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# **Translating sounds: the translation of onomatopoeia between English and Spanish**

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## **Table of contents**

Abstract.....	1
Keywords.....	1
Resumen .....	1
Palabras clave .....	1
1. Introduction .....	2
2. Translating onomatopoeia in context .....	3
3. Translating onomatopoeia with no direct equivalent in the target language.....	5
4. Translating mots expressifs .....	7
5. Conclusion.....	10
Bibliography .....	12

## **Abstract**

The translation of onomatopoeia is a somewhat neglected issue in translation studies. Although some English onomatopoeic forms are similar to Spanish forms or can be understood in Spanish, one should not underestimate the importance of translation as a key tool both for understanding these words and for preserving them in Spanish. Sometimes, their translation will not be based on one-to-one correspondences, and will vary depending on the context, the genre and the type of onomatopoeic word that we find. Their complexity contrasts with the lack of comparative material in this field of study and reveals that greater importance should be assigned to studies of this nature. This paper offers different strategies and solutions for translating onomatopoeia in comic books and literature, onomatopoeia with no direct equivalent in the target language and *mots expressifs*.

**Keywords:** onomatopoeia, *mots expressifs*, translation, comic books

## **Resumen**

La traducción de onomatopeyas es un tema que permanece relativamente olvidado en estudios de traducción. A pesar de que algunas de estas palabras son similares o fáciles de entender en inglés y español, su traducción es importante tanto para su correcta comprensión como para la preservación de estas palabras en español. En ocasiones, su traducción no se basa en correspondencias exactas y varía dependiendo del contexto, el género y el tipo de palabra onomatopéyica de que se trate. Esta complejidad contrasta con la falta de material comparativo en esta área de estudio y revela la importancia de conferir más relevancia a estudios de esta naturaleza. Este trabajo ofrece estrategias y soluciones diversas para la traducción de onomatopeyas en cómics y literatura, onomatopeyas sin un equivalente directo en la lengua de llegada y *mots expressifs*.

**Palabras clave:** onomatopeya, *mots expressifs*, traducción, cómics

## 1. Introduction

In *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), Ferdinand de Saussure discusses the arbitrariness of language and the manner in which words are not determined by reality; that is, neither their phonetic sequence ([teɪbəl]) nor their graphic representation (“table”) is in any essential way tied to their signified. This being so, different languages may refer to different things with different words; and that rigid piece of furniture at which we sit to work can be referred to as “table” in English, “mesa” in Spanish or “taula” in Catalan.

However, onomatopoeia is one feature of language that tries to imitate reality and would therefore be expected to more easily cross language boundaries. Onomatopoeic forms are the words in our language that reproduce sounds that are not strictly speaking human words—the sounds of the natural world—and since these are the same in every country, one would suppose that they would be reproduced by the same words in all languages. And yet because onomatopoeia is only the representation of a sound sequence and each language has its own phonetic system, the fact is that onomatopoeia varies from one language to another. Dogs saying “woof” in English, “guau” in Spanish and “bup” in Catalan is proof enough to conclude that they are arbitrary.

The overall objectives of this paper are to offer strategies to help with the translation of onomatopoeia depending on the form and context in which they are found and to raise the reader’s awareness about the importance of translating them. To this end, the paper will focus on the translation of onomatopoeia in different contexts, of those onomatopoeic forms with no direct equivalent in the target language and the specific case of *mots expressifs*.

## 2. Translating onomatopoeia in context

Translation is always subject to context and onomatopoeia is no exception. In her article *Onomatopoeia and Unarticulated language in the translation of Comic Books*, Valero Garcés distinguishes between four onomatopoeic forms: sounds produced by animals (e.g., *tweet-tweet* and *pío-pío*), unarticulated sounds produced by humans (e.g., *smack* and *plaf*), sounds expressing feelings or attitudes (e.g., *phew* and *uf*) and artificial sounds (e.g., *band* and *pum*) (2008, 241-243). All of them can be found in the most prolific publication of onomatopoeia: comic books.

The norm in the translation of comic books from English into Spanish seems to be the translation of the onomatopoeia found in bubbles, while those integrated in the panel are mostly left untranslated, as is usually the case with onomatopoeia describing artificial sounds (*Figure 1*). In the past, the reason for this could have been the difficulty of removing the onomatopoeia merged with the picture, but nowadays new technologies provide the necessary tools for a fairly straightforward substitution of onomatopoeic forms in comic books (Valero Garcés 2008, 243). The main problem is that retaining these words in the original language creates a vicious circle in which people come to understand English onomatopoeia because they are hardly ever translated and in which English onomatopoeia are not translated because people understand them. The importance and influence of English comic books does not help this, either. And here the problem is no longer the lack of understanding, but the loss of Spanish onomatopoeic forms. Apart from this, in comic books one can also find what are called chain letters, such as “alfkrlalkjdloe”, usually used to replace coarse language, which have no meaning besides the graphic function they serve and, therefore, would make no sense to translate or change.



**Figure 1:** Jim Borgman and Jerry Scott, *Zits* vol. 3, 2002, p. 16

When the onomatopoeic form is in literary texts, the approach changes completely. According to Valero Garcés, it is easier in English to create nouns and verbs from onomatopoeic forms because English is a more dynamic language (2008, 239) and, therefore, formal texts in English novels, for example, can include onomatopoeia without affecting their tone. In Spanish, however, onomatopoeic forms make the text sound more colloquial. Take, for instance, the moment in Clive Barker’s novel *Abarat* when it says: “She’d no sooner spoken than there was a deep resonant boom in the air, which shook the snow down from all the branches and blossoms in the vicinity” (2006, 20). If the word “boom” were to be translated into Spanish as “bum”, the sentence would acquire a colloquial tone that the original is not seeking. Therefore, most Spanish translators would opt for a word like “explosión” or “detonación”, since Barker uses the English onomatopoeic form as a noun. The same happens with other forms such as *crash*, *slam* and *bang*, which translators generally render with “choque”, “portazo” and “disparo”, respectively. Hence, when translating a literary or more formal text, Spanish onomatopoeia should be avoided except in the case of translating a dialogue, a book for children or a piece in which the sound of the words plays an important role.

As a special case, we can consider *wow*. The dictionary of onomatopoeia by Riera-Eures and Sanjaume offers the Spanish equivalents “gauh” and “uau” (2010, 33). However, if you look up these two forms in the Real Academia Española—the

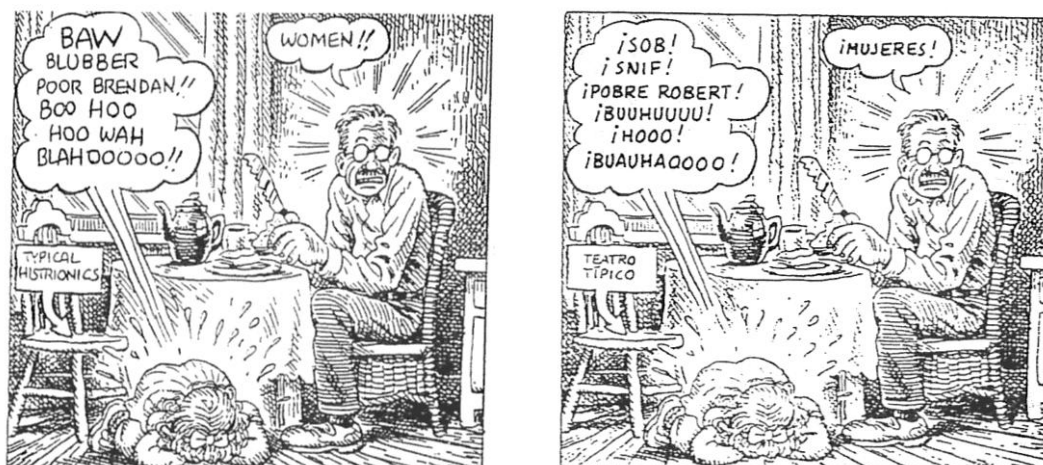
dictionary of reference in the Spanish language—there is no mention of “uau” and “guau” is only defined as the voice of a dog. It is not surprising, therefore, that *wow* is usually translated as the interjection “vaya”, instead of another onomatopoeic form. Nevertheless, in this case the choice is not made out of the tone of the text, but is to counter the lack of information on onomatopoeia in most dictionaries.

### **3. Translating onomatopoeia with no direct equivalent in the target language**

As observed above, onomatopoeic forms change across languages because of phonetic differences; that is, different languages represent natural sounds differently and according to their particular sound system. But this is not the only cause for differences across languages. Riera-Eures and Sanjaume claim that the complexity of natural sounds and our individual hearing abilities also influence how people verbalize sounds (2011, 14). They propose that we tend to use one word to describe an actual group of different sounds involved in one single process and so find different onomatopoeic forms with the same or similar use in a language. Each language will have more or less onomatopoeia for a certain sound, and some may even verbalize sounds that other languages have not incorporated. When this situation arises in translation, different strategies can be used.

One of the best solutions is to select an onomatopoeic form which is used in similar situations or for similar sounds and which evokes a sound that we could associate with that situation. In the case of English and Spanish, the former is clearly more varied in onomatopoeia, and it has, for instance, an onomatopoeic form for the sound of rabbits: *snuffle-snuffle* (Riera-Eures and Sanjaume 2010, 20). Spanish does not have this level of specificity and, therefore, probably the best solution would be to use the onomatopoeic forms “hi hi” or “iii”, which are used for other rodents such as rats or hamsters. Another

popular strategy that has also been favoured by the influence of English in comic books is the adaptation of the form in the source language to the spelling of the target language. This already happens between English and Spanish with onomatopoeia like *sniff*, which are translated as “snif” or “esnif”. In *Figure 2*, as appears in Valero’s article, it can be observed how unusual English onomatopoeic forms like *baw blubber* have been substituted by other English forms adopted in our language, such as “snif” (2008, 242). In some cases, the influence is so strong that English onomatopoeia end up substituting the Spanish form almost completely. Such is the case of *oink*, the form used for the sound of pigs, where the Spanish equivalent “ein” has been replaced by the form “oinc”, adapted from English<sup>1</sup>.



**Figure 2:** Robert Crumb, *My Troubles with Women I, II* in Valero Garcés, 2008, p. 242

However, translators can be faced with onomatopoeic forms which verbalize a sound with a highly specific meaning the other language does not have. Such is the case of English *duh*. In spoken Spanish, we could maybe say something like “uh” to convey the same meaning, but it is not a common onomatopoeia and the intonation and facial expression would play too important a role to be understood only from context in a text.

<sup>1</sup> The *Diccionario-guía de traducción* does not offer an equivalent onomatopoeic form in Spanish for English *oink* (2009, 305), whereas the *Diccionari d'onomatopeies i altres interjeccions* suggests “ein”, “oenc”, “oinc” and “oink-oink” (2010, 117), none of which is included in the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*. However, “oinc” is the form generally used in Spanish.



In this case, the specificity of the word makes it impossible to find an onomatopoeic equivalent in Spanish, and adapting its spelling would produce a word that made no sense whatsoever to Spanish people. The best solution for *duh*, therefore, would be to translate it as a word with the same meaning, such as “obviamente”, “es obvio”, “naturalmente”, or even “no soy estúpido”. In *Figure 3*, for instance, the teacher’s words could be translated as “De ahora en adelante, por favor, absteneos de contestar ‘es obvio’ a las preguntas más sencillas.” This way, we manage to maintain the same meaning and make it understandable for the reader.



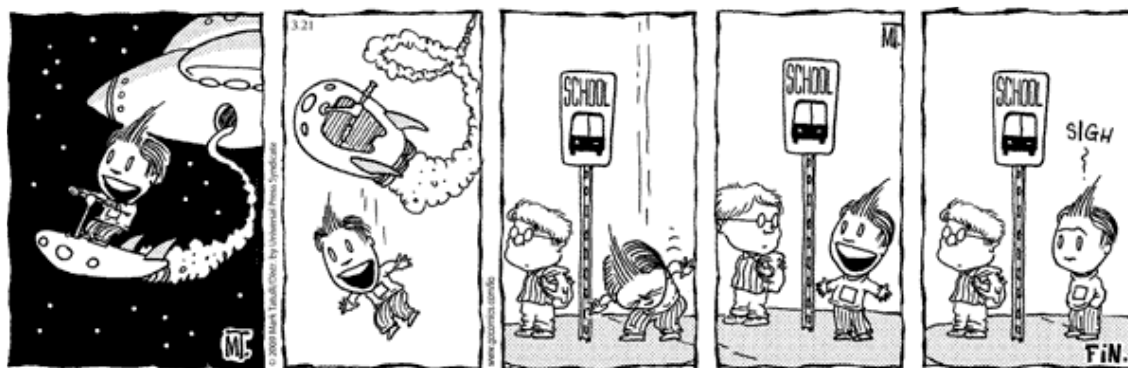
*Figure 3:* Dave Carpenter, *Untitled*, 2007

#### 4. Translating mots expressifs

Comic books in English make use of another type of onomatopoeic word to refer to sounds that erupt in a specific scene, and these are *mots expressifs*. This French phrase literally means “expressive words” and refers to phonosymbolic nouns and verbs—usually monosyllabic—that evoke a sound due to their phonological form

(Gasca 2008, 8). According to Riera-Eures and Sanjaume, the imitation of sounds played a very important role in the first stages of language development (2011, 9). Along the centuries, words have evolved from that first stage to what we know today and many words have lost their original imitative nature due to phonetic and morphological evolution and have become opaque. Take, for instance, the Spanish word *tintinear* (“to jingle”). Although the first six letters evoke the sound of a bell—and are actually used as an onomatopoeic form on their own—the morphological ending cancels the possibility to use this word as a proper onomatopoeic form.

In Spanish, therefore, *mots expressifs* are not used as onomatopoeia because the language is not as dynamic as English, “grammaticalizing these representations [of sounds] and converting them into verbs or nouns without the addition of endings” (Santoyo in Valero 2008, 239). Take now the English *mot expressif* *sigh*. The Online Etymology Dictionary offers the following information: “probably a Middle English back-formation from *sight*, past tense of Old English *sican* ‘to sigh’, perhaps echoic of the sound of sighing”. The initial sibilant and the fact that it is only one-syllable long make the word resemble the sound it names, and are also convenient for comic book writers. Consider, for instance, the following comic strip (*Figure 4*), and the published Spanish translation (*Figure 5*).



**Figure 4:** Mark Tatulli, *Lio*, 2009

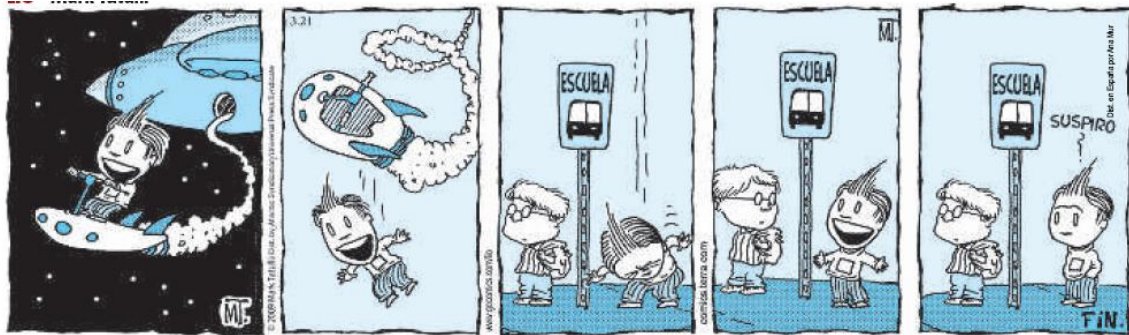
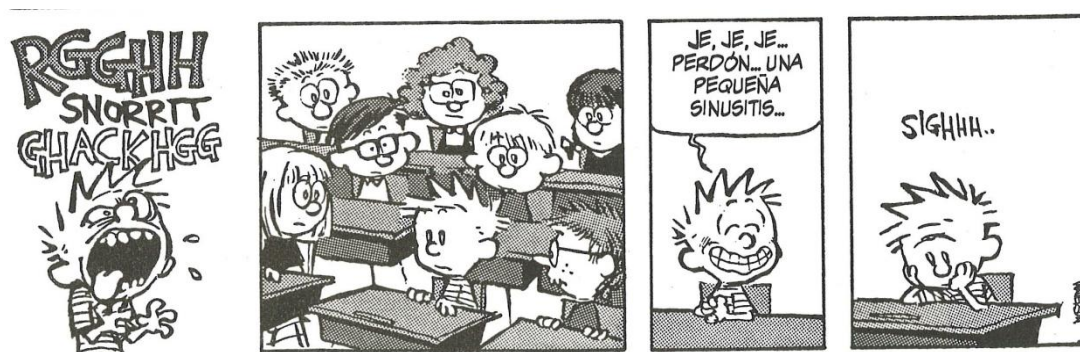


Figure 5: Mark Tatulli, *Lio*, 2009

Although the choice of “suspiro” as a translation for *sigh* does not alter the meaning of the story, one should acknowledge that this is not an accurate translation in this context. The word *suspirar* in Spanish comes from Latin *spirare* (“to breathe”), to which the prefix *su-* (“from below”) was attached, which is, in turn, an evolution of a variant of the Indo-European word *upo* (“below”). *Suspirar*, therefore, was not originally a *mot expressif*. However, in the same way the evolution of words can divest them of their imitative nature, words can also echo a sound that they did not evoke in previous stages. Michel Bréal gives the example of the French word *sourdre* (“to well up”) and observes that people perceive in it “the sound of water running over the ground” (1991, 123), even if it comes from Latin *surgere*, which did not bring that image to mind. The Spanish *suspirar*, not being a *mot expressif*, describes the idea of a sigh because of the sibilants, but the three syllables that constitute it make it too long to be associated with the sound of sighing. A more desirable translation would be the Spanish onomatopoeic form “uf” or even “ay”.

Note that in another published translation of a comic strip that contained the *mot expressif* *sigh*, the translator chose to keep the original word (Figure 6). But for Spanish readers, a word like this is going to be more difficult to intuit than a more common English-language onomatopoeic form, like *crack* or *slam*, mainly because someone who does not know English will have no idea what the word *sigh* actually sounds like.

Michel Bréal claims that “we hear the sound of nature through the words to which our ears have become more accustomed from childhood” (1991, 106), and Gerald Knowles argues that “the claimed link between sound and meaning is ultimately a subjective matter” (1987, 63). Thus, if we perceive a sigh in the phonetics of this word is partly because we know its meaning and our brain establishes a connection between the word and the sounds that could resemble a sigh. Someone who does not know this word will have a harder time trying to grasp its meaning despite its pronunciation. This proves, once again, the importance of translating onomatopoeia.



*Figure 6:* Bill Watterson, *El ataque de los monstruosos muñecos de nieve mutantes*, 2001, p. 125

## 5. Conclusion

The translation of onomatopoeia deserves more attention than it actually gets. Their differences in form and number across languages make their translation a subject of debate in which there are no infallible strategies. These differences also prove that their translation involves the same problems as the translation of language in general.

The use of onomatopoeia can affect the register of a text. Whereas genres like comic books favour the use of onomatopoeia, others like literature will usually need more formal words in languages that do not make use of onomatopoeic forms in certain registers, and this is the case of Spanish. Despite its apparent imitative nature, onomatopoeia varies across languages and not only in form. Some languages verbalize sounds that others do not, or have a wider variety of onomatopoeic forms to refer to a

specific sound. The lack of direct equivalents will sometimes force the translator to look for alternative strategies. The evolution of words has also played a role in the formation—or deformation—of onomatopoeia, and has meant that in some languages it is easier to use nouns and verbs as onomatopoeia. This is the case of English, but not of Spanish.

The resources made available to translators for solving the problems in the translation of onomatopoeia between English and Spanish are very limited. Together with the influence and importance of American comic books, this contributes to the progressive loss of Spanish forms. Onomatopoeic forms are not translated in many cases and this fosters the use of foreign forms in Spanish comics as well. The publication of more comparative studies and dictionaries would certainly help in the appropriate translation of onomatopoeia.

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