

## **Fictive orality and semantic vagueness from the translational perspective: A case study of the word 'stuff' and its translations into Spanish**

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### **Abstract**

According to Goetsch (2003) and Koch and Oesterreicher (1990), fictive orality must be understood as the illusion of orality created in a written text by exploiting a particular set of linguistic resources typical of oral language. Applying some theoretical tools taken from Descriptive Translation Studies and Contrastive Linguistics, this paper examines a typical feature of the language of oral immediacy: semantic vagueness. In order to approach the translation techniques applied by translators to address semantic vagueness in narrative texts, we have chosen to focus on the translations of the word 'stuff' in a parallel corpus of literary texts as a case study. The paper does not intend to be a comprehensive corpus-based study but rather aims to illustrate some of the possible responses of translators when interpreting the vague semantic load of a lexical unit. The analysis will also highlight the usefulness of some theoretical concepts such as point of view (Rabatel, 2003 and 2005; Raccah, 2002 and 2005a), semantic intensity (Renkema, 2001) and euphoric/dysphoric orientation (Raccah, 2002, 2005a and 2005b) to describe translation techniques from a textual perspective.

### **Keywords**

Fictive orality, semantic vagueness, 'stuff', English-Spanish translation

## 1. Introduction

The illusion of orality evoked by authors of narrative texts in order to breathe life into their literary creations raises various problems for translators. Some of them, such as identifying orality traits and their function in the source text, selecting appropriate linguistic devices to convey them in the target text or recreating a similar expressive load present a challenge for any translator. Overcoming such obstacles can certainly mean the difference between a translation that credibly recreates orality versus a more contrived one.

Applying some theoretical tools taken from Descriptive Translation Studies and Contrastive Linguistics, this paper examines a typical feature of the language of oral immediacy: semantic vagueness. Lexical units with blurry semantic borders help to present the message in imprecise terms, thus conveying poor discourse planning, in keeping with the immediacy of oral spontaneity. Interpreting vague terms always activates an inferential process based on knowledge or experiences which the speaker presents as something shared and thus able to be inferred by the addressee. In order to approach the translation techniques applied by translators to address semantic vagueness, we have chosen to focus on the translations of the word 'stuff' in a parallel corpus of literary texts as a case study. The paper does not intend to be a comprehensive corpus-based study but rather aims to illustrate some of the possible responses of translators when interpreting the vague semantic load of a lexical unit. The analysis will also highlight the usefulness of some theoretical concepts such as point of view (Rabatel, 2003 and 2005; Raccah, 2002 and 2005a), semantic intensity (Renkema, 2001) and euphoric/dysphoric orientation (Raccah, 2002, 2005a and 2005b) to describe translation techniques from a textual perspective.

## 2. Theoretical framework and corpus description

The construction of meaning in any natural language production relies on the human ability to relate abstract representations to their actualisation in a given context. From this perspective, words generate representations which are associated with a given socio-cultural frame. By combining certain words, speakers construct scripts which refer to real-life situations, known and recognized by the addressees. But translation modifies this communicative situation and makes it even more complex.

As most current trends in Translation Studies fully accept, the interpretative act activated by translation establishes a complex and dynamic link between the semantic and pragmatic instructions given by the text and the linguistic and cultural background of the translator. As Christine Durieux (2007) points out, subjectivity plays a key role in this personal background:

Non seulement les connaissances acquises du traducteur le guident dans son accès au sens du contenu du texte à traduire mais aussi tout son système de valeurs intervient dans le processus d'interprétation-compréhension et contribue à l'orienter (Durieux, 2007, p. 51).

Translators, when interpreting the verbal content of a text, take on textual meaning to reconstruct it from their own framework of beliefs and values. As a result, they build cross-cultural bridges, but their intervention can hardly be an invisible filter because, in this process, they apply their communicative, cultural and personal values to the text they are reconstructing. This becomes particularly obvious when translators cope with lexical units

with blurry semantic borders, as they are faced with the question of whether to preserve the vagueness of the source text or to stabilize it by choosing a more precise term.

Taking these general premises as a starting point, the contrastive analysis presented in this paper is based on three main theoretical concepts:

-*Point of view*, which can be understood as different ways of framing specific verbal productions into mental representations. This notion is based on the assumption that language is a sort of mirror which reflects the speaker's cultural and cognitive representations: meaning is built on the speaker's general universe of beliefs, but he/she always chooses his/her own principles and attaches a particular orientation to terms. This personal orientation reflects, directly or indirectly, personal value judgments on the status of discourse referents. Therefore, we could say that point of view constitutes a general form of expressing the speaker's subjectivity (Rabatel, 2003 and 2005; Raccah, 2002 and 2005a).

-*Semantic intensity*, which, according to Renkema (2001), must be considered one of the main manifestations of modality. It provides information on the speaker's attitude with regard to the propositional content of the message. It is linked to the general and specific meaning of words and presupposes a scalar order of synonyms.

-*Euphory* and *dysphory*, which refer to value judgements intrinsically connected to words (Raccah, 2002). Positivity is always associated with euphoric words, whereas dysphoric words convey negativity in all contexts. Moreover, there are words allowing ambiguity, as they can be euphoric or dysphoric according to the speaker's intentionality and the cultural framework in which they are used (Raccah, 2005a and 2005b).

Applying these theoretical tools to an analysis of translation techniques (Molina & Hurtado, 2002) on a lexical level should allow us to describe more accurately the minimum instructions given by each lexeme to construct meaning, since: "Normally, one translates ideas, on which words act as constraints" (Newmark, 1982, p. 135). The classic concept of translation techniques still appears nowadays as a key theoretical tool in descriptive studies aiming to identify regularities in translation patterns. The first attempts to systematise the translator's expressive resources date from a time in which there was a strong dependence on translation and linguistics, as shown in Fedorov's (1968) or Levy's (1969) taxonomies, for example. Among these early works, that which had the greatest impact was undoubtedly Vinay and Dalbernet's *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais* (1958), although it has also been widely criticized for not taking into account the communicative and pragmatic dimension of the translation process. But these contributions have nonetheless served as the starting point for more recent studies aimed at broadening the scope of descriptive translation studies. Thus, the taxonomy of translation techniques put forward by Molina and Hurtado (2002) from a functionalist perspective tries to systematise existing classifications established from heterogeneous criteria. The authors define this concept in the following terms:

[...] We define translation techniques as procedures to analyse and classify how translation equivalence works. They have five basic characteristics: 1) They affect the result of the translation; 2) They are classified by comparison with the original; 3) They affect micro-units of text; 4) They are by nature discursive and contextual; 5) They are functional. (Molina & Hurtado, 2002, p. 509)

By applying this concept to the contrastive analysis of the corpus, we should be able to determine to what extent the lexical solutions chosen by translators to convey the vagueness

of 'stuff' result in semantic coincidences. These micro-textual shifts could have a great impact on the reader of the target texts in terms of construction of meaning at a macro-textual level.

In order to describe the semantic instructions of the word 'stuff' and illustrate how translators deal with its vagueness in narrative dialogues, we have assembled a corpus of twenty-two 20<sup>th</sup>-century British and American novels now considered literary classics. These narrative texts have been translated into Spanish by recognised translators and published by prestigious publishing companies. Whenever possible, we have included a second version of the original text in order to broaden the range of interpretative options. The original novels and their translations are all part of the author's personal collection. As regards corpus construction, the texts were collected in PDF files and the instances of 'stuff' were retrieved manually using the 'search' function. Following that, the excerpts in which 'stuff' appears were selected including enough surrounding co-text for the textual interpretation. Finally, the original and translated excerpts were compared and aligned in another document to arrive at a list of contextualized occurrences.

### 3. Contrastive analysis: 'stuff' and its translations into Spanish

To give credibility to dialogues present in planned discourses, authors of literary texts select a certain set of linguistic features over others. The starting point of our study is the model set out by Koch and Oesterreicher (1990). According to these authors, the traditional dichotomy between 'oral' versus 'written' discourse must be superseded by a continuum operating between two poles: 'language of immediacy' (*Sprache der Nähe*) and 'language of distance' (*Sprache der Distanz*), regardless of medium and channel. Thus, the language of immediacy may be of oral conception, even if it occurs in a written medium, and the language of distance may be of a written conception, even if it occurs in a spoken medium. According to Goetsch (2003) and Koch and Oesterreicher (1990), fictive orality must be understood as the illusion of orality created in a written text by exploiting a particular set of linguistic resources typical of oral language and is a specific and structured modality placed along this continuum.

The use of vague lexical units, especially recurring in spontaneous oral language, is a distinguishing feature of "the low intensity of lexical variation in colloquial modality, dominated by iteration, where speakers choose general broad-reference terms such as 'cosa' or 'hacer,' known as 'wildcard words'" (López Serena, 2007, p. 179; our translation). A high degree of understanding between interlocutors together with spontaneity in the character's interventions are conditions of the communicative situation which encourage the use of these sorts of lexemes. As they are semantically vague, they are firmly anchored in the communicative action and situation, so they can only be exploited in the language of immediacy. This feature must therefore be taken into account in translation so as not to undermine the credibility of fictive orality in literary texts.

According to bibliographical references, 'stuff' is a wildcard word with a high recurrence in colloquial language, capable of replacing other precise expressions in several contexts:<sup>1</sup>

Matter, material, articles, or activities of a specified or indeterminate kind that are being referred to, indicated, or implied: 'a lorry picked the stuff up,' 'the mud was horrible stuff,' 'a girl who's good at the technical stuff,' 'all that running and swimming and stuff.' [OED]

<sup>1</sup> See Andújar Moreno (2010) for a contrastive English-Spanish analysis of some closing pragmatic markers such as 'and stuff like that,' 'and all that stuff,' 'and that stuff.'

Therefore, 'stuff' combines a low accuracy of semantic content (minimal intension) with a high degree of denotation (maximum extension). In the corpus of our study, we have retrieved 107 instances of this lexeme by using the 'search' function of the PDF file. Although in some contexts 'stuff' is accompanied by a noun, in most cases this lexeme occurs without syntactic complements. Paul Auster's novel *The Brooklyn Follies* is a case in point; in example (1), the main character Nathan Glass meets Nancy Mazzucchelli, another important character in the plot:

(1)

She cracked another smile and laughed. Who is this silly person, she must have been wondering, and why is he talking to me like this? I decided the moment had come to introduce myself. "I'm Nathan, by the way," I said. "Nathan Glass."

"Hello, Nathan. I'm Nancy Mazzucchelli. And I'm not an artist."

"Oh?"

"I make jewelry."

"That's cheating. Of course you're an artist."

"Most people would call it a craft."

"I suppose it depends on how good your work is. Do you sell the things you make?"

"Of course. I have my own business."

"Is your store in the neighborhood?"

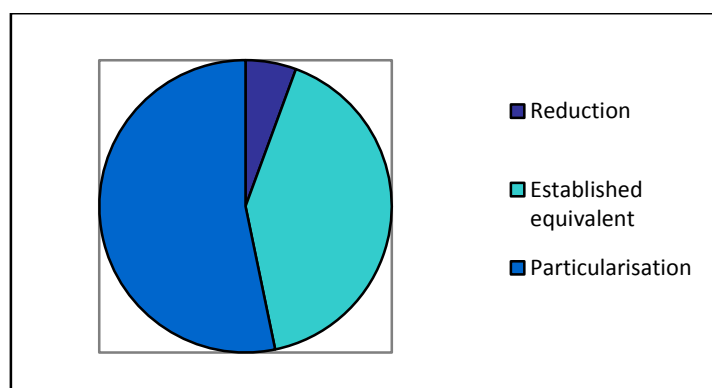
"I don't have a store. But a bunch of places on Seventh Avenue carry my *stuff*. I also sell things out of the house." [Auster, 2006]

The interpretation of the word 'stuff' must always be based on previous textual excerpts, so this lexeme plays an important role in achieving textual cohesion. Its minimal semantic instruction leads the addressee to turn to previous co-text to find a referent possessing the 'lifeless' feature within its semantics. In example (1), 'stuff' serves as this sort of referent which the addressee can easily decode because both speaker and addressee share a common ground of interpretation. Within the field of frame semantics, Ana María Rojo López (2002), following Minsky (1975), has labelled these interpretative structures 'visual frames':

Visual frames refer to the interpretation structures that take part in the configuration of objects and scenes in visual perception. Visual frames function like other types of frames: they generate expectations and allow us to infer details that we have not actually seen by providing 'absent' information on the basis of previous visual experiences. (Rojo López, 2002, p. 316)

In the above example, both speaker and addressee know that 'making jewelry' involves necklaces, earrings, rings, bracelets, etc. When this frame is activated, the addressee is able to evoke a mental image of the elements categorized as 'stuff.' From a pragmatic point of view, this lexeme is a powerful tool to highlight shared knowledge and assumptions between members of the same linguistic community. Thus, 'stuff' is a marker of complicity and positive politeness between interlocutors, as it places them on a common interpretative ground within a particular socio-cultural context.

The translation of 'stuff' in occurrences such as that in example (1) is resolved in the corpus by applying three main translation techniques (Molina & Hurtado, 2002): reduction, established equivalent and particularisation. Figure 1 reflects the frequency with which they occur:



**Figure 1.** Translation techniques applied in the corpus to translate 'stuff'

Once the contextualised instances of 'stuff' were retrieved from the corpus, each excerpt was studied qualitatively and a taxonomy established according to the translation technique applied in the target text. The data on frequency shown in figure 1 has been calculated from the total amount of 107 instances. As indicated above, particularisation is the most frequent translation technique, as well as the one with more implications for the reader in terms of translator intervention and construction of meaning. The next section of the study examines the main data obtained from the contrastive analysis of translation techniques.

### 3.1 Reduction

Reduction is a minority technique in the corpus representing 5.6% of the total. This percentage illustrates translators' strong preference for neutralising semantic vagueness by using some kind of lexical correspondence in the target language. A reductive translation choice through which a translator omits the target text segment corresponding to 'stuff' in the source text involves a high degree of intervention, because it eliminates semantic vagueness without compensations in other parts of the target text. Translators could have made up for the loss of the oral effect by selecting appropriate linguistic means to recreate the oral effect in other textual areas and thus maintain the general equivalence of intention. As a result of systematic omission, the credibility of the alleged oral nature of the character's interventions is undermined. A representative example of this can be found in a passage of Graham Greene's *The Third Man* and its Spanish translation:

(2)

This I have sometimes called stage two. Stage three was when the organizers decided that the profits were not large enough. Penicillin would not always be impossible to obtain legitimately; they wanted more money and quicker money while the going was good. They began to **dilute the penicillin with coloured water**, and, in the case of **penicillin dust, with sand**. I keep a small museum in one drawer in my desk, and I showed Martins examples. He wasn't enjoying the talk, but he hadn't yet grasped the point. He said, 'I suppose that makes **the stuff** useless.' I said, 'We wouldn't worry so much if that was all, but just consider. You can be immunized from the effects of penicillin. At the best you can say that

A esto le he llamado yo a veces la etapa número dos. La etapa número tres empezó cuando los organizadores decidieron que los beneficios no eran lo bastante grandes. No iba a ser siempre imposible conseguir legalmente la penicilina; querían más dinero y con más rapidez mientras la cosa iba bien. Empezaron a **diluir la penicilina con agua coloreada** y en el caso del **polvo de penicilina lo mezclaban con arena**. Guardo un pequeño museo en un cajón de mi escritorio y le enseñé varias muestras a Martins. No le agradaba mucho la conversación, pero todavía no había comprendido lo que yo quería que entendiera. Dijo: «Supongo que eso echa a perder **el producto**.»

the use of **this stuff** makes a penicillin treatment for the particular patient ineffective in the future. [Greene, 1971]

«No nos habría preocupado mucho si eso hubiera sido todo», le dije, «pero escuche lo que voy a decirle. Le puede inmunizar contra los efectos de la penicilina. En el mejor de los casos **[0]** convierte en ineficaz para el paciente un tratamiento futuro a base de penicilina. [Greene, 1995; Barbara McShane and Javier Alfaya's translation]

In example (2), as happens in all the excerpts of the corpus where 'stuff' is eliminated in translations, the translator's reduction must be linked to the analysis of the anaphoric chains at a macro-textual level. As we well know, anaphoric chains contribute to create theme and rheme textual patterns which ensure the continuity and progression of the information flow. These anaphoric chains are not built upon strict identity relationships between textual referents. Instead, heterogeneous textual mechanisms come into play to refer to the same referent, which in turn becomes richer as new informative elements are added in the textual flow. In example (2), where the anaphoric links are highlighted in bold, the translators have completely omitted the second occurrence of 'stuff,' perhaps because they considered it repetitive. In suppressing these anaphoric links that do not add new semantic information but are linked to stylistic and expressive purposes of fictive orality, translators might be following what Gideon Toury defines as the law of growing standardisation (Toury, 1995; Laviosa-Braithwaite, 1998, p. 288-291), "one of the most persistent, unbending norms in translation in all languages studied so far." (Toury, 1995, p. 188)

### 3.2 Established equivalent

Preserving semantic vagueness using appropriate target-language lexemes is the second most common type of translation technique (41% of the total). When translators choose an equivalent, they prefer vague and neutrally-oriented expressions, which force the addressee to infer the referent's euphory or dysphory depending on the context, as happens in the source text. The most frequent translation is 'cosas,' the lexeme recognized in bilingual dictionaries as an established equivalent (Molina & Hurtado, 2002, p. 510). Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* offers an example:

(3)

"That's not bad. I've never been to bed with a writer. No, wait: do you know Benny Shacklett?" She frowned when I shook my head. "That's funny. He's written an awful lot of radio **stuff**." [Capote, 1993]

—No está mal. Nunca me he acostado con un escritor. Aunque, espera, ¿conoces a Benny Shacklett? —Al verme decir que no con la cabeza, puso un gesto ceñudo—. Qué raro. Ha escrito montones de **cosas** para la radio. [Capote, 1995; Fernando Rodríguez's translation]

In these cases, the established equivalent 'cosa' (Molina & Hurtado, 2002, p. 510) has a similar discursive function in Spanish, is frequent in oral spontaneous language and also highlights the 'lifeless' semantic feature of the referent to be inferred by the addressee.

The second most common translator response is to replace 'stuff' with different lexemes that establish wide anaphoric connections with previous textual elements, even at the risk of diminishing colloquialism in the character's interventions. 'Algo' is the preferred option in all these cases, as shown in example (4):

(4)

Spade put his packages on the kitchen-table and went into the bedroom. He sat on the bed beside the girl, kissed her smooth shoulder, and said: “I wanted to see if that kid was still on the job, and to get **stuff** for breakfast.” [Hammett, 1992]

Spade dejó los paquetes en la mesa de la cocina y entró en el dormitorio. Se sentó en la cama, al lado de la chica,  
le besó el hombro suave y dijo:  
— Quería saber si ese chico seguía de guardia y comprar **algo** para el desayuno. [Hammett, 1994; Francisco Páez de la Cadena’s translation]

By using the undefined quantifier ‘algo’—a lexeme also recognised by dictionaries as an established equivalent— the speaker activates a non-conceptual mention (Fernández Ramírez, 1987, p. 301). In example (4), taken from Dashiell Hammett’s *The Third Man*, the referent mentioned by the quantifier ‘algo’ remains unclassified, but it is nevertheless accessible to the addressee. ‘Desayuno’ activates an interpretative visual frame that enables the addressee to identify the relevant food in terms of textual coherence. Such a non-conceptual reference is an effective technique through which to reproduce the semantic vagueness of ‘stuff’ in our corpus, although it slightly reduces the oral effect of the text. In addition to ‘algo,’ translators use neutral demonstrative pronouns with the same purpose, as seen in example (5), from Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* and its Spanish version:

(5)

After four years, and fighting through the whole goddam Korean war, I ought at least to have made corporal. But I never did. Know why? Because the sergeant we had was tough. Because I wouldn’t roll over. Jesus, I hate that **stuff**. I can’t stand it. [Capote, 1958]

Después de cuatro años de luchar en toda aquella cochina guerra de Corea, por lo menos tenían que haberme hecho cabo. Pero no, ¿sabe por qué? Porque el sargento que teníamos era una bestia de marica. Y yo no me dejaba. Jesús, no puedo con **eso**. No puedo soportarlo. [Capote, 1990; Enrique Murillo’s translation]

In such cases, pronouns refer to general concepts, ideas, acts or complex enunciates which are difficult to summarise in a simple nominal concept. Thus, from the speaker’s point of view, they are versatile linguistic devices, since they provide room for references to complex entities of a different nature, although they require an additional cognitive effort on the part of the addressee in order to interpret them.

### 3.3 Particularisation

Particularisation is a form of semantic explicitation and the most frequent translation technique in the corpus (53.2% of the total). In these cases, translators neutralise semantic vagueness by using more specific lexemes reflecting a subjective point of view (Molina & Hurtado, 2002, p. 510).

Based on Toury’s notions of obligatory and non-obligatory shifts (Toury, 1995, p. 57), the particularisations found in the corpus are non-obligatory, because there are no linguistic constraints forcing the translator to specify; a more literal and less precise translation is therefore possible, because the target language offers lexical units with similar vagueness and discursive function. Nevertheless, translators make a lexical choice and decide to make information explicit, thus verbalising information that the addressee might be able to infer and narrowing down an interpretation which remains open in the source text (Klaudy, 2008; Becher, 2010a and 2010b). The high recurrence rate of such lexical particularisation in the corpus clearly demonstrates that translators feel uncomfortable with ellipsis and vagueness (Chevalier & Delport, 1995, p. 50).



The discursive regularities we have identified in the corpus allow us to define two sub-categories of occurrences depending on whether or not there is a shift towards an explicit dysphory in the translation. In both sub-categories, the orality marker and the speaker appealing to shared knowledge are lost in the Spanish version.

The first category is that of neutral hypernyms. In these occurrences, the discursive function of 'stuff' is conveyed in translation by using hypernyms which clarify the referent alluded to by the speaker. From an axiological point of view, these hypernyms are neither euphoric nor dysphoric, but they become imbued with the positive or negative orientation of the immediate co-text. This translation technique is applied in example (6), an excerpt from Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and its two translations into Spanish by Francisco Abelenda and Alfredo Crespo:

(6)

Then they'll feel they're thinking, they'll get a sense of motion without moving. And they'll be happy, because facts of that sort don't change. Don't give them any slippery *stuff* like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with. That way lies melancholy.

[Bradbury, 1953]

Les parecerá que están pensando, tendrán una sensación de movimiento sin moverse. Y serán felices, pues los hechos de esa especie no cambian. No les des *materias* resbaladizas, como filosofía o psicología, que engendran hombres melancólicos.

[Bradbury, 1985; Francisco Abelenda's translation]

Entonces, tendrán la sensación de que piensan, tendrán la impresión de que se mueven sin moverse. Y serán felices, porque los hechos de esta naturaleza no cambian. No les des ninguna *materia* delicada como Filosofía o Sociología para que empiecen a atar cabos. Por ese camino se encuentra la melancolía.

[Bradbury, 1993; Alfredo Crespo's translation]

In this passage, a discursive movement from general to particular takes place in which both translators categorise 'filosofía' and 'sociología/psicología' [sic] as particular elements of 'materias' ("Asignatura, disciplina científicas", DRAE). Thus, the vague semantic content of the source text is specified in the translation. Besides guiding the interpretation of the addressee, this translation technique implies the loss of the colloquial marker, and the euphory or dysphory of the lexical choice should be inferred from the context and the reader's world knowledge.

The translators' efforts to guide the reader's interpretation by using hypernyms may result in widely divergent micro-semantic scenes in different versions of the same novel. Let us compare these excerpts taken from Eric Ambler's *Epitaph for a Spy* and the two Spanish versions by M. Pais Antigueira and J. Vacarezza:

(7)

"They kept me there for three months. I was not charged. They did not even question me. All I could get out of them was that my case was being considered. The first month, while I was getting used to it, was the worst part. Those police weren't bad fellows. One of them even told me that he

»Me retuvieron allí durante tres meses. Nadie presentó ninguna acusación contra mí. Ni siquiera me interrogaron. Todo lo que conseguí que me dijeran es que mi caso estaba siendo estudiado. El primer mes fue el peor porque no estaba acostumbrado. Aquellos policías no eran malos chicos.

»Allí me retuvieron durante tres meses. No se me acusó de nada. Ni siquiera me interrogaron. Todo lo que pude averiguar fue que mi caso estaba pendiente. El primer mes fue el peor de todos, mientras me acostumbraba a mi nueva situación. Esos policías no eran mala gente.

<p>had sometimes read my <b>stuff</b>. But at the end of the three months I was moved to a concentration camp near Hanover.” [Ambler, 1970]</p>	<p>Uno de ellos incluso me confesó que había leído varias veces mi <b>expediente</b>. Al cabo de tres meses fui trasladado a un campo de concentración cerca de Hannover. [Ambler, 1971; M. Pais Antiqueira’s translation]</p>	<p>Uno de ellos me dijo que a veces solía leer mis <b>artículos</b>. Pero al finalizar los tres meses me llevaron a un campo de concentración situado cerca de Hannover. [Ambler, 1969; Julio M. Vacarezza’s translation]</p>
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In the first translation of example (7), the policeman who is holding the main character in custody is reading his ‘expediente’ (“Conjunto de todos los papeles correspondientes a un asunto o negocio. Se usa señaladamente hablando de la serie ordenada de actuaciones administrativas”, DRAE), whereas in the second version the same policeman is reading ‘artículos.’ The main character is under arrest in a Nazi prison for clandestine journalistic activities, so the second micro-semantic scene seems more consistent with the context in which the word ‘stuff’ occurs. Such semantic shifts illustrate how the translator’s subjective filters exert a decisive influence on the reading of a novel at all textual levels.

The second category is that of dysphoric lexemes in the translation. In this case, the translator’s lexical choices involve semantic shifts exploiting negative value judgments and subjective points of view. In all of these cases, translators prefer lexemes with precise semantic content that always convey negative connotations. These translation options are more in line with the translators’ interpretative filters and thus more conventional in terms of their belief system. For example, in this passage of *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott’s famous novel, Jo gets angry when her sister Meg explains that their friendship with Laurie is seen as selfish by their mutual acquaintances:

(8)

“I couldn’t, it was so embarrassing for me. I couldn’t help hearing at first, and then I was so angry and ashamed, I didn’t remember that I ought to go away.”

“Just wait till I see Annie Moffat, and I’ll show you how to settle such ridiculous **stuff**. The idea of having ‘plans’ and being kind to Laurie because he’s rich and may marry us by-and-by! [Alcott, 1998]

—No podía, me resultaba demasiado embarazoso. Al principio, no pude evitar oírlas y, luego, estaba tan furiosa y avergonzada que no pensé en alejarme.

—Espera a que vea a Annie Moffat. Te enseñaré cómo poner fin a **chismes** ridículos. ¿De modo que piensan que tenemos un plan y somos amables con Laurie porque es rico y podría casarse con una de nosotras? [Alcott, 2004; Gloria Méndez’s translation]

In Gloria Méndez’s translation in example (8), the vague lexeme seems to be influenced by the dysphory conveyed by the adjective ‘ridiculous’ occurring in the immediate co-text (“Deserving or inviting derision or mockery”, OED). The negativity of the co-text encourages an explicitly negative lexeme in the translation (“Chismes: Noticia verdadera o falsa, o comentario con que generalmente se pretende indisponer a unas personas con otras o se murmura de alguna”, DRAE). The same discursive regularity is evidenced in example (9) taken from Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*:

(9)

It’s the usual story, the usual stories. God to Adam, God to Noah. *Lie fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth*. Then comes the moldy

Es el relato de costumbre, los relatos de costumbre. Dios hablando a Adán. Dios hablando a Noé. Creced y multiplicaos y poblad

old Rachel and Leah **stuff** we had drummed into us at the Center. [Atwood, 1998]

la tierra. Después viene toda esa **tontería** aburrida de Raquel y Leah que nos machacaban en el Centro. [Atwood, 1987; Elsa Mateo Blanco's translation]

Elsa Mateo's lexical solution in the translation in example (9), 'tontería' ("Hecho o dicho sin fundamento o sin base lógica," CL), seems to be conditioned by the previous adjective 'moldy' ("tediously old-fashioned," OED). However, in other examples, the Spanish versions make a dysphory—which can only be inferred from the context without any adjective conditioning the reader's interpretation—explicit, as can be seen in example (10), Fernando Rodríguez's version of *In Cold Blood*:

(10)

Spent New Year's Eve snowed up in a motel in Albuquerque. Boy, when they finally hit Vegas, they needed good whiskey and good news. I was ready with both. Our young men had signed waivers of extradition. Better yet: We had the boots, both pairs, and the soles—the Cat's Paw and the diamond pattern—matched perfectly life-size photographs of the footprints found in the Clutter house. The boots were in a box of **stuff** the boys picked up at the post office just before the curtain fell. Like I told Al Dewey, suppose the squeeze had come five minutes sooner! [Capote, 1993]

Pasaron la Nochevieja aislados por la nieve en un hotel de Alburquerque. Caramba, cuando por fin llegaron a Las Vegas, falta les hacía un buen whisky y buenas noticias. Yo los aguardaba con las dos cosas. Nuestros jovencitos habían firmado sendas renuncias de extradición. Y algo todavía mejor: teníamos las botas, los dos pares, y las suelas: las Cat's Paw y las de dibujo a rombos, correspondían exactamente con las huellas encontradas en la casa de los Clutter. Las botas venían en una caja llena de **trastos** que acababan de recoger de correos precisamente un momento antes de que cayera el telón. Como le decía yo a Al Dewey: «Imaginate si la patrulla llega cinco minutos antes». [Capote, 1995; Fernando Rodríguez's translation]

'Trastos' ("Cosa inútil, estropeada, vieja o que estorba mucho", DRAE) results in an explicit shift towards negativity motivated by the translator's personal interpretation. Such subjective shifts become more obvious in contexts where characters express negative feelings and emotions, as this excerpt from Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* shows. In example (11), Amory, the main character, gets angry when his friend Carling asks for a painkiller in a bar:

(11)

He heard Carling addressing a remark to the bartender:

"Give him a bromo-seltzer."

Amory shook his head indignantly.

"None of that **stuff**!"

"But listen, Amory, you're making yourself sick. You're white as a ghost." [Fitzgerald, 1920]

Oyó a Carling que decía al barman:

—Déle un alcaseltzer.

Amory sacudió la cabeza indignado.

—Nada de **porquerías**.

—Pero escucha, Amory, te estás poniendo

enfermo. Estás pálido como un fantasma. [Fitzgerald, 1984; Juan Benet Goitia's translation]

In such examples, translators reinterpret the emotional load of the source text within their linguistic and cultural framework of reference. Since emotions and feelings are attached to personal experiences, the exact meaning underlying each expression may vary from person to person. In this case, the Spanish lexeme 'porquería,' ("Cosa que no gusta o no agrada," DRAE), in addition to expressing a strong feeling of disdain, is an explicit marker of emotional distance. Such emotional load is implicit in the source text. The semantic divergence between source

and target texts becomes more pronounced in contexts where the source text's colloquialism turns into vulgarity in translation, as we see in example (12):

(12)

<p>She does that again and I'm not here, Moira said to me, you just have to slap her like that. You can't let her go slipping over the edge. That <b>stuff</b> is catching. [Atwood, 1998]</p>	<p>Si vuelve a hacerlo y yo no estoy aquí, me dijo Moira, sólo tienes que abofetearla. No hay que permitirle que pierda la noción de la realidad. Esa <b>mierda</b> es contagiosa. [Atwood, 1987; Elsa Mateo Blanco's translation]</p>
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The vulgar lexeme 'mierda' ("Cosa sin valor o mal hecha," DRAE), chosen by Elsa Mateo in the Spanish version of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, aggressively denies the referent its value. As a result, the emotional distance of the referent to the speaker is significantly increased in the target text, which expresses a stronger feeling of anger in comparison to the original. The accumulation of such intensity shifts throughout the course of the translation may alter character idiolects, as well as the reader's representation of such characters and the feelings and emotions expressed by them in the literary text.

#### 4. Conclusions

This paper has primarily focused on the function of semantic vagueness in mimicking spoken language in literary dialogues. As we have seen, the language of proximity recreated in narrative texts draws on some linguistic strategies specific to the oral conception in order to give credibility to the characters' discourses. One such specific strategy is mentioning a precise referent by using lexemes with very general semantic features. In order to explore how translators deal with such lexemes, we selected the translation of 'stuff' as a case study by examining 107 occurrences of this lexical unit in a corpus comprising twenty-two British and American novels and their translations into Spanish.

From a discursive point of view, the strong anchoring to the communicative situation of dialogues in narrative texts, together with familiarity, emotional implication, spontaneity or understanding between characters, create a favourable context for the speaker to use the word 'stuff'. Moreover, from a semantic and pragmatic perspective, one of the specific characteristics of communicative immediacy is the possibility of alluding to precise referents using lexemes containing general semantic traits. In particular, 'stuff' gives the addressee the minimal instruction to search for a referent with the semantic 'lifeless' trait in the immediate co-text. The limited semantic accuracy of this lexeme requires the addressee to intensely cooperate in an active process of meaning construction. Therefore, textual interpretation is always based on the interlocutor's supposedly shared knowledge which must be activated through contextual information.

The translation techniques applied in this corpus of narrative texts reveal the translator's preference for reducing or neutralising vagueness in the Spanish versions by using more precise solutions. These lexical translation choices result in meaning shifts incorporating different points of view and euphoric/dysphoric orientations in target texts. The following table summarises the most frequent translation techniques in the corpus, as well as their implications for readers of the target texts:

Translation technique	Frequency	Discursive regularities	Implications for target readers
Reduction	5.6%	a) Suppression without compensation b) Made possible by the articulation of textual anaphoric chains with theme/rheme elements	a) Loss of vagueness b) Loss of colloquialism c) Significant change in the character's idiolect
Established equivalent	41%	a) Established equivalent: 'cosa' b) Less-frequent translations: non-conceptual references ('algo' / 'esto', 'eso')	a) Blurred colloquialism b) Slight change in the character's idiolect
Particularization	53%	a) Translation using neutral hypernyms b) Translation using more dysphoric hypernyms	a) More precise semantic content b) Loss of colloquialism c) More negative lexical choices in translations d) More vulgar lexical choices in translations e) Significant change in the character's idiolect

**Table 1.** Translation solutions in the corpus, and main implications for target readers

Particularisation, the most frequent translation technique in the corpus, highlights the translators' preference to specify the semantic content of the original lexeme. This translational response seems somewhat surprising given that in source texts there are neither linguistic nor translation constrictions imposing more explicit solutions. The target language offers linguistic resources to recreate vagueness. This translation technique also allows us to see how the translators' subjective filters are projected in the attempt to stabilise fuzzy semantic content in their versions.

By applying the concepts of point of view, semantic intensity and euphoric/dysphoric orientation to the contrastive analysis, the description of translation techniques allows for greater precision with regard to different approaches to translations of the same semantic content. The translation shifts involving the above-mentioned concepts have shown that translators prefer lexical solutions that blur the colloquialism of literary dialogues, clarify the referents alluded to in the text and, as a result, undermine the credibility of the text's fictive orality. This general tendency towards more explicitness in translation could fall into the category of the so-called 'universals of translation:' those regularities or general laws of translation that are repeated regardless of the two languages involved in the textual transfer process (Baker, 1993, p. 243).

The results of the comparison between source and target texts indicate that, when reconstructing the orality of narrative texts, the translation problem posed by lexemes with vague semantic content, such as 'stuff,' cannot be simplified by claiming that all the occurrences of the lexeme must be translated by the same vague lexeme of the target

language. Since use of such lexemes is related to the recreation of orality in source texts, we could argue that this is a textual manifestation of a perlocutionary effect intended by the author (Hickey, 1998, p. 220). It is therefore necessary to strike a proper balance between the constrictions of the source pole, those of the target pole and the personal choices of the translator with regard to orality. The different versions studied in the corpus reveal that translators can never be objective cultural mediators because, when managing the uniqueness of each language, they exploit the full potential of words to reflect reality perceived from different angles. Each translational response is, therefore, one with a high degree of subjectivity and the result of a personal interpretative process which can sometimes have far-reaching implications for the readers of target texts.

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