# SOME PROBLEMS IN THE TRANSLATION OF CONVERTED DENOMINAL VERBS FROM NOUNS DENOTING ANIMATE BEINGS[1].

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As the title indicates, this paper is primarily concerned with translation problems, those of converted denominal verbs from nouns denoting animate beings. But what do I mean by converted denominal verbs?

Converted denominal verbs are those verbs which are the resut of conversion processes in which a noun has undergone a change in grammatical category (from noun to verb), no change in form being acknowledged. As Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1558) have defined it, conversion is then "the derivational process whereby an item is adapted or converted to a new class without the addition of an affix". This seems to be a quite productive (and therefore important) word-formation process as far as English language is concerned. And this is so for several reasons: a) it allows the creation of new items by using words already existing in the language; b) it allows language users to effectively communicate what they have in mind; c) it allows economy of expression, coherence, and precision. In Spanish, however, this tendency to form new words from already existing ones without the addition of an affix does not seem to be so marked.

Having explained the object of study, it seems necessary to explain at this point why the study of these verbs in translation is interesting:

Firstly, as we have just said, since the tendency to form converted verbs in Spanish is apparently less pronounced than in English, and, as Baker (1992: 11) argues, there is no one-to-one correspondence between orthographic words and elements of meaning within or across languages, it seems interesting to look at the ways in which these items should be translated. As meanings are not universal, languages do not equally categorize their lexicons and therefore, their transference is not always easy.

Secondly, translating consists not only in transferring the element(s) of a communicative act from a source language to the corresponding one(s) in the target language but also in transferring their connotations and the socio-cultural denotations that condition their structures. And this seems specially relevant in the case of denominal verbs. As Clark and Clark (1979: 768) have put it:

> when a speaker utters such a verb [denominal verb], he intends his listener to see that the verb picks out a readily computable and unique kind of state, event, or process that the speaker is confident the listener can figure out – on the basis of the verb itself, the linguistic context, and other mutual knowledge.

In spite of all this, it seems that any cognitive experience may be expressed in any language. The question is how to overcome the barriers peculiar to the structural organization of each language system. As Jakobson (1959: 233) says, "Equivalence in difference is the cardinal problem of language and the pivotal concern of linguistics".

In the following lines, I will analyse some examples of (American-)English converted denominal verbs and their potential "equivalents" in Spanish as well as problems of inequivalence and translation loss arising from such translations.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

As we have said above, it is my main aim to present some problems and difficulties in the translation of English converted denominal verbs (especially those whose base noun denotes an animate being), caused by the so-called anisomorphism between languages.

The items selected belong to a more extensive corpus of converted items compiled from journalistic, literary, legal, and technical-scientific language from the period 1997-1999.

Most of the items below are converted verbs from agent nouns, both features [+human], [-human] being present in the selected set. In general, the verbs studied may be distinguished by the characteristic animate. Moreover, all of them are paraphraseable by "to be, act as (noun)".

Among those verbs in the corpus which present the feature [+HUMAN], that is, those which are the result of converting a noun denoting a person, such as *censor, cook, model* and *witness* do not seem to present any problem of translation (see examples below). Thus, the Spanish verbs *censurar, cocinar, modelar/inspirar, atestiguar/ ser testigo de/presenciar* may be said to be "equivalent" to their corresponding English counterparts, especially in the cases of the examples studied, in which no connotations seem to have been added to these items.

*Censor* : "to act as censor to": *without the need to censor content providers.*

*Cook* : "to act as cook, to prepare food by the action of heat": *it wouldn't heat up the whole house when I were cooking or canning.*

*Model* : "to present as in a model or outline": *gasphase combustion chemistry can be adapted to model homogeneous SCWO experiments for methanol.*; "to frame a model or theory of the structure of": *an electronic discharge to model the experiments[...]*; "to frame": *instead it was fiction evidently modeled upon a romance novel*; "to plan": *the agreement is modeled after [...] the Council of Europe Convention.*

*Witness* : "to experience by personal (especially ocular) observation": *I [...] were appalled to witness Buddy's fat father* ; "to be a witness, spectator": *judging from the part of the meeting she had witnessed*; "to be present as an observer at": *a fisherman witnessed the act* ; "to see with one's own eyes": *Grace witnessed the successful cleansing of a white shirt.*

However, there seems to be no direct equivalent in other examples within this type of [+human] converted denominal verbs. This means that different translation strategies must be used in order to solve the situation. As will be seen in the examples that follow, context and purpose of translation will often rule out some strategies and favour others.

*Cater* : "to act as 'cater', caterer; to occupy oneself in procuring or providing (requisites, things desired, etc)": *town centers [...] catered to more specialized needs.*

The example may be regarded as a figurative use of the English verb *cater* which may be used mainly w.th activities related or done by people. In this case, however, it refers to town centers, then we may speak of personification. If we translate this word into Spanish, the result is that no direct equivalent is available. Therefore, there is a need to paraphrase the meaning of it. Thus, "ofrecen servicios para", "se encargan del servicio de...". There is then an obvious translation loss in the sense that economy of expression is lost and the personification is not so marked. A verb phrase with verb+complements is needed instead of simply a verb.

*Champion* : "to fight for; to defend or protect as champion; to maintain the cause of, stand up, uphold, support, back, defend": *Washington should [...] champion the cause of freedom there.*

As in the previous case, the translation loses efficacy and expressiveness. Moreover, the English metaphor Washington = champion does not exist in the Spanish "defender" (but note: Eng. defend), "abogar por" though the paraphrase "ser el defensor de" is also possible. This latter translation, though mantaining the metaphor, loses both the immediacy and the economy of the English verb.

*Coauthor* : "to be the co-author of (a book, etc)": *Diana Ossana, with whom he writes screenplays and who coauthored two novels with him during his recovery .*

This example evidences the fact that word-formation processes in Spanish are somehow more restricted than in English. Thus, though "co-autor" (noun) exists, the verb *co-autorizar is not possible in this context since it would mean "to autorize something together with others". The most appropriate translations seem to be "escribir conjuntamente" or "ser la autora de... junto con...". In the former the idea of authorship or identification of Diana... as one of the authors seems to be absent. In the latter, the paraphrase is quite long, consequently losing the immediacy, economy and precision of the English language.

*Cowboy* : "to compete against established traders or operators, providing shoddy goods or services usually at low prices": *a book-length essay about the German essayist, reading, writing and cowboying.*

Resorting to a paraphrase seems to be the easiest and the only possible translation into Spanish of this denominal verb. Though Spanish has adopted both *cowboy* as a loanword and also its translation as "indio" or "vaquero", the use of an American word like this as a verb in Spanish still seems to be far from reality. Thus, the phrase "haciendo el indio" seems the most appropriate form to convey the meaning of the source language item.

*Engineer:* "to arrange, contrive, plan": *he engineered his own appointment last April in the face of opposition from Yeltsin.*

This is quite a remarkable example since the potential equivalent "ingeniar" does not refer to "Eng. engineer - Sp. ingeniero (profession)" but to "Eng. Creativity - Sp. ingenio". Other possible translations are the Spanish "urdir" or "tramar" which may be said to be more neutral than the English. Moreover, the idea of working or planning something very carefully as an engineer does or would have done, is lost.

*Father* : "to be or become the father of, to name or declare the father of (a child)": *the wily females were sneaking off so often that half their offspring turn out to be fathered by outsiders ;* "to

adopt totake the responsibility of": *Arnette's mother had only two children, one of whom had fathered only defectives.*

In both examples the translation by "engendrar" makes sense. However, in both cases the sense or meaning of the English verb is lost. The physical perspective expressed by the English verb is different from the Spanish one. While in Spanish the action is emphasized, in English the emphasis is on the agent of the action.

*Guard :* "to take up or maintain a position of defence": *police guarding the building.*

Though the word "guardar" exists in Spanish, it is not usually used in this context but in "guardar un secreto" (keep a secret) and it is usually translated into English as "keep" or "save". "Vigilar", "custodiar", "proteger", or "defender" may be appropriate translations. However, these verbs do not reflect the idea of playing the role of a guard, of a person.

*Host :* "to gather, to assemble (act as a host)": *the government of Germany [...] will uncomfortably host what promises to be a bruising battle over finances.*

As in previous examples, if we translate this verb as "ser la sede", "albergar", the metaphorical character of the English sentence is obviously lost. While the English verb may be said to be a conversion of "host" (noun), that is, "person dispensing hospitality" and therefore, metaphorically used, in Spanish there is no relation between the corresponding noun "anfitrión" and the verb "albergar". The Spanish "albergar" is quite similar in meaning to "ser la sede de". Thus, both imply that the government of Germany will be the venue for the battle over finances. In English, however, the term used is less neutral and concedes vividness and character to the country through the metaphoric use.

*Jockey :* "to play the jockey with; to try to gain an advantageous position": *some journalists jockey for space.*

While the English verb metaphorically expresses the idea of competition by identifying journalists with jockeys, it is impossible to maintain this metaphor in Spanish as the verb "competir" does not have that connotation. The only possible solution is the use of a paraphrase such as "(algunos periodistas) *compiten* (por un espacio/sitio) *como si fueran jinetes*". Anyway, the immediacy and vividness of the English verb is also lost.

*Marshal :* "to place, to arrange": *the mere approach of dawn marshaled new perspectives.*

Once again this example confirms the anisomorphism between both English and Spanish, the former being more metaphorical. Thus, *marshaled new perspectives* may be understood as "bringing new perspectives as a marshal, a police or a chief, would have done". There is then a connotative idea of power or even of necessity which is also kept in the corresponding Spanish translation "poner en orden". Another possible translation is "conducir" in the sense of "bringing forth" though it is quite a neutral verb. Thus, in spite of communicating the main idea, it cannot be said to communicate it effectively since all its connotations are lost.

*Partner :* "to associate or join with as a partner": *their finding[...] reinforced the current notion that NR1 must partner with one or more NR2 subunits to form functional receptors.*

The translation of *partner with* as "unirse con" though mantaining a similar structure, verb+preposition, it reinforces the idea of "union" or even "merger". Its English counterpart emphasizes the "association of a pair" providing the example with a

metaphorical character since applying *partner* to a chemical may be considered a personification. This metaphorical character is, however, absent in the Spanish translation since "hacerse compañero" or "actuar como compañero con" is not applicable and it does not make sense in this context.

> *Pioneer*: "to initiate (a course of action, etc)": *Miami financier Thomas Herzfeld, who pioneered close-end mutual funds, wants to pool claims in a fund*

Though the Spanish noun *pionero* exists, there is no corresponding derivative verb. Instead, the verb *pioneer* has to be translated as 'promover" or "ser el primero en promover". There are clearly translation losses: first of all, Thomas Herzfeld is no longer qualified as pioneer; secondly, "promover" has its equivalent in the English *promote*, which is more general and it does not imply that such a promotion is the first of its kind; thirdly, the Spanish "ser el primero en promover" though matching the English form quite well, it is neither economical nor vivid or immediate. Moreover, it identifies Thomas Herzfeld with the first person in promoting... which is more or less equivalent to saying that he is a pioneer in doing something, though not exactly the same.

> *Shepherd*: "to follow a person so as to cheat him": *shepherding the children*.

The slang use of the English noun *shepherd* as a verb does not have an equivalent in Spanish. It has to be translated by a completely neutral verb "guiar" or even "conducir" in the sense of "leading somebody to a place". The infomality and even what we could qualify as a somewhat pejorative use is lost in Spanish. There is no idea of comparison or identification with "shepherd-flock" as may be the case in English.

> *Spook*: "to frighten or unnerve; to alarm": *He manages to satisfy pro-life-movement leaders like the DeVoses without spooking prochoice Republicans like New Jersey state senator Diane Allen...*

This denominal verb may be said to be somehow metonymic since the converted denominal verb *spook* comes to denote the action that the entity denoted by the noun produces. This metonymic character is completely lost in the Spanish translation "asustar" which is, on the other hand, a more serious and neutral term. Though 'pegarle un susto a..." is more informal and therefore may be considered a better translation of the English slang term *spook*, it does not fit the context of the example. In other words, it does not sound natural in Spanish.

> *Star*: "to appear as a 'star', perform the leading part": *"Othello" fared better, in versions starring Emil Jannings*.

Though there seems to be no better translation than 'protagonizar", it is quite obvious that "being the most important character in a film" does not always have has the "great" connotations of "being the star". A paraphrase may also be used: "ser la estrella". Thus, in the example "... en versiones en las que Emil Jannings era la estrella". Which of these two translations is the best? It does not seem that one is better than the other but it may depend on the purposes and the context of the translation itself, that is, it depends on factors such as type of publication, the public to which it is addressed, the translator...

> *Tailor*: "to fit as a tailor does": *It is no longer easy (even if desired) to tailor national laws*.

"Confeccionar" and 'adaptar" seem to fit the message in the English example. However, "confeccionar" has lost the connotation of doing it as a tailor does and so has

"adaptar". Moreover, the Spanish terms may be said to be more formal than the English form which is, however, more illustrative.

Apart from the English converted denominal verbs studied so far, I have also included in the present study others which present the feature [-HUMAN], unlike the former. It seems interesting to analyse their potential translations in order to see whether animal and plant names used as verbs behave like [+human] ones or rather, if they are quite different.

As with [+human] denominal verbs, I have found a case in which equivalence may be said to exist, or rather, the degree of equivalence is quite high. Thus in:

> *Snake* : "to move in a creeping, or stealthy manner suggestive of the movements of a snake": *the queue snakes around Travel Books.*

The Spanish "serpentear" does perfectly express both the connotations and denotations of the English form.

Unlike the previous verb, other [-human] converted denominal verbs included in the corpus present problems of inequivalence or lower degree of equivalence and translation loss, as follows:

> *Beef up* : "to strengthen; to add vigour, power, or importance to": *banks within domestic markets are beefing up in preparation for the next stage...*

This vivid, metaphorical and illustrative English verb does not found a similar counterpart in Spanish since it is impossible for the Spanish language (at least for the time being) to form a verb from "vaca". "Reforzar", "robustecer", or "fortalecer" have to be used in its place. It is noticeable, however, that the expression "estar como una vaca" or "ponerse como una vaca" is available in Spanish and I could even say that it can often be heard in certain circles, especially when talking about size, slimming, and so on. Even although this is quite an informal expression, there is, however, no corresponding verb in Spanish. The three verbs above may be said to be neutral and therefore the informality of the English example cannot be easily expressed.

> *Clam* : "to shut up, be silent": *Norman Estep is grilled mercilessly by all the women in town, and clams up.*

The clear simile established between Norma Estep and clams is not easily translatable. Thus, the translation "ponerse muy poco comunicativo" gives the gist of the meaning but it does not have the connotations of the English word. Moreover, the informality of the English example is also lost in the corresponding Spanish translation which is more neutral and general.

> *Cock* : "to set up assertively or obtrusively (app. with reference to posture)": *the photographer squatted, cocking his head as he examined the possibilities.*

As in previous examples, the translation of the verb *cock* above as "ladear" loses its connotative and metaphoric or even pejorative meaning. The most approximate form corresponding to the Spanish "ladear" is "to tilt to one side", both being absolutely neutral.

> *Mushroom* : "to expand or increase rapidly (to rise like a mushroom)":... *women incarcerated in state prisons for drug offenses mushroomed from 667 to 6,193 – an 828% increase.*

This denominal verb is the only one found which derives from a plant name. Like the preceding types, it is also metaphoric. Its Spanish translation may be said to have a high degree of equivalence if we consider that it may be translated by "aparecer o brotar como hongos" though this lacks the economy of the English form. Other possible translations are "crecer rápidamente" or "multiplicarse", these being however less efficient in the sense that the metaphoric character of the English verb is lost.

## 3. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this paper I have tried to suggest, more than solve, problems and difficulties arising in the translation of English converted denominal verbs into Spanish. The problems suggested above seem to have two different sources. One, perhaps the most important, is the different nature of the two languages involved: Spanish has revealed itself as less metaphorical than English. Thus, at the time of translating most of the examples, there was an obvious translation loss in the Spanish forms. Moreover, Spanish is not as economical a language as English which results in an important lack of conciseness. So, most of the examples had to be translated by means of a paraphrase or an explanation.

The other source of translation difficulties may be due to the different ways of perceiving events or entities in the two cultures, difference that derives also in differences of conceptualization.

The already suggested non-equivalence between the two languages usually produces important translation losses that are not easily solved in spite of the use of paraphrases and explanations that "compile" both connotative and denotative meanings.

However, this does not mean that the two languages in this study are completely different. There are points in common as some examples above have shown (cf. *censor, cook, model, witness* and *snake*). Moreover, if there were no differences this study would probably have never been done and even, taking issues too far, we would probably speak not of two languages but would have identified only one.

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#### 4.1.1. *Corpus Sources*

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