

Translating Irony in Popular Fiction: Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*

Daniel Linder

University of Salamanca (Spain)

In Dashiell Hammett's The Maltese Falcon (1929), detective Sam Spade uses obscure language to threaten Wilmer Cook, a young homosexual employed by crimeboss Caspar Gutman. What Spade says to Gutman,— “That daughter of yours has a nice belly (...) too nice to be scratched up with pins”— refers literally to how his daughter, while drugged, scratched herself on the stomach with a bouquet-pin to keep awake. However, the statement contains an ironically encoded message for Wilmer: “It would be too bad if I had to shoot (scratch up with pins) your young homosexual lover (daughter of yours).” This sentence carries both the literal and ironic meaning at the same time. In this paper, I will examine how the Spanish translations (1933, Casas Gancedo; 1946, Warschaver; 1958, Calleja; and 1992, Páez de la Cadena) dealt with the dually encoded meaning of the sentence. Because the same-sex love relationship was hidden behind specialized slang and because Spade's sentence is so cleverly worded, the translators have overlooked the ironic meaning entirely.

1. Introduction

The Maltese Falcon is a meticulously constructed detective novel which was first published serially in the American pulp magazine *Black Mask* between September 1929 and January 1930. Dashiell Hammett's highly stylized narrative quickly appeared in book form later in 1930, when it was launched by the mainstream New York-based publisher Alfred Knopf.

During the two-year composition period, Hammett apparently wrote more than 250,000 words, equal to half the bible (Marling, 1995, p.127). This prolonged and highly selective writing process yielded a very precise text in which the hard-boiled author put onto the page exactly what he intended to convey. During this time Hammett was in high demand as a *Black Mask* contributor and novelist, and he certainly intended to infuse his writing with new challenges. Taking the reins of his privileged position, he sought to infuse the detective genre with greater literary depiction, whether explicit or encoded, of the moral societal realities encompassing him. Hammett set out to portray males sexually drawn to other males in as open a light as the virile male-oriented genre of hard-boiled detective fiction would allow (Layman, 2001, p. 51).

However, Hammett's descriptive passages and dialogues could not make use of an elaborate range of expression. Early twentieth century societal constraints precluded such things as explicit depiction of sexual acts and characters who deviated from the well-established societal norms.

These constraints were exercised in fictional literature through the figures of magazine and publishing house editors. *Black Mask's* Joseph "Cap" Shaw and Alfred Knopf's Harry Block both suggested changes to the manuscript of *The Maltese Falcon*, which either omitted or softened Hammett's portrayal of homosexual characters. Editors in the late 1920s and early 1930s felt that readers drawn to this genre would not accept male same-sex attractions cast in an open light. Hammett's reply to Harry Block shows how the editor felt about these portrayals: i.e. they might be acceptable in the mainstream novel but not in the hard-boiled genre. However, Hammett pressured him to accept the introduction of homosexual characters in his detective fiction (Layman, 2001, p. 51).

Hammett did manage to slip cleverly disguised depictions of homosexuals into the definitive version of the novel, i.e. the February 14th, 1930 first printing by Alfred Knopf (Marcus, 1999, p. 961). He accomplished this feat by using highly specialized slang terms and segments of text worded in such a way that they had dual meanings. Hammett's editors were duped because they misunderstood the slang and failed to latch on to the dual meanings of the ambiguously worded portions.

In a conference presentation entitled "Are There Homosexual Characters in *The Maltese Falcon*?" delivered in 2001 and published in 2002, I established that there is ample textual evidence that Caspar Gutman, Wilmer Cook and Joel Cairo are all homosexual characters (Linder, 2002). When Sam Spade, the novel's hard-boiled detective protagonist, tells the gentlemanly crime boss Caspar Gutman to keep his "gunsel" away, he means for Gutman to restrain his "young homosexual companion". This interpretation is documented in Goldin et al. (1950, p. 89), Marcus (1999, p. 966), Maurer (1981, pp. 306-307) and Partridge (1995 [1950], p. 298). According to James Erle Gardner, Hammett even bragged about how he used his specialized knowledge of underworld slang to trick "Cap" Shaw, who supposedly thought that a gunsel was simply a gunman (1965, p. 74). In his critical survey of homosexual characters in the detective genre, entitled *Gay and Lesbian Characters and Themes in Mystery Novels*, Anthony Slide points to how Hammett was able to "identify Wilmer as homosexual to those in the know" by using the little-known slang term "gunsel" (1993, p. 70).

In "Are There Homosexual Characters in *The Maltese Falcon*?", I also observed that the word "daughter" could literally refer to Rhea Gutman, who appears in the novel, or could be construed as referring to Wilmer Cook, Gutman's much younger homosexual lover and employee. In chapter XVII, "Saturday Night", Sam Spade goes to the Alexandria Hotel, summoned by his client Brigid O'Shaughnessy, only to find Rhea Gutman in a heavily drugged state. In order to keep herself awake she had apparently scratched herself on the belly with a large bouquet pin; Spade sees this for himself when Rhea pulls up her clothes and shows him her belly full of scratches under her left breast:

In her right hand, when he forced it open, lay a three-inch jade-headed steel bouquet-pin. "What the hell?" he growled again and held the pin up in front of her eyes.

When she saw the pin she whimpered and opened her dressing-gown. She pushed aside the cream-colored pajama-coat under it and showed him her body below her left breast—white flesh crisscrossed with thin red lines, dotted with tiny red dots, where the pin had scratched and punctured it. "To stay awake... till you came" (Hammett, 1930/1995, p. 535)

With her last waking breath, Rhea Gutman sends Spade to a remote location in search of Brigid, a ruse to keep him away. When in chapter XVIII, "The Fall-Guy", Sam Spade returns to his apartment, he finds Brigid O'Shaughnessy there, along with Caspar Gutman, Joel Cairo and Wilmer Cook. Spade purportedly refers to Gutman's daughter Rhea, but when Wilmer reacts in an undeniably decisive and aggressive manner it is obvious that there is more to Spade's words than meets the eye:

- (1) "The looseness of his lower lip and the droop of his upper eyelids combined with the v's in his face to make his grin lewd as a satyr's." "That daughter of yours has a nice belly," he said, "too nice to be scratched up with pins."

The boy in the doorway took a short step forward, raising his pistol as far as his hip. (...) The boy blushed, drew back his advanced foot, straightened his legs, lowered the pistol and stood as he had stood before, looking under lashes that hid his eyes at Spade's chest. The blush was pale enough and lasted for only an instant, but it was startling on his face that habitually was so cold and composed. (Hammett, 1930/1995, pp. 543-544)

Wilmer Cook obviously feels that Spade is referring to him, and he interprets his words as a threat; but then he withdraws when he realizes that Spade has merely been provoking him. Wilmer appears to have interpreted Spade's words to mean something like "It would be too bad if I had to shoot (scratch up with pins) your young homosexual lover (daughter of yours) in the belly." His physical actions—he steps forward and raises his pistol, then steps back and lowers it while blushing—demonstrate this.

Having established the duality of Spade's statement addressed to Gutman—"That daughter of yours has a nice belly (...) too nice to be scratched up with pins"—I will proceed to investigate how its underlying homosexual meaning is ironic and what the verbal mechanisms underpinning this irony are, in the subsequent sections. I will look at the linguistic forms used by Dashiell Hammett through his narrator Sam Spade and demonstrate that they are sufficiently "echoic" to be interpreted as containing additional meanings. Then I will also examine how the

narrator's voice disassociates itself from what he says, relying on the reader to construe his words' ironic meaning.

Once the verbal mechanisms of the irony have been explored, I will examine how this very complex communication pattern travels across language borders through translation. Analyzing whether irony is transferred into translated texts may allow the researcher to gain some insight into whether readers (i.e. translators) comprehend irony and how it is understood. Translators are undoubtedly readers of their source texts and reformulators of target texts, and their efforts leave traces of their reading process. Some of the literature on the subject of the translation of irony points to how translators may not capture the irony at all (for instance, Beeby Lonsdale, 1996, pp. 81-88).

However, even in cases when translators capture the irony of the source texts during the reading stage, they may then be faced with obstacles at the reformulation stage, as the process of recasting a source text into a target text is not done in a paradise of myriad possibilities but in a worldly frame of action curtailed by the limited availability of forms in foreign languages. Therefore, if irony is not transferred into a target text this may indicate that the source text was misread but it may also show that the translator was unable to reflect the irony given the limited store of words and expressions available in the target language and culture.

2. Verbal Irony

Geoffrey Leech was one of the first to depart from the classic definition of irony in literature—i.e. that irony ensues when a writer expresses the opposite of what is known to be true, thus expressing a humorous attitude towards it— and one of the first to attempt to define literary irony as a linguistic mechanism. This starting point is quite useful, indeed, Leech claims that all tropes in literature occur when the reader is led to believe that some textual anomaly requires further interpretation, i.e. linguistic features are put in the foreground in order to be interpreted for expressive content (1969, p. 172). Therefore, this foregrounding must be the starting point for the reader's interpretation of an author's and narrator's intended pragmatic meaning, usually humorous or jokingly derisive.

Grice then tackled the issue of irony by explaining it in terms of a speaker's "flouting of the maxims", particularly the maxim of quality. When a speaker says something that is patently the opposite of what is meant this is interpreted by the hearer as being humorous (irony) or injurious (sarcasm). In human communication, exchanges in which a speaker is intentionally saying the opposite of what he or she means can be explained by means of the cooperative principle: none of us interpret other speakers' words literally one hundred percent of the time, instead, we look for the intended meaning above and beyond what is actually being said.

Such instances of conversational implicature lead hearers, in full knowledge of the falsehood of what they are hearing but attempting to search for meaning, to conclude that the speaker is being ironic. In other words, a speaker is "exploiting a maxim" for a humorous or injurious effect (Grice, 1975, p. 49).

Sperber and Wilson reduced all of Grice's maxims to one, that of relevance, and explained irony in terms of "echoic second-degree interpretation" (1986, p.238). In their explanation of verbal irony, Sperber and Wilson further departed from classic definitions of irony as a sort of humorous enunciation meaning the opposite of what was said. They defined it in terms of an instance in which a speaker "echoes" either an utterance previously mentioned or an utterance not specifically mentioned but attributable to a type or a person. Having "echoed" an actual or attributable utterance, the writer then disassociates him or herself from it. Finally, the writer relies on the reader to interpret an ironic meaning based on a resemblance between the echoed utterance and the writer's seemingly divergent intended meaning. When the hearer completes this process of second-degree interpretation, a communicative circle is closed, and the speaker can be said to have been ironic.

3. Sam Spade's Verbal Irony

Before analyzing the main example of this article, Spade's phrase "That daughter of yours has a nice belly (...) too nice to be scratched up with pins", a brief comment on the immediately preceding sentence is required (see example 2 above). In that sentence, the narrator's voice clues us in on the brash sexual statement that follows, seeming to say, "Spade is going to make a sexually loaded statement now". This phrase links up with the very first paragraph of the book, in which the v-motif is mentioned and reinforced. The inverted v-shape of Sam Spade's eyebrows and the marked v-shape of his chin mentioned at the novel's outset as a leitmotif are finally named explicitly precisely in this passage: Sam Spade is a satyr, a creature who has a particular fascination with lewd sexual behavior. The suggestion here is that for the satyr, sexual lewdness goes beyond simply seeing exposed skin below a breast, hardly arresting at all even in 1929/1930, and must therefore refer to some much greater and more transgressive sexual exploit. Indeed, the whole ploy exposes the unmentioned and implicit homosexual relationship between Wilmer Cook and Caspar Gutman.

Why did Spade not say something much more straightforward like "Your daughter's belly is too nice to scratch it up with a pin"? This would have been just as provocative towards Gutman and his lackey Wilmer Cook, and it would have been unequivocally clear in its referents. However, by pronouncing his highly stylized phrase Spade says the same thing but with a highly meaningful tinge of irony. On the one hand, "that daughter of

yours has a nice belly" is an ironic statement, in the sense that it implies the opposite of what is said. On the other hand, "too nice to be scratched up with pins" is a veiled threat containing irony, in the sense that it teasingly understates the potential deadly outcome of the encounter.

Let us now examine how the structure "that daughter of yours" can be interpreted ironically. In the first place, the phrase contains an echo referring back to Spade's earlier query about Gutman's daughter which was met by an unexpected gender change in Joel Cairo's response: he uses "he" to refer to the girl. In chapter V, "The Levantine", Spade questions Cairo about whether Gutman is truly the owner of the falcon. Then Spade rather unexpectedly asks Cairo whether Gutman's daughter is the owner. Cairo's response is jarring and creates confusion regarding the gender of the daughter:

"What about his daughter?" Spade asked.
Excitement opened Cairo's eyes and mouth, turned his face red, made his voice shrill. "He is not the owner!"
Spade said, "Oh," mildly and ambiguously. (emphasis in original, Hammett, 1930/1995, p. 432)

It is not clear why Spade asks this question, because at this early point in the novel Gutman remains unnamed and Spade cannot know if he has a daughter at all. However, in line with Spade's own admission, "[His] way of learning is to heave a wild and unpredictable monkeywrench into the machinery." (Hammett, 1930/1995, p. 465) Purportedly he is doing that here, and the tactic is providing him with some information that he might not have received if he had used a more conventional interrogation tactic. In any case, the reader is informed that "daughter" is not always to be taken to mean the culturally expected "female offspring".

By saying "that daughter of yours" rather than "your daughter" Spade disassociates himself from what he is saying, seeming to imply something like "that daughter who belongs to you" or it could also mean something like "that daughter who I dislike". Spade's choice of words seems to be suggesting a derisive and alternate implication.

The reader can now construe that Spade may not be referring to Gutman's real daughter at all, but to another person who seemingly belongs to Gutman and who he despises. In fact, this person is the "opposite" of Rhea Gutman, a son. In chapter XVIII, "The Fall-Guy", Gutman says, "I feel towards Wilmer just exactly as if he were my own son. I really do." (Hammett, 1930/1995, p. 549) However, when Gutman is finally convinced to give him up to the police, he explains this decision to Wilmer in these terms: "Well, Wilmer, I'm sorry indeed to lose you, and I want you to know that I couldn't be any fonder of you if you were my own son; but —well, by Gad!—if you lose a son it's possible to get another — and there's only one falcon." (Hammett, 1930/1995, p. 563) Thus, the secondary interpretation

based on resemblance here is that Sam Spade is being ironic by referring to Gutman's daughter when he is really referring to Wilmer and expressing a negative attitude towards him.

A further example of Hammett's meticulous text crafting resides in the words that are consistently repeated throughout the text and which to an ordinary reader's eye and ear seem overly frequent. This odd pattern is used in conjunction with specific characters or positioned in conspicuous proximity to underlying sexual themes. One example is the word "belly", suspiciously affixed to descriptions of Caspar Gutman and seemingly suggesting a particularly perverse sexual association with younger bodies. The word appears on eleven occasions, always in descriptions of or direct speech uttered by Caspar Gutman.

Now, let us examine how "too nice to be scratched up with pins", the second half of the main example, can also be interpreted ironically. This is yet another example of Hammett's curious wording. The use of the passive voice leaves the reader in doubt as to who did the scratching, and, indeed, the time reference of the phrase if Sam Spade refers to a past action. Interpreted more broadly, the indeterminacy of the passive voice may also imply that the scratching is about to take place.

The use of the word "pins" in the plural is also incongruent, as all readers know that Rhea Gutman used only one pin. Because of this inconsistency the reader is led to conclude that perhaps the referent is not the bouquet-pin used by Rhea Gutman to keep herself awake but that the word refers to other "pins" not previously mentioned. The reader knows perfectly well that Sam Spade is armed as he stands in the center of the room; he has prevented Wilmer Cook from stripping him of his pistol just moments before. Therefore, it is not difficult for the reader to conclude that "pins" may actually refer to the bullets in Spade's gun.

All of these curiosities packed together in the sentence we are examining are meant to lead readers to make a secondary, echoic interpretation. They should realize that Spade is being verbally ironic, saying cheekily to Gutman that "It would be too bad if I had to shoot your young homosexual lover in his nice-looking belly". The reader is indeed helped to make this conversational connection by the action Wilmer takes: he steps forward, raises his gun, realizes that he has been made the victim of a joke, then retreats. When Wilmer hears Spade deliver the line "That daughter of yours has a nice belly (...) too nice to be scratched up with pins" he properly processes Spade's intended meaning, physically reacts to it, but then feels embarrassed because he was too dull-witted to restrain his own gut reaction to Spade's provocation.

4. The Translation of Irony

This section will explore some of the literature on subject of the translation of irony, which, in fact, tends to point to how translators, as readers of source texts, may not capture irony at all.

Sperber and Wilson have pointed out how tricky it often is for hearers to complete a communicative circle and recognize the latent irony in an utterance. They point to the difficulty hearers may have in successfully interpreting irony, when they state that “All communication takes place at a risk. The communicator’s intentions cannot be decoded or deduced, but must be inferred by a fallible process of hypothesis formation and evaluation; even the best hypothesis may turn out to be wrong” (Wilson and Sperber, 1992, p. 67).

A researcher from the University of Barcelona, Allison Beeby Lonsdale, tried to determine exactly how many non-native readers were able to capture the irony present in a journalistic source text. She gave a Spanish-language source text to a group of native Spanish-speaking university students and the same text to a group of native speakers of English, then used a questionnaire to determine whether they had captured the irony. She discovered that none of the English-speaking subjects perceived the irony at all, while more than half of the Spanish-speaking subjects were able to perceive it (1996, pp. 15-16). This is relevant to the task of translating texts, as the vast majority of translators work from their foreign languages into their native language. Had the group of English native speakers been asked to translate the sample text into their native language, they would supposedly not have reflected the irony in their target texts since they had not been able to grasp it in the source text to begin with. Another intriguing finding in Beeby Lonsdale’s research is that even among the native speakers there were readers who proved to be incapable of decoding the ironic meaning.

In an article entitled “Translating Irony in Popular Fiction: Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*”, I pointed out how the translators appeared not to have perceived that the repetition of the words *cute* and *giggle* at key junctures in the source text went far beyond what was required for reiterative lexical cohesion and constituted an expressive anomaly, or foregrounding, which required further interpretation. This should have triggered their sensitivities as readers of the source text, but it did not. None of the translators appeared to have recognized the importance of the pattern and they all failed, at the key point of the denouement of the novel, to identify the link back to the reiterated word usages in the preceding pages. In other words, the translators were incapable of identifying the co-textual appearance of *cute* and *giggle* throughout the book’s first 150 pages (or so) and thus they failed to recognize the crucial importance of the repetition of these two words in the book’s most climactic scene.

When applying Sperber and Wilson's theories to the discipline of translation, Hatim and Mason not only point out how irony may be difficult to detect but they also discuss how difficult it may be to reproduce it in a target text. They show how important it is for translators to reproduce the propositional content of the source text but also the clues meant to trigger an ironic interpretation on the part of the target text reader. However, in the recoding phase translators may be faced with linguistic and cultural constraints. While navigating the limited number of linguistic forms and the narrow windows of the recipient culture's literary expectations, translators may, in their target texts, "fail to achieve the degree of irony perceptible in the source text" (Hatim and Mason, 1990, p. 99).

In "Translating Irony in Popular Fiction: Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*", I pointed out that the words *cute* and *giggle* were extensively repeated in the source text. However, because the (into-)Spanish translators did not repeat the linguistic/lexical forms exactly and consistently, the target texts contained insufficient clues for the Spanish readers to identify the verbal irony of the climactic moment of the novel. This is perhaps due to the fact that Spanish is much less tolerant of exact lexical repetition in literary texts. This would mean that even though the translators may have understood the ironic meaning, they were precluded from reproducing it in Spanish because it would have sounded unnaturally repetitive to the target text readers' ears.

I also suggested that in the case of *giggle* Spanish simply does not have a single word that denotatively means "laugh in an affected or silly manner" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Vol. I, 1961/1981, p. 957) and is connotatively associated with a childish tendency to laugh uncontrollably and try to suppress the urge at the same time. While English has an array of lexemes describing specific types of laughing (for example, chuckle, guffaw, snicker), Spanish tends to express laughter using the verb *reír* (laugh) affixed to adverbials (*reír con ganas*, *reír a carcajadas*) or the noun *risa* (laughter) introduced by other verbs (*morir de risa*, *no poder contener la risa*) (Casares, 1975, p. 391). Thus, (into-)Spanish translators may have been constrained by the language itself and prevented from adequately portraying the degree of irony in the source text.

Despite the fact that translators must make choices, given the often limited supply of linguistic forms and the shackles of literary expectations, Hatim and Mason suggest that translators may add items to their target texts that will come to the aid of their readers: "Translators may feel the need to provide additional cues for recognition of ironic intention" (1990, p. 99). Prioritizing the crucial need for target text readers to be given overt cues triggering irony, the authors hint that translators may maintain equivalence while adding small portions of text as long as they serve the purpose of helping the target text readers to identify irony.

Now what did the Spanish translators do with the ironic statement from *The Maltese Falcon* analyzed above? A brief historical contextualization of the four Spanish versions is in order first.

5. Spanish Translations of *The Maltese Falcon*

Let us briefly examine all of the versions *The Maltese Falcon* produced in Spain and Argentina, then investigate how they dealt with the translation of “That daughter of yours has a nice belly (...) too nice to be scratched up with pins”.

The first version, which appeared in Spain in 1933 under the title *El halcón del rey de España* [The Falcon of the King of Spain], was translated by F. de Casas Gancedo and published by the Madrid-based Dédalo. As Franco Aixelá has pointed out, this version is notable for its heightened treatment of all matters related to sex (2008). Ideologically manipulated translations tend to be stripped of explicit content, and this is often expected, but they may also be intensified, a theoretical possibility not often contemplated by scholars. Franco Aixelá unearthed an actual case of intensification in Casas Gancedo’s Spanish translation of the novel .

The second version in Spanish was published in Argentina in 1946. The work of Eduardo Warschaver, this translation was published in Buenos Aires by Ediciones Siglo Veinte. This version is practically unknown, and is often missed by scholars and bibliography compilers of Hammett’s works in Spanish translation (Franco Aixelá, 1996). However, Warschaver’s work was copied practically word for word, though with slight variations in word order and punctuation, by Antonio Rubio in 1953, despite a copyright page statement saying “Traducción del inglés por Antonio Rubio” [Translation from English by Antonio Rubio] and “Derechos literarios reservados” [Literary rights reserved]. The Antonio Rubio version was then copied with virtually no changes by E.F. Lavalle in 1961. Though the circumstances in which these two copied versions appeared would be compelling to unearth, it will have to be the subject of future research.

A third Spanish version was produced in 1968 by Fernando Calleja for Alianza Editorial in Madrid. A very widely circulated version, it was reprinted at least 15 times. The broad availability of this translation coincided with the reactivation of the Spanish publishing industry which increasingly included detective novels in mainstream collections (Vázquez de Parga, 1993, p. 200). Indeed, this translation first appeared in the collection *El libro de bolsillo, Sección Literatura* [Pocket Books, Literature Section], and it was reprinted twice in 1978 by Editorial Bruguera (Barcelona) as a part of the late 1970s publishing boom. This translated version appears to be the most widely used one up to the present, with the last reprint dating from 2004.

The fourth version in Spanish of *The Maltese Falcon* was produced by Francisco Páez de la Cadena for Debate (Madrid) in 1992. This version, which also appeared in a mainstream literary collection entitled *Colección Literatura* [Literature Collection], has enjoyed some prestige, as it was included in Debate's *Obras Completas* [Complete Works] in 1994.

Now, let us proceed with the analysis.

6. Irony in the Spanish Translations of *The Maltese Falcon*

The focus of the analysis is on the way in which each of the Spanish translations deals with the dually encoded meaning of the sentence "That daughter of yours has a nice belly (...) too nice to be scratched up with pins" (for the complete quote see example 1 above).

-Su hija, señor Gutman, tiene unos pechitos muy monos para estropeárselos con arañazos y afileraos.- dijo. (1930/1933, p. 156)

-Su hija tiene un pecho muy bonito –dijo- demasiado bonito para ser rasguñado con alfileres. (1930/1946, p. 200)

-Esa hija suya –dijo- tiene una bonita barriga; demasiado bonita para andar arañándola con alfileres. (1930/1968, p. 192)

-Su hija tiene una barriguita preciosa –dijo-, demasiado preciosa para arañarla con alfileres. (1930/1992, p. 192)

As previously noted, the Casas Gancedo translation intensifies many sexual references; the following back-translation is in part the one proposed by Franco Aixelá: "Your daughter, Mr. Gutman, has very nice little breasts [that are too nice] to be ruined with pin scratches and punctures" (2008, p. 99). The basis of the heightened sexual content of Casas Gancedo is the use of *pechitos* [little breasts]. It is curious to note that in the English text Sam Spade never caught sight of Rhea Gutman's breasts at all, but saw the skin on her belly *below* her breasts. Nonetheless, Casas Gancedo adds explicit sexual content to the exchange:

Samuel se la hizo abrir. En ella tenía un alfiler de cabeza negra.

-¿Qué es eso? ¿Para qué es esto?—le preguntó poniéndoselo delante de sus ojos.

La muchacha, al verlo, abrió la bata, se desabotonó el pijama y dejó descubierta la parte izquierda de su busto. Debajo del pecho erecto y juvenil, la blanca carne aparecía arañada. Líneas rojas se cruzaban y entrecruzaban, y de trecho en trecho aparecían algunos pinchazos.

-*Para no dormirme; para poder estar despierta hasta que usted viniere. (1930/1933, p. 147)*

= [Samuel made her open it. She had a black-headed pin in it.

“What is that? What is this for?” he asked her putting it in front of her eyes.

The girl, upon seeing it, opened her pyjamas and exposed the left side of her bust. Underneath her youthful, erect breast, the white skin appeared scratched. Red lines crossed her skin and criss-crossed each other, and from place to place some punctures appeared.

“So that I wouldn’t fall asleep; to stay awake until you came“. (my emphasis)]

The above example is further proof of the intensified, rather than the expectedly neutralized sexual references in this translation (see Franco Aixelá, 2008).

Insofar as the irony is concerned, the rather coarse sexually heightened treatment distracts from any more nuanced rhetorical underlying meaning the phrase might have. The image of Rhea Gutman’s tiny breasts wholly dominates the passage. In other words, the statement has been stripped of any clues suggesting an ironic meaning. Casas Gancedo used *su hija* [your daughter]; he adds the portion, *señor Gutman* [Mr. Gutman]; and he amplifies the end of the statement to *arañanzos y afilerazos* [pin scratches and punctures]. Note that although Gancedo adds to the text in two places he apparently makes no effort to use the additions to signal more clearly to the reader that Sam Spade is being ironic and is subtly threatening Wilmer Cook.

The Warschaver translation also refers to *pecho* [chest, or breast], though the razor-edge sexuality is now absent, as it does not refer to Rhea Gutman’s womanly attributes in the plural nor with the endeared, enticing diminutive *-ito*. The ironic intention of Spade’s source text words has disappeared: Warschaver uses *su hija* [your daughter], and he seems to be seeking an almost obsessive, faithful rendering in terms of the words and expressions chosen. None of the irony referring to Wilmer is in any way signalled.

Calleja’s translation is the only one of the four to follow Spade’s pattern of using *esa hija suya* [that daughter of yours], which in Spanish is equally dissociative as it is in English. He opts to translate *belly* literally, as *barriga*, though this is a rather childish-sounding word in Spanish, not quite suggestive of the enticing expanse of torso that Rhea Gutman showed to Spade. Calleja uses the very colloquial structure *andar arañádola* [for it to get scratched up], thus approaching, but only to a certain extent, the original intention of the author and the narrator. The signal to the reader cues up the following interpretation: Spade is bragging about seeing Rhea’s belly in the presence of her father, a brash thing to be doing in the circumstances. Nonetheless, the word *daughter* can in no way be construed to refer to

Wilmer and the veiled threat is entirely absent. In other words, the irony has disappeared.

The translation by Páez de la Cadena reverts back to using *su hija* [your daughter] and, like Warschaver's, uses an almost word-for-word rendering of the last portion. It does use *barriguita* [little belly], with the endearing suffix *-ita*, which may add a slightly enticing tone to the reference to Rhea's belly. However, no ironic signalling is present in Páez de la Cadena's Spanish translation.

Having demonstrated that none of the published Spanish versions in any way convey the irony present in the source text, I would like to examine a few ways in which I believe it could have been encoded. I would simply like to play with the sentence and try out a few possible renderings which, in addition to the literal meaning, also trigger an ironic interpretation of the main example sentence, "That daughter of yours has a nice belly (...) too nice to be scratched up with pins". This should not in any way be understood as a prescriptive recipe for future translators of the novel but simply as an exploratory exercise into the realm of what is possible.

There are five ways in which I believe the Spanish renderings could be improved upon, all of which are slightly deviant from the original English and exploit the potential of Spanish vocabulary slightly better:

- *la niña* [the girl] could be used instead of *esa hija suya* [that daughter of yours], which might lead the reader to dissociate the idea of blood parenthood from the referent;
- *piel* [skin] could be used instead of *barriga* [belly], which would avoid the use of a word that suggests childhood cramps and tummy aches, and in its stead uses a much more adult-associated word;
- *pins* could be omitted entirely, as the words available in Spanish (*alfileres*, *imperdibles*) do not in any way suggest a similarity in shape or association with bullets or anything else life-threatening;
- a stronger, more slangy verb such as *rajarse* [slit, tear up] could be used in place of *scratch*; this verb means the same thing but has much more threatening and dangerous associations; and
- a much more ironic reference to Rhea Gutman's behaviour (she was, after all, faking that she had been drugged, and after Spade called an ambulance she disappeared before it could reach the hotel) could be used, and a specific narrative mention of Sam Spade's ironic intentions could also be added.

The renderings below, I believe, convey a large portion of the irony while at the same time remain interpretable on two levels, i.e. the literal and the ironic:

Vaya con la niña—dijo con voz irónica. Tiene una piel preciosa, demasiado preciosa para rajarla. (my translation)

= ["That's some girl you've got there," he said ironically, "She's got lovely skin, too lovely to get all slit up". (my back-translation)]

-Menuda es la niña – espetó, irónico. Con la piel tan preciosa, da pena rajarla. (my translation)

= [“That’s a fine girl you’ve got there,” he spat out ironically, “With skin as lovely as that, it’s a shame to tear it up”. (my back-translation)]

7. Conclusions

Dashiell Hammett’s narrator Sam Spade used a dually interpretable phrase —“That daughter of yours has a nice belly (...) too nice to be scratched up with pins” — to subtly threaten the character Wilmer Cook while addressing Caspar Gutman. On the one hand, the sentence can be interpreted literally to refer to Gutman’s daughter Rhea, who indeed scratches herself on the belly to keep awake after having been drugged. On the other hand, the sentence can be interpreted ironically to refer to Wilmer Cook; the underlying interpretation being “It would be too bad if I had to shoot your young homosexual lover in the belly.” As we have seen above, this interpretation is wholly supported by what is known about Hammett’s intentions when writing the novel and by the intertextual evidence contained in previous chapters of the book itself.

Despite the presence of this ironic meaning in the original, the four Spanish translators (Hammett, 1930/1933; Hammett, 1930/1946; Hammett, 1930/1958 Hammett, 1930/1992) conveyed none of this irony in their versions. They seem to have either overlooked the subtext and prioritized the literal meaning, or they may have been limited by the available linguistic choices in Spanish and the expected norms of Spanish-language literary culture. In effect, the irony has fully disappeared from the Spanish translations.

In spite of the failed translations, there are ways of conveying both the literal meaning of Spade’s utterance and the ironic intention using Spanish creatively. Several possible renderings are suggested that indeed transmit the intended dual meanings.

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