and a boxer. Both meanings are also present in the Spanish title. Two idiomatic meanings of the sequence touch of pink are confronted in (17). On the one hand, the expression refers to something nice or beautiful, since Alim, an Islamic Canadian leads an ideal life with his boyfriend, but on the other hand, the pink colour is also associated to the gay world. The same two meanings are also realized in the Spanish title. The original title also contains a reference to a film starred by Cary Grant entitled A Touch of Mink, which is not present in the
Spanish title. The set phrase stuck on you, in (20), is used to refer to somebody who is very attracted to somebody else, but the literal meaning is also relevant, because the film is about a pair of Siamese twins who are joined at the hip because they share a liver. Pegado a ti, the title in Spanish, also plays on the literal and idiomatic meanings of the phrase, which is equivalent to the English one.

The titles in (11), (12) and (13) contain puns in which one of the meanings corresponds to the name of a character of the film. Thus, (11) is a pun on the name of the main character of the film, Ant Z, and on the word ants, and exactly the same pun is reproduced in the Spanish title: Hormiga Z and hormigas. In the film corresponding to the title in (12), the main character, Joe Young, is an actor who is chosen to play the lead role in the pornographic film Captain Orgazmo, which is about a sex superhero who fights crime with his Orgazmorator, a ray-gun which emits a light beam that causes the most intense orgasm in whoever it hits. Therefore, in this film again one of the meanings in the pun of the title corresponds to the name of a character of the film, the other one being that of “orgasm”. Exactly the same type of pun is reproduced in the title of the Spanish version. Dances with wolves in (13) may be interpreted in its literal sense, as the film is set in the wilderness of the Dakota territory during the American Civil War, but it is also the name given to Lieutenant John Dunbar, the main character of the film, by the Sioux tribe he is accepted in. Both interpretations are kept in the Spanish title, Bailando con lobos (“dancing with wolves”).

The adjective fatal, present in (16), means “fateful, decisive” and “causing disaster” both in English and Spanish, and those two meanings are present in the original title and in its translation into Spanish. In the name of the Father is the beginning of the formula used in Christian religion when one makes the sign of the cross, but the film is also about the relationship between a father and his son, who fought for justice to clear his father’s name after both of them have been wrongly convicted of bombing two pubs outside of London. With regard to (19), saved in English may refer to somebody who has avoided danger, harm, injury, etc., and in the Christian faith may also refer to somebody who is no longer influenced by the power of evil so that he/she can go to heaven when he/she dies. Exactly the same meanings are also realized in the Spanish title. Example (21) contains an idiomatic pun both in the original title in English and in its translation into Spanish. Look who’s talking is an idiomatic expression used in English to refer to somebody who is giving an opinion which is the opposite of how they live or what they do themselves. The literal meaning also applies in this case, since the film deals with a baby whose thoughts can be heard by the film-watcher. The title in Spanish, which has been literally translated from the original, presents exactly the same confrontation of meanings. Black knight, in (22), has a double interpretation because it refers not only to the famous medieval knight but also to the skin colour of the protagonist.
of the film, Jamal Walker, a young Afro-American man who finds himself sent to the year 1328.

Whereas in the previous examples the Spanish pun is based on the same linguistic mechanism as the original English puns and reproduces the same confrontation of meanings, in other cases, although the Spanish title also contains a pun, there is some difference between the original pun and the pun in the translated title, in the linguistic device which serves as basis to the pun, in the meanings which are realized in the pun, or in both aspects. This is the case of examples (23) to (34).

(23) Legally blonde
    Una rubia muy legal
(24) Face off
    Cara a cara
(25) Brassed off
    Tocando el viento
(26) Dodgeball: A true underdog store
    Cuestión de pelotas
(27) Laws of attraction
    Hasta que la ley nos separe
(28) Prick up your ears
    Ábrete de orejas
(29) Bringing up Baby
    La fiera de mi niña
(30) Devil’s advocate
    Pactar con el Diablo
(31) The perfect catch
    Amor en juego
(32) Fever pitch
    Fuera de juego
(33) The family stone
    La joya de la familia
(34) Without a paddle
    De perdidos al río
(35) The Dukes of Hazzard
    Dos chalados y muchas curvas

In some cases, such as (23), (25), (29), and (33), apart from differences in the semantic structure of the pun, there is also a change in the linguistic phenomenon which serves as basis to the pun, particularly a shift from exploited phonology—two paronyms in (23) and (25) and two homonyms in (29) and (33) give rise to the pun—to a polysemic pun. Thus the title Legally blonde is a pun on legally blind, a term used in the United States to refer to people who, due to some visual handicap, have certain legal rights. The title of this film has been translated into Spanish as Una rubia muy legal, which also contains a pun, but confronting in this case two different meanings of the word legal: “related to law” and “slang for good, referring to a person”. The film to which the title in (25) corresponds is about a crew of British coal miners whose livelihood is doomed when Margaret Thatcher’s government moves to close their mine. The miners play in a brass band in their off hours. Brassed off also means “dejected, fed up”. Therefore, the pun is based on two paronymic words: brass and brassed. The pun in the Spanish title, on the other hand, involves the confrontation of the two different meanings of two polysemic words, namely tocando—which means “touching” and “playing a musical instrument”—and viento, meaning both “wind” and “brass musical instru-
ments”. In (29) Baby refers not only to “a very young child who cannot yet talk or walk”, but it is also the name of one of the protagonist’s pet leopard. Two homonymous words, therefore, have given rise to the original pun. The pun in the translated version, however, is based on polysemy, which implies that the two or more associated meanings are part of what is considered to be one single word. Thus, fiera means “wild animal, beast”; but also, in a figurative sense, “bad-tempered person”. Stone, in (33), is the surname of the family portrayed in the film, but it also refers to the diamond of an engagement ring belonging to the family. The title in Spanish, on the other hand, plays on two meanings of the word joya [“jewel”], its literal and its figurative meaning, referring both to the ring and to Everett Stone, one of the main characters of the film and blue-eyed son of the family. The change in this case, as in the previous one, has been from homonymy to polysemy.

The type of change in (27) also involves modifications in the linguistic basis of the pun, but it has a different nature. The word laws in the English title has a double meaning. It refers not only to the “rules established by authority or custom, regulating the behaviour of members of a community, country, etc.”, since the protagonists of the film are two divorce attorneys, but also to “rules of action or procedure”, referring to the relationship between the two main characters. The title in Spanish plays on a set phrase pronounced by the priest in a wedding, hasta que la muerte os separe [“until death separates you”], but the word muerte has been replaced in this case by the word ley, making reference to the characters’ profession. Therefore, there has been a change from a polysemic to an idiomatic pun. All the previous examples also present certain shifts on the semantic structure of the pun.

Some other cases which show shifts on the semantic structure of the pun are, for instance, (24), (28), and (30). The title in (24), Face off, is a pun, as Cage and Travolta have their faces surgically removed and exchanged, but afterwards they proceed to engage in a violent face-off or “confrontation” in which good and evil not only confront each other, but are inextricably intertwined in the two leading characters. Consequently, two meanings are present in that title, that of “face separated and extracted from its original place” (literal interpretation) and that of “confrontation” (idiomatic interpretation). The title of the film in Spanish is “Cara a cara” [lit. “face to face”], which also plays on the literal and idiomatic meanings of that sequence: “exchange of faces” and “in the presence of somebody else”. The title Prick Up Your Ears, (28), was originally intended for a film to be written by the British playwright Joe Orton for the Beatles but which did not materialise. On the one hand, prick up somebody’s ears is an English idiom which means “listen with attention”, but, on the other hand, prick also refers to the male sexual organ. It is a triple pun since ears is intended as an anagram of arse according to Orton himself. The translation into Spanish also includes wordplay, as Ábrete de orejas [lit. “open your ears”], which is not an usual expression in Spanish and which could
also be interpreted as “listen with attention”, is based on the expression “abrirse de piernas” [lit. “open one’s legs”], which has sexual connotations. Devil’s advocate, in (30), contains an idiomatic pun, since in that title both the idiomatic meaning (“somebody who pretends to disagree with somebody else in order to start an argument”) and the literal meaning of the phrase make sense. In fact, the film is about a young, seemingly unbeatable defence attorney, Kevin Lomax, who is recruited by a very powerful law firm and whose boss will be the Devil himself. The Spanish title also plays on the idiomatic and literal meanings of a set phrase which has a parallel equivalent in the English language: pactar con el Diablo [“to make a pact with the Devil”].

In the latter three cases, (24), (28) and (30), the meanings confronted in the original pun and in the Spanish pun belong to related semantic fields, but on other occasions the meanings of the ST pun and the meanings of the TT pun belong to totally different semantic fields. Let us take the case, for instance, of (26). The term underdog is used in English to refer to a person who is unlikely to win a contest, but at the same time, it is also used to refer to marginated people or social rejects. In fact, the plot of the film has to do with the owner of a gym whose clients are socially rejected people, and who, trying to save the gym, organizes a dodgeball competition. The title in Spanish contains a pun as well, but in this case, on two meanings of the word pelotas, namely, “round objects used in games and sports; balls” and “round male sex organs that hang in a bag of skin behind the penis; testicles”. This second meaning is also idiomatically associated to bravery or courage.

In the original title of (31) the noun catch has two meanings. It refers to “somebody who is worth getting as a boyfriend or husband” and also to “the act of catching a ball”, as the film focuses on the relationship between Lindsay, a woman who thinks that she has found the perfect man, and Ben. Everything seems ideal until she finds out that she will have to fight against her boyfriend’s obsession with his favourite baseball team. The Spanish title plays on the idiomatic and literal meanings of the phrase en juego, namely, “at stake” and “in the game”. In (32) the original title plays on two meanings of the word pitch: its idiomatic meaning in the expression fever pitch [“high level of excitement”], and “area of ground marked out for a game; sports ground or field”. The film is a romantic comedy about a man, a woman and a football team, Arsenal. The Spanish title reproduces a pun, in this case confronting the literal and idiomatic meanings of the set phrase fuera de juego, namely “offside” and “unready, unprepared, off guard”. Both titles in (34) play on the literal and figurative meanings of set phrases. The American English idiom “up the creek without a paddle” means “to be in a difficult, unfortunate or inextricable position”, but the literal reading is also possible, since the film tells the story of three friends who go canoeing down the Columbia River, but they soon find that their canoeing experience goes wrong, as the river turns dangerous. The title
in Spanish also contains a pun which reflects the literal and idiomatic meanings of the phrase *de perdidos al río*. This phrase is a Spanish idiom equivalent to the English one *in for a penny, in for a pound*, but it could also be read in a literal way, as the protagonists are *lost (perdidos)* in the *river (río)*.

Whereas the English title in (35) plays on two meanings of the word *Duke*, namely “nobleman of the highest rank” and the family name of the main characters of the film, Bo and Luke Duke, the Spanish title confronts two meanings of the word *curvas* (“curves”): “a bend in a road”, referring to the secondary roads of Hazzard County, and “a woman’s breasts and hips”, making reference to their sexy cousin Daisy, who goes with them in their adventures, and to some other attractive female farmers from the area. In addition, the original title also contains a pun on the name of the county, *Hazzard*, and the noun *hazard*, “danger, risk”, since the Duke cousins are constantly in danger when trying to save the family farm from destruction by the town’s corrupt commissioner, and in their efforts they will often have to elude authorities.

3.2 From pun to no pun

In this case the sequence which contains the pun in the original title corresponds to a sequence which has no pun in the translated title. This gives rise to three possible semantic structures.

a. The *non selective* variant maintains the two ST meanings without assembling them into a pun:

(36) **Blacula** Drácula Negro

In (36) the original title contains a paronymic pun on *Dracula* and the black colour. Both meanings are retained in the Spanish title, *Drácula Negro* [“black Dracula”], which contains no pun.

b. A *selective* translation only retains one of the two meanings, losing the pun by definition. That has been the solution adopted in examples (37) to (47).

(37) The importance of being **Earnest** La importancia de llamarse Ernesto
(38) Days of **thunder** Días de trueno
(39) Road to **Perdition** Camino a la perdición
(40) Demon **Knight** Caballero del diablo
(41) **Darkness Falls** En la oscuridad
(42) South Park: **Bigger, longer and uncut** South Park: Más grande, más largo y sin cortes
The importance of being Earnest, in (37), is the original title of two films based on the famous play by Oscar Wilde. Earnest is not only the name of the main character, but, as an adjective, it also means “serious, determined”. Only the first of those two interpretations is present in the Spanish title. The noun thunder in (38) refers not only to the “loud noise that follows a flash of lightning”, but also to the noise produced by the motors of racing cars. The Spanish title only conveys the first of those meanings. The original title in (39) plays on two meanings of the word Perdition, which is not only the name of a place, but also a common noun which refers to “the state of being punished after you die for the bad things you have done”. Of these two interpretations only the latter is retained in the Spanish title. In (40) the titular knight refers both to a knight-like figure who tries to prevent the demon’s bid for universal kingship and to “the time of darkness in each 24 hours”, since the action of the film is settled during one night. Therefore, both “Demon Knight” and “Demon Night” literally suit the film. The translation of the title into Spanish, nevertheless, keeps only one of those meanings, as Caballero del diablo means “devil’s knight”.

The story told in the film corresponding to the title in (41) goes around the city of Darkness Falls, but at the same time, Darkness Falls may be interpreted as a sentence composed by a subject and a verb, since the Tooth Fairy, one of the film’s characters, cannot go in the light and if somebody wakes up and sees her, she will kill him/her. This second interpretation is that reflected in the Spanish title of the film. In the original title in (42), the adjectives “bigger, longer and uncut” refer to the film itself, meaning that it lasts longer and that it is unabridged or uncensored; but, at the same time, in keeping with the naughty humour of the film, they also refer to a male sexual organ, meaning with a greater length and thickness and not circumcised. Only the first of those two interpretations is reflected in the Spanish title. The adjective straight in the original title of (43) is a polysemic word which means both “not bending or curving” and “honest and true”, as The Straight Story chronicles a trip made by a 73-year-old man from Laurens, Iowa, to Mt. Zion, Wisconsin, while riding a lawn mower. The man undertook his strange journey to mend his relationship with his ill and estranged 75-year-old brother. The almost total absence of curves of the road explains the first meaning of the adjective straight, whereas the fact that the film is based on a real story accounts for the second meaning. The title in Spanish, however, reflects only the second of those meanings.
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*I love you to death*, in (44), plays on its idiomatic and literal meanings. The most obvious interpretation of that title is the idiomatic one, in which the prepositional phrase *to death* means “so much”. However, the literal meaning also applies in this case, since in this film the female protagonist decides to kill her husband when she finds out that he has been unfaithful to her for years. It is this meaning that is reflected in the title in Spanish. In the original title in (45) there are two puns. The first of them has already been dealt with in (21), of which this film is a sequel. Therefore, *too* in the original title refers not only to the adverb, meaning “as well”, but also to the numeral *two*, as this film is the second part or a sequel of a previous one. Only the first of those meanings is conveyed to the Spanish title. The word *winter* in (46) refers not only to the season of the year, but also to the surname of the main character of the film. The Spanish title does not convey the surname meaning. In (47), the word *dead* is an intensifier meaning “totally”, referring to the calm sea, but also an adjective meaning “not alive”, since this film is a thriller. This second interpretation is not conveyed to the Spanish translation of the title.

c. **Diffuse paraphrase.** The solution known as *diffuse paraphrase* keeps with none of the ST meanings. It is the strategy which has been adopted in examples (48) to (64).

(48) **Bend** it like Beckham  Quiero ser como Beckham
(49) **X, Y and Zee**  Salvaje y peligrosa
(50) **What lies** beneath  Lo que la verdad esconde
(51) **Dead ringer**  Su propia víctima
(52) **To die for**  Todo por un sueño
(53) **Shattered Glass**  El precio de la verdad
(54) **Good Will Hunting**  El indomable Will Hunting
(55) **Two much trouble**  Problemas inesperados
(56) **Sunset Boulevard**  El crepúsculo de los dioses
(57) **Monkey business**  Me siento rejuvenecer
(58) **The Blues brothers**  Granujas a todo ritmo
(59) **All that Jazz**  Empieza el espectáculo
(60) **Beyond borders**  Amar peligrosamente
(61) **Saving Grace**  El jardín de la alegría
(62) **Raising Helen**  Mamá a la fuerza
(63) **Old school**  Juegos universitarios
(64) **Trading places**  Entre pillos anda el juego

In (48) *Bend it* refers to David Beckham’s famed ability to curve the ball into the goal. That is something that Jess, the main character of the film, tries to emulate, but at the same time it is a metaphor for *bending the rules*, since Jess is the rebellious daughter of a traditionalist Indian Sikh family in England. She wants to play
football, which is not considered correct by her family and her environment. In addition, she also falls in love with her Irish football coach, and that is also thought improper by her parents. However, neither of the two meanings of the sequence bend it present in the original title is rendered in the Spanish title of the film, Quiero ser como Beckham [“I want to be like Beckham”], which contains no pun. Zee, in (49), refers not only to the last letter of the alphabet, but also to the name of the main character, performed by Elizabeth Taylor. Salvaje y peligrosa [“Wild and dangerous”] is the title of the Spanish version of the film. Neither of the two meanings which are present in the original pun appears in the Spanish title, which includes no pun.

The word lies in the title What lies beneath, in (50), is both the third person singular of the verb lie-lied-lied [“tell something which is untrue”] and of the verb lie-lay-lain [“to be situated in a specified place”]. The translation of that title into Spanish, Lo que la verdad esconde [“What the truth hides”], contains neither of those two meanings.

In the film entitled Dead ringer, (51), one of a pair of twins, jealous that the other became wealthy and took away her husband, kills her sister and takes over the latter’s identity. The title is, therefore, a pun, since the collocation dead ringer, in which dead is an intensifier, normally means “a person or thing that very much resembles another”, but in another less obvious interpretation, dead could have its literal meaning, since one of the twins has been killed. The translation of the film title into Spanish has been Su propia víctima (“Her own victim”). The idiom to die for, which corresponds to the original title in (52), means “to wish something or want to do something very much”, but the literal meaning of the verb die is also relevant, as the main character of this film, Suzanne Stone, wants to be a television newscaster and is willing to destroy anything or anyone that may stand in her way. The Spanish title, Todo por un sueño [“Everything for a dream”], however, reflects neither the idiomatic nor the literal meaning of the original. Apart from the most obvious meaning of (53), “broken glass”, there is another meaning, since the main character of the film is called Stephen Glass. He is a young reporter who enjoyed a meteoric rise at the political magazine The New Republic in the mid-1990s, until a great number of his published articles were exposed as partially or totally fraudulent, which caused Stephen Glass’s downfall and explains the use of shattered in the title. In the title in Spanish, El precio de la verdad (“The price of truth”), neither of the readings of the original is present.

There are three ways to read the title Good Will Hunting, in (54). At first sight it seems to refer to someone hunting for good will, seeking benevolence, which, in a way, is true. The point, however, is that the central character’s name is Will Hunting. So there is a double pun on the name of the character. On the one hand, it might refer to the good Will Hunting (as opposed to one who is constantly
wrestling with his inner demons), but, on the other hand, it might also mean that someone is hunting for the good Will inside the defensive, angry Will. As in (3), in (55) the word two has two possible interpretations. In one of them, as the spelling suggests, it is a number, but the rules of grammar suggest the interpretation in which it is an adverb spelt too. The term Sunset in (56) has a double meaning. It is the name of a boulevard where Norma Desmond, the main character of the film, lives. However, sunset also has a metaphorical meaning in this case, as Norma is a faded star of the silent era. “Monkey business”, in (57), is a set phrase which means “dishonest or bad behaviour”, but apart from the idiomatic meaning, the literal reading is also possible, since one of the protagonists of the film is Esther, a chimpanzee. In (58) there is a play on the word Blues, which is a surname, but it also refers to the music style.

The expression all that jazz in (59) means “all the things that are related to what somebody is talking about”, but at the same time, it makes reference to the musical content of the film. The title in Spanish, Comienza el espectáculo [“the show begins”], does not reflect either of the meanings of the original.

Beyond borders, in (60), is a set phrase in English which means “to great extremes”, but the original title of this film conveys not only the idiomatic meaning of that phrase, but also its literal meaning. The film is an epic tale of the turbulent romance between two star-crossed lovers set against the backdrop of the world’s most dangerous hot spots, the far corners of the world. The title in Spanish, Amar peligrosamente [“To love dangerously”], has nothing to do with either of the mentioned interpretations.

Saving Grace, in (61), is also a set phrase which refers to a good quality that makes it possible to accept someone or something that is bad in all other ways. Grace is also the name of the main character of the film, and with that meaning saving may be interpreted either as a gerund, in which case Grace is saved, or as a present participle, which implies that it is Grace herself that saves. Another title which contains an -ing form which may be interpreted both as a present participle and as a gerund is Raising Helen, since the main character of this film, Helen, takes on the responsibility of raising her sister’s three children, but, on the other hand, she is also raised herself in a sense, when she realizes that her new life is more fulfilling than her career at a top modelling agency. Apart from that, the title also brings to mind the idiomatic expression raising hell. Mamá a la fuerza [“Mum by force”], the title in Spanish, reflects none of the meanings of the original. In Old school there is also a play on the literal and idiomatic meanings of that phrase, “school one attended as a boy or girl” and expression used to refer to “an old fashioned or conservative person”. The Spanish title is Juegos universitarios [“university games”]. Trading places, in (64), contains two different meanings: “changing places or positions” and “places where trade is carried out”. The film deals with a success-
ful New York commodity broker and a swindling begger who see how their life-
styles are switched. The translation of that title into Spanish, *Entre pillos anda el juego* [“the game is between scoundrels”], reflects neither of the meanings of the original title.

3.3. From pun to "punoid"

Another way to tackle the problem is to try and recreate the effect of the ST pun by means of a rhetoric resource such as repetition, rhyme, alliteration, etc.—devices brought together by Delabastita under the term “punoid”. An illustration of inserted *rhyme* is example (65):

   (65) The pacifier    Un cangúro super duro

*Pacifier* in the original title is a polysemic word which means both “someone or something that is able to make people become peaceful or calm” and “a small plastic or rubber object that a baby sucks”, since the film is about an undercover agent who agrees to take care of five children, the toughest mission he has ever had. The Spanish title, *Un canguro super duro* (“A super hard babysitter”) on the other hand, has resorted to rhyme.

3.4 Direct copy

In the case of the direct copy strategy the ST pun is reproduced in its original form without actually ‘translating’ it.

   (66) Two much    Two much
   (67) French kiss    French kiss
   (68) Repli-kate    Repli-kate
   (69) Alien Nation    Alien Nation
   (70) Capturing the Friedmans    Capturing the Friedmans
   (71) Mr. Deeds    Mr. Deeds
   (72) City of Angels    City of Angels
   (73) Holy Smoke    Holy Smoke

Example (66) is the title of a screwball comedy film which instantly suggests a love triangle. In fact, the two men in the triangle happen to be twins. Thus, the title is a pun on both the number which comes after *one* and the adverb. For the Spanish version of the film exactly the same title has been used, without translating it. The title in (67) also contains a pun, since a “french kiss” is a “kiss between two people with their mouths open and tongues touching”, but apart from this idiomatic meaning, the literal meaning in which “French” refers to something coming
from France is also present, as the action of the film takes place in Paris. As has been said above, in *Repli-kate*, (68), there is a morphological pun based on the presence of the verb “replicate” and the name of the protagonist of the film, “Kate”. Example (69) may be interpreted as a sequence Adj. + N, “country from another world”, or as a single word, “alienation”. Title (70) corresponds to a documentary on the Friedmans, a seemingly typical, upper middle class Jewish family whose world is instantly transformed when the father and his youngest son are arrested and charged with shocking and horrible crimes. Therefore, the verb *capture* means not only “take as prisoners”, but also “represent on film”. The word *Deeds* in (71) has a double meaning, since the protagonist’s name is Longfellow Deeds and the word also means “something that someone does”. The title in (72) presents a pun on the word *Angels*. The action of the film takes place in the city of Los Angeles, and Seth, one of the protagonists, is an angel. In (73) the sequence *holy smoke* is an idiom used in English to express surprise, delight or astonishment. However, the literal reading of that phrase is also possible, as the film deals with a young woman who falls under the influence of a charismatic religious guru in India.

3.5 Transference

In the case of transference, TT words or sequences are forced to acquire the meanings from their ST counterparts, although they normally do not have the same signification. In the following example, the English expression *in her shoes* has been translated word by word into Spanish as *en sus zapatos*. This TT phrase takes the idiomatic meaning of the original (“imagine oneself to be in somebody else’s position”). The film tells the story of two sisters, Maggie and Rose, who are very different, and who, after a calamitous quarrel, as time goes by in the film, learn to understand, love and make peace with one another. The literal reading of the title is also relevant here, since Maggie and Rose have nothing in common but their shoe size. In addition, Rose’s one joy in life is shoes, because they always fit.

(74) **In her shoes**  En sus zapatos

3.6 From no pun to pun

The original titles dealt with in this section do not contain any pun, but they have been introduced here in order to illustrate a strategy in which the TT contains one pun, but it corresponds to a ST which contains no pun. It is the case of examples (75) to (79).

(75) **Bedazzled**  *Al diablo con el Diablo*
(76) **Freaky Friday**  *Ponte en mi lugar*
Thus, in (75), *Al diablo con el Diablo* [lit. “to the devil with the Devil”] is an idiomatic pun, since it plays on the idiomatic expression “irse al diablo” [“to go to hell”], and the word *diablo* [“devil”]. *Ponte en mi lugar*, in (76), also contains an idiomatic pun, since it plays on the idiomatic meaning of the sequence, “put yourself in my shoes”, and its literal meaning [“occupy my physical place”]. Both *Como Dios* and *Un San Valentín de muerte*, in (77) and (78), also contain idiomatic puns. *Estar como Dios* means to be really well, but the literal meaning also applies in this case, since the main character of the film, Bruce Nolan, is endowed with divine powers. *Un San Valentín de muerte* means, in its idiomatic sense, a terrific, a very good Valentine’s Day. However, the literal meaning of the word *muerte* [“death”] also makes sense in this case, since the film is a thriller in which several girls are murdered on Valentine’s Day. In (79), the word *retratos* [“portraits”] in the Spanish title also has a double meaning: “painting or picture of a person” and “description of the moral characteristics of a person”.

3.7 Combination of direct copy and another strategy

On some occasions the direct copy strategy is combined with some other translation strategy. That is to say, the original title is kept in English, but it is followed by its translation into Spanish. Examples (80) to (83) illustrate this strategy:

(80) Cut Cut. *Corten*
(81) Crash Crash. *Colisión*
(82) Crossroads Crossroads. Hasta el final
(83) Brokeback Mountain Brokeback Mountain. *En terreno vedado*

*Cut* in (80) means both “injure a part of someone’s body with something sharp that cuts the skin” and “stop recording in film”. The film is about a group of film students that attempt to finish a horror movie that stopped production years earlier when the director was killed, and when filming begins, so do the killings. The title is maintained in English, but immediately afterwards it is literally translated into Spanish as *Corten*, which reproduces the same meanings of the original. Example (81) presents the same combination of strategies, because in the Spanish version of the film the original title is reproduced in English together with its literal translation, which conveys a pun identical to the original one. Both *crash* and *colisión* may be interpreted at the same time in their literal and figurative senses, as “an accident that happens when a moving vehicle hits something”—because
the film starts and finishes with a car accident—but also as a “confrontation or occasion when two or more different things or people come together”, since the film portrays a racially and economically diverse group of people whose lives collide with one another in unexpected ways, giving rise to interactions which are sometimes quite unsettling. This second metaphorical interpretation is favoured by the tagline of the film: “Moving at the speed of life we are bound to collide with each other”.

In (82) both the literal and idiomatic meanings of “crossroads” are present. On the one hand, the title refers to “a place where one road crosses another”, as the film could be classified as belonging to the genre of road movies, but on the other hand, it also refers to “a point during the development of something when you have to make an important decision about what to do next”, because the protagonists are three adolescent girls who have to make some decisions at that point in their lives. The Spanish version of the film keeps the title in English followed by another title in Spanish, Hasta el final (“up to the end”), which contains no pun and does not reflect either of the meanings present in the original. The original title in (83) does not contain any pun and in the Spanish version of the film it is directly copied and followed by the sequence en terreno vedado (“in forbidden territory”), which presents a confrontation of meanings, as the phrase may be interpreted both in its literal and figurative senses. The two main characters of the film meet in a game reserve, a place where hunting and lighting bonfires is forbidden, and, moreover, the protagonists are engaged in a secretive and forbidden relationship.

4. Conclusions

As could be seen, a variety of strategies have been used to translate puns in film titles in English into Spanish. These strategies range from the reproduction of a parallel pun in Spanish—based on the same linguistic mechanism and rendering the same semantic ambiguity—to a title which contains no pun and does not reflect any of the meanings present in the original pun. The fact that puns are actually translated contradicts the position according to which puns are untranslatable, and the fact that on several occasions ST puns have TT counterparts comes to question to a greater extent the well-known statements about the “untranslatability of wordplay.”
[Even the most superficial contrastive analysis reveals that the lexical systems of English and Spanish (as well as those of any other pair of languages) are anisomorphic [. . .]. Consequently, it is very difficult—except for an accidental coincidence—that the puns based on the exploitation of the potential ambiguity of the linguistic system of the source language can be reproduced in the second language]⁴

All the statements which postulate the untranslatability of wordplay are based on an ideal preconceived notion of what a translation should be. The very fact that puns are translated invalidates the concept of the untranslatability of puns. I agree with Delabastita in that

[w]hat seems to be called for is an approach to wordplay translation that stops favouring ideal notions of translation and translatability and that addresses instead the rules and norms that govern the translation of puns in actual reality (Delabastita 1993:190).

However, the difficulty involved by the translation of puns is something evident, partly due to the fact that the asymmetry between the signs of a language and the extralinguistic entities and their conceptualizations does not reflect an identical pattern across languages (Alexieva 1997:140–1). In this paper, instead of giving opinions about the translatable or untranslatable of wordplay based on intuition, several titles which function as translations in the target culture have been analyzed, since actual translations are the only, or at least the most important, observable fact we have.

References


⁴. This is just one example out of many. See Delabastita (1993:173–7) for a whole list. Catford, for instance considers that "[l]inguistic untranslatability occurs typically in cases where an ambiguity peculiar to the SL text is a functionally relevant feature — e.g. in SL puns." (Catford 1965:94), and according to House, "untranslatability concerns [for instance] cases in which language is used differently from its communicative function: cases of plays on language, i.e. puns or intentional ambiguities, which are so closely tied to the semantic peculiarities of a particular language that they cannot be translated" (House 1973:167).
Abstract

The main purpose of this article lies on the analysis of the translation strategies used for the translation of puns in film titles in English into Spanish. It is a well-known fact that the Anglo-Saxon culture is very fond of punning, which is reflected for instance in their use in literary works, advertisements or in the titles of films. In addition, the use of puns in film titles serves a double function. Firstly, puns are used as a device to attract the potential viewer’s attention, and secondly, they allow at least two different meanings to be represented normally in the same portion of text.

Before undertaking an analysis of the strategies used for the translation of puns, a definition and a classification of wordplay are offered, in which Delabastita is followed with a slight variation. Without disregarding the difficulty involved by the translation of wordplay, the fact that several translation strategies have been used to render wordplay in the target language – Spanish in this case – contradicts the position according to which puns are untranslatable. The approach adopted in the present study is, therefore, unevaluative and description-oriented. The strategies adopted by the translators range from a reproduction of a parallel pun in Spanish, reflecting the same confrontation of meanings of the original and the same linguistic basis, to a title which contains no pun and reflects neither of the meanings present in the source text.

Résumé

Cet article a pour principal objectif l’analyse des stratégies de traduction utilisées pour traduire des jeux de mots dans les titres de films, de l’anglais en espagnol. Il est un fait bien connu que...
la culture anglo-saxonne est très friande de jeux de mots, ce qui se reflète par exemple dans leur utilisation dans des œuvres littéraires, des publicités ou des titres de films. De plus, l’emploi des jeux de mots dans les titres de films a une double fonction. En premier lieu, ils servent à attirer l’attention du spectateur potentiel et, deuxièmement, ils permettent à au moins deux significations différentes d’être représentées dans la même partie de texte.

Avant d’entreprendre une analyse des stratégies utilisées pour traduire les jeux de mots, nous en proposons une définition et une classification proches de celles de Delabastita, avec une légère variante. Sans méconnaître la difficulté que représente la traduction d’un jeu de mots, le fait que plusieurs stratégies de traduction ont été utilisées pour traduire un jeu de mots dans la langue cible – l’espagnol en l’occurrence – contredit le point de vue qui prétend que les jeux de mots sont intraduisibles. Par conséquent, l’approche adoptée dans la présente étude est non-évaluative et orientée vers une description. Les stratégies adoptées par les traducteurs vont de la reproduction d’un jeu de mots parallèle en espagnol qui reflète la même confrontation de sens que l’original et la même base linguistique, à un titre qui ne contient pas de jeu de mots et ne reflète aucune des significations présentes dans le texte source.

### About the author

Francisco Javier Díaz Pérez has a Ph.D. in English Studies. He is a permanent lecturer at the English Department of the University of Jaén (Spain), where since 1998 he has taught several courses in the fields of translation and linguistics. His main research interests are related to the areas of cross-cultural pragmatics and translation. He has several publications connected with these fields.

Address: Francisco Javier Díaz Pérez, University of Jaén, Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Campus de Las Lagunillas s/n, 23071 Jaén, Spain. E-mail: fjdiaz@ujaen.es

### Appendix

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<td>Prick up your ears</td>
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<td>Stuck on you</td>
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<td>X, Y and Zee</td>
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