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# Irony in Popular Fiction: Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* in Film and in Translation

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## 1. Introduction

§ An essential element of Raymond Chandler's fictional magic is his ironic narrative technique, but no study has specifically examined the linguistic mechanisms behind this irony, much less these mechanisms in translation. In this presentation, I will analyze the mechanisms behind the ironic treatment of the character Carmen Sternwood in Chandler's first novel, *The Big Sleep* (1939). Then, I will go on to analyze how they are dealt with in translation into the medium of film and into Spanish. I will use these analyses to draw some conclusions about the treatment of irony in cultural transfer.

The mechanisms and effect of the irony in the novel are plot-driven, therefore a brief summary of the plot will be essential for understanding this paper. *The Big Sleep* begins when the private detective, Philip Marlowe, calls on the rich elderly General Sternwood to take care of a blackmailer who had claimed money from gambling debts incurred by his wild and childish youngest daughter, Carmen Sternwood. During the interview, the General laments the disappearance of his trusted son-in-law, Sean Regan, husband of his more sensible eldest daughter, Vivian Sternwood. Marlowe, who narrates the novel, suspects that the General really wants to know that Sean Regan is not behind the blackmail. Several deaths happen before Marlowe can discover that Sean Regan had been murdered by the General's daughter Carmen in a wild rage, and that his other daughter Vivian had kept it a secret from him.

## 2. Irony in the *The Big Sleep* (1939)

Classic definitions of irony tend to describe it in terms of a dramatic mechanism, not a linguistic one. Geoffrey Leech was the first to describe the linguis-

tic mechanisms behind irony. He holds that all tropes in literature occur when authors lead readers to believe that some intentional textual anomaly requires further interpretation, i.e. authors foreground linguistic features in order to indicate that they must be interpreted for expressive content (1969: 172). However, achievements from within the field of pragmatics have been very satisfactory for describing the linguistic features of irony in literature. Sperber and Wilson explain irony in terms of «echoic second-degree interpretation» (1986: 238). They affirm that when some element in a communicative act alludes not to the words of the speaker, but to another speaker's words, the hearer initiates an interpretation of those «echoic» words on a «secondary» level.

Raymond Chandler creates such «echoic» effects in his fiction. In *The Big Sleep* Chandler, skillfully uses two key words, cute and giggle, in such a way that they simultaneously characterize Carmen Sternwood and lay the groundwork for the ironic «secondary interpretation» of Marlowe's statement «My, but you're cute» in the novel's climax, a scene in which Carmen apparently jeopardizes the detective's very life. In chapter 1, Carmen intentionally falls into Marlowe's arms, forcing Marlowe to catch her.

1. When her head was against my chest she screwed it around and giggled at me. «You're cute,» she giggled. «I'm cute, too.»

Notice how Carmen's word cute and Marlowe's word giggle concur in such close proximity in this example. In fact, this pattern continues throughout the book. Initially, Carmen is the only one who uses the word cute, and it only appears in dialogue exchanges. But as Marlowe realizes how often Carmen uses this childish word, he gradually introduces it into narrative passages for an ironic effect, and begins outwardly treating Carmen like a child. Then, he uses it to «echo» Carmen's words in his conversations with her, and it will be in the climactic scene when Marlowe will use cute for full ironic effect. Giggle, also a childish word, only appears in passages that are narrated by Marlowe and in which he describes Carmen's actions. In the face of just about any situation, whether meeting a new person or witnessing a murder, Carmen reacts in the same way; she giggles. In chapter 7 Marlowe hears gunshots coming from inside the blackmailer's house, and, when he breaks in, he finds Carmen sitting in front of a camera drugged, unclothed and oblivious to the blackmailer, who lies murdered at her feet.

2. We walked over to Geiger's body and back. I had her look at him. She thought he was cute. She giggled and tried to tell me so, but she just bubbled.

In chapter 12, Carmen goes back to the blackmailer's house the next day hoping to find the pictures Geiger had taken of her, but she finds Marlowe instead. Marlowe starts questioning her, but he gets nowhere.

3. (...) it was suddenly a lot of nice clean fun. So she giggled. Very cute. The giggles got louder (...)

However, Carmen is no child. In chapter 24, Marlowe arrives home to find Carmen lying naked in his bed. In the first two pages of this chapter, cute and giggle concur densely: cute appears five times (Carmen 4, Marlowe 1) and giggle appears seven (Marlowe all 7). Marlowe asks her to leave, but eventually loses his patience.

4. «Now I know how you got in tell me how you're going out.»  
She giggled. «Not going – not for a long time ... I like it here. You're cute.»

The «echoic» use of the word cute combined with Marlowe's own word giggle are building the groundwork for the «secondary interpretation» of the irony in the climactic moment of the novel. In chapter 31, Marlowe agrees to take Carmen for target practice with her gun, but when Marlowe is setting up the target Carmen tries to shoot him. Luckily, Marlowe had anticipated what she would do and had loaded her gun with blanks. Marlowe's ironic use of cute in dialogue with Carmen and giggle in the narrative creates a brutal linguistic irony.

5. «My, but you're cute.»  
(Carmen faints, but shortly afterwards regains consciousness, my note)  
«What happened?» she gasped.  
«Nothing. Why?»  
«Oh, yes, it did,» she giggled. «I wet myself.»

### 3. Irony in film versions of *The Big Sleep* (1946 and 1978)

The mechanisms of irony must be translated into film versions. Howard Hawks directed *The Big Sleep* for Warner Brothers in 1946. Although Raymond Chandler was unable to write the screenplay, he was pleased with the Hawks film, even though it takes ample liberties with his plot line. Since the film starred Humphrey Bogart in the role of Philip Marlowe and Lauren Bacall in the role of Vivian Sternwood, the film became a Bogart-Bacall vehicle that was made to end in an embrace and a fade out, which never happen in the original novel. This has already been thoroughly discussed by other scholars, but I would like to add that in some Latin American countries this film was marketed purely as a romance picture by changing the title from the natural *El sueño eterno* to *Al borde del abismo*.

The 1978 film version directed by Michael Winner, was a vehicle for Robert Mitchum, who had been such a success as Marlowe in the earlier *Farewell, My Lovely* (1976). The film is seldom considered in the same league as the 1946 ver-

sion, even though Michael Winner wrote the screenplay much more closely to the original novel. Winner's version made the unfortunate mistake of changing the entire setting from 1940's Los Angeles to 1970's London, thus transplanting Marlowe into unfamiliar and unconvincing territory. As a result, Carmen Sternwood became Camilla Sternwood and Vivian becomes Charlotte, supposedly more British-sounding names. Winner's version did not merit any critical acclaim or stimulate any new scholarly discussion about Chandler's work in the original or in film. Therefore, the film version par excellence of *The Big Sleep* is the 1946 version. However, I would like to point out that, when promoted in Spanish, this film's title also changed from *El sueño eterno* to *Detective privado*.

Chandler's irony did not fare well in these two versions. The plot changes in Hawks' *The Big Sleep* result in the complete omission of the scene in which Carmen fires at Marlowe. Carmen only says the word *cute* once, and there is no offscreen narrator's voice in which the word *giggle* could appear. However, the visual medium of film offers ways of compensating for such lost effects, particularly in the settings, the camera angle and the acting. Hawks makes no attempt to make Martha Vickers, the actress who plays Carmen, compensate for Carmen's giggling, but he does bring out her childishness through her exaggerated her thumb-sucking in every scene.

Winner makes a much more serious attempt to compensate for the loss of irony. Carmen says the word *cute* only once as well. Marlowe's voice is used offscreen to narrate the famous «I was calling on four million dollars» and «You just slept the big sleep» passages, but Winner does not use the narrator's voice to reflect Carmen's giggling. He brings it out in the acting, as he has Candy Clark in the role of Camilla Sternwood laugh the same wild way in all her scenes. He brings out this wildness in Carmen's personality over her childishness. Rather than have Carmen do only the same childish thing in each scene, he has her laugh wildly and also do something unpredictable. For example, in the opening scene, after falling into Marlowe's arms, she skips away and makes an obscene gesture; later, over the dead blackmailer's body, she makes fun of him by pointing her finger like a gun and making shooting sounds. However, the scene in which Carmen tries to kill Marlowe does not transmit the irony Chandler had built up to. After Marlowe says «My, but you're cute,» the screenplay requires him to clarify what has just happened, saying «It's a good thing I loaded the thing with six blanks. I had a hunch about what you might do.» This immediately ruins the effect of the irony that might have been created.

#### 4. Irony in the Spanish translations of *The Big Sleep* (1958 and 1972)

There are two Spanish translations of the novel, both titled *El sueño eterno*: the first version by Inés Navarro and Antonio Gómez for Aguilar (Madrid)

in 1958 and the second version by José Antonio Lara for Barral (Barcelona) in 1972. The INAG translation has been revised and reedited on two occasions, both by Carrogio (1979, 1984), but the JAL translation has been reedited in an unrevised form more than twenty times by six different publishers.

Chandler's irony must also be translated across languages, in this case Spanish. Hatim and Mason have applied Sperber and Wilson's description of irony to the translation of literature. They affirm that text readers identify irony by «matching the view apparently expressed with any discordant view expressed co-textually.» (97-100). The mechanism Chandler uses for readers to match «the view apparently expressed» with «any discordant view» in the original novel is based on the «co-textual» repetition and concurrence of cute and giggle. But in the examples cited above, the repetition and concurrence in the target text are insufficient to trigger the necessary «second degree interpretation.» Notice how both translations use four different words between the two of them for cute (encantador/a, listo/a, mono/a, simpático/a), and also four different words for giggle (risas, risitas, reír, divertida).

1. INAG: Cuando su cabeza estaba sobre mi pecho, la levantó y me miró riéndose.  
—Es usted listo –dijo, divertida–; yo soy lista también.  
JAL: Cuando su cabeza estaba sobre mi pecho, la levanté; ella me miró, riéndose.  
—Es usted listo –dijo, divertida–; yo también lo soy.
2. INAG: Pasamos por encima del cuerpo de Geiger. La obligué a mirarlo. Pensaba que él era encantador. Se echo a reír e intentó decírmelo, pero no lo consiguió.  
JAL: Pasamos por encima del cuerpo de Geiger. La obligué a mirarlo. Lo encontró encantador. Se echo a reír e intentó decírmelo, pero no lo consiguió.
3. INAG: (...) de pronto todo se convertía en entretenida broma. Y por ello reía. Muy mona. Las risitas fueron subiendo de tono (...)  
JAL: (...) de pronto todo se convertía en una broma divertida. Y por eso reía. Muy mona. Las risas fueron subiendo de tono (...)
4. INAG: Ahora que sé cómo entró, dígame cómo se las va a arreglar para salir.  
—No voy a salir –lanzó nuevas risitas– en mucho tiempo. Me gusta estar aquí. Es usted encantador.  
JAL: Ahora que sé cómo entró, dígame cómo se las va a arreglar para salir.  
—No voy a salir –lanzó nuevas risitas– en mucho tiempo. Me gusta estar aquí. Es usted encantador.
5. INAG: ¡Vaya, pero qué mona es usted! (...)  
—¿Qué ocurrió? –preguntó.  
—Nada. ¿Por qué?  
—¡Oh, sí! Algo ocurrió –dijo con una risita–, me he mojado.

JAL: ¡Vaya, pero qué simpática es usted! (...)

—¿Qué ocurrió? —preguntó.

—Nada. ¿Por qué?

—¡Oh, sí! Algo ocurrió —dijo con una risita— me hice pipi.

It is likely that the translators failed to comprehend the irony. In a brief informal study at the University of Barcelona, Allison Beeby Lonsdale discovered that more than fifty percent of Spanish-speaking students were able to perceive the irony present in an article written in Spanish, and none of the non-native-Spanish-speaking subjects were able to perceive the irony at all (1996: 15-16). Although exact repetition of lexical items in the same sentence or in the same paragraph is considered non-stylistic in literary texts in Spanish, the novel does contain certain character leitmotifs that require lexical repetition. For example, the character Lash Canino dresses in brown from head to foot. INAG repeat *castaño* five times in a matter of three short sentences, and JAL does the same with *marrón*. Therefore, I feel that had they recognized the irony, they would have overridden the Spanish proscription of lexical repetition, just as both of them did with the Canino description.

Perhaps the translators were not the best qualified for the job. In the Spanish literary system of the time, the subgenre of detective fiction was not considered as dignified as the straight novel, and translators were chosen accordingly. Inés Navarro was an executive secretary at Aguilar, who translated for extra money on the side, and Antonio Navarro was her husband. There are reasons to believe that José Antonio Lara was not a professional either. Recently, however, the genre of detective fiction itself is making its way into the canon of the Spanish literary system. Editorial Debate (Madrid) has published many new translations of Chandler's work since the late 1980s, but, regrettably, they reprint the 1972 version of *The Big Sleep* unrevised in the first Spanish edition of Chandler's complete works, *Obras Completas* (1995).

I say regrettably, because I believe that the JAL version is merely a plagiarized version of INAG's. If we collate the passages cited from the two texts, we find that roughly 85% of the words contained in them are identical, and many of the passages are exactly the same. This has serious implications, because, since the first translation was produced during a period when official government censorship existed in Spain and the second has not been extensively revised, the version of *The Big Sleep* that is available today is not only a plagiarism, but a plagiarism of a work produced under oppressive cultural conditions.

## 5. Conclusions

I have examined the translation into film and into Spanish of the mechanisms Raymond Chandler used in *The Big Sleep* to produce an ironic effect in



a climactic scene. I hope to have shown that loss in cultural transfer may be attributed to the task of translation itself and also to other cultural factors that are brought to bear on the task of translation. This explains how a dramatically altered film like Howard Hawks' can remain the classic film version of this novel and how a plagiarized translation can be the most reedited and reprinted of the all of Chandler's novels.

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