1. Insults as communicative devices

Verbal communication between human beings deploys a great range of ostensive mechanisms where communicators apply their best efforts to attract their addressees' attention. To keep interaction going all languages have developed elaborate sets of verbal and nonverbal tools whose main function is to keep the communicative channel open. Some of these tools are phatic, that is with the only intention to maintain the listeners' commitment in the exchange, while others have an ostensively communicative purpose.

Among the different devices used by humans to interact through language, there is a particularly powerful one which reinforces the intentional force of communication dramatically. We are referring to those words and expressions which are generically called *insults*. By them, we mean locutions and utterances (but also gestural movements) *with the basic (but not the only) intention to hurt an addressee emotionally*. Insults are distinguishably human. They are emphatic manifestations of our intentions, evidence of our feelings and very often a clear exhibition of our aggressive nature. But since insults are part of our elaborate system of communication, their role in it is far more complex and multifarious than we can imagine.

Insults are code breaking, etiquette violators; and are likely to provoke an immediate response from the addressee. Insults manipulate existing words to add explicit overtones. Basically they have a connotative nature, resort to metaphor and absurd analogies and nonsensical images along with a strong creative drive. In that respect, insults pertain both to the domain of dead metaphors and to the innovative use of the language. When insulting, humans can turn to well-known expletives or invent new terms and expressions. Perhaps the latter is more often used in written language (although one could think of experienced insulters; like certain politicians, who can be very good in their use of creative oral insults) where the insulters have time to think and elaborate their words before using them. Insulting here can become a written art where insulters subtly use language as a weapon and where “insultees” are not sure of whether they are being insulted or not, and to what degree. There is even an “insulting literature” which takes the form of pseudo-humorous pamphlets, rhymes, screenplays, full of chauvinistic and derogatory cliches and jokes usually addressed to people from other races, cultures or minorities; and published or uttered by people who believe themselves to be “superior”. People can “duel” with words, insulting and being insulted until one wins, silencing the interlocutor (Murray, 1983: 190). Oral insults, due to their highly emotional context, rely on the well-experienced and rehearsed catalogue which most language users have at their command. Insulters choose the most suitable ones according to the speech event and communicative setting.

Fundamentally, insults are connotative linguistic devices used with denotative explicitness. Let us take the case of *bastard* (Crozier, 1988: 119). This term can be explained as a metaphor which developed from transparent denotative and connotative meanings and whose insulting entailment has become again denotative:

b. **Connotation**: The unwanted product of illicit sex, and consequently a legally inferior and socially undesirable person.

c. **Metaphor**: A person who is not illegitimate but is nevertheless undesirable.

The first two meanings are literal and only the metaphor has acquired the insulting overtones so typical in English. Due to their illocutionary force which overtly flouts a basic communicative maxim (politeness), and to the original meanings (sex, religion, excretions...) from which the insulting metaphors and analogies are created, they are considered taboo in many cultures, and an embarrassing topic to talk about or even analyze. Some scholars (Jay, 1977: 234) complain about a widespread inhibition to study this phenomenon which fails “to stimulate interest in it” and even refusal to allow such “research to be printed”. Insults are often described as dirty words, obscene talk; verbal abuse, etc. All these definitions include an ethical side which should not interfere with language research. From a serious analytical approach, all forms of communication should deserve similar treatment. It is not scientific to skip this special use of language for moralistic reasons only. Human beings have insulted others since the wake of civilization, no sooner than they realized that they could hurt each other not only physically (with objects) but sometimes even more profoundly: with words. Psychologists agree that words can be more painful and their effects more lasting than physical wounds. Therefore, all societies have developed elaborate mechanisms for insulting.

Cultural constraints operate forcefully in the insulting paradigm of any language. That means that not all insults work with the same efficiency in two different languages. For instance, the word *bastard* is one of the gravest insults one can utter in English, but if we use the same word in Spanish, *bastardo*, the insulting effect is weakened, becoming almost a lenient insult. Another of the strongest insults used in the British Isles is *cunt*, usually applied to men; and which prompts an immediate response when uttered; but in other languages like Spanish terms and locutions used trans-sexually as insults are not common. Consequently, the contextual effects produced by such uses in other cultures may lead to the recipient's perplexity rather than to an offended reaction. This has important implications in translation as we will see in subsequent pages where we will consider the necessary adjustments which the translator must undertake in order to display in the target text the intended illocutionary effects contained in the source text.

Insults are, therefore, culturally bound. The cognitive drive which impels people to insult one another is the same for everyone, but the tools employed differ (sometimes radically) from one language to another. Let's take the example of *foxy* when applied to a woman, which in English means: fascinating, attractive, clever, or sexy; but its literal translation into Spanish: *zorra*, usually refers to bitch, whore, or wicked. Just the opposite! Although this seems to be an obvious fact which all translators should be aware of, many examples can be found of careless translations (maybe done in a hurry) of films and TV shows where the actors use typical English insults which have not been adapted to the target culture and which sound awkward to most non-English ears. For example, *You bastard son of a bitch!* would be translated into Spanish as ¡Tú bastard hijo de perra!; or *You fucking cunt* translated into Spanish as Tío, eres un jodido coño.

### 1.1. What is in an insult?

In this article we will narrow the scope of the term *insult* down to the communicative exchange where a speaker (insulter) uses language with the intention of morally hurting an addressee (“insultee”); and therefore we will leave other related linguistic strategies such as swearing or cursing aside. In fact, swearing and cursing would be at the other end of the communicative
exchange. Psychologists (Freud, Adler, Murray, and others) relate swearing and cursing to personality and introspection. Adler (in Darou, 1983) considers swearing to be a signal of social isolation. Apparently, there is no intention of communicating anything but to show a rebellious self-centeredness around individualistic emotions such as frustration, power, revenge or pain.

Others (e.g. Lain) see swearwords as an attempt to humanize language. Bad language is also a matter of social class. Speakers from the lower social edge use swearwords, insults and all kinds of verbal abuse more frequently than those belonging to the upper segment. Educational reasons as well as more emotional control could explain the difference. One can expect a low-class worker use this kind of language more naturally than a scientist or a well-off merchant. Youngsters also use it more frequently than their elders and men insult more than women (on this issue see de Klerk, 1992; Hughes, 1992; and Coyne et al., 1978, among others). Educated people have more sophisticated forms of insulting others. By means of irony or sarcasm, they can hurt as much (or more) as with direct expletives. This type of verbal exchange requires a complex degree of interaction between the speakers where the speaker must make his insulting intention clear enough to his addressee, so as to guarantee the grasp of the right meaning. Insulting in such contexts can be so elaborated and refined that you must be very alert to get it. There is a profound and clever way of insulting that only intelligent people can detect. An obvious case would be all those covert insults published or uttered in totalitarian countries by opponents without the authorities realizing them. Meanings are original, new; but nonetheless insulting.

Insult or verbal abuse is used in communicative contexts by speakers who feel emotionally involved with their audiences and even if its primary objective is to hurt, very often the insult is reversed into a praising utterance. Insults are used to attack but also to defend oneself. From a behaviorist angle (Skinner), by insulting humans attain the social reward of attention and inclusion. Ethnologists believe insulting is a refined and civilized way of releasing certain doses of aggressiveness without resorting to force and physical violence. This may explain why, on the other hand, primitive peoples hardly insult but use direct violence instead.

An interesting point worth commenting on is that matriarchal societies use insults less often than patriarchal ones. Traditionally women insult less than men, even in highly egalitarian societies. Since many insults are sexist and woman-oriented, women are reluctant to use them for fear of participating in their own degradation (Saporta, 1988). The case of fuck is interesting (Crozie, 1988: 122) which in its literal and connotative (not insulting) meaning only has a woman as speaker: "I've been fucked" (literally, to copulate; connotatively, to have been deceived and devalued alter copulating). When the sentence becomes a metaphor (an insult) then the speaker becomes a man (I've been fucked, meaning “I've been cheated”) and not a woman for fear of being taken literally.

As pointed out above, insults evolved linguistically from terms or expressions without an original insulting meaning through a connotative layer which added both insulting and non-insulting overtones to become fully insulting metaphors: Pig (literal = animal; connotative = dirty, untidy; metaphoric = dirty manners or behavior). Most insults have a referential meaning derived from animals, actions, institutions, peoples, etc; which, as we have said, do not have an original insulting quality; but there are also instances where insults have been created from nowhere.

1.2. Why do people insult?

Basically humans resort to expletives for two main reasons. First, as a sort of catharsis, a tension relief when they feel stressed or need to release a high emotional strain. In these cases,
swearwords are either self-directed (those who utter them are at the same time agents and patients, (insulters and “insultees”) or are zero-directed, that is, there is no specific recipient. *Shit!, fuck it!, bloody hell!*, etc, are examples of these. Second, insults can also be other-directed, that is, they are communicatively bound. They include second person pronouns as to make clear this is a face-to-face exchange just between *speaker* and *hearer* or *speaker* and *multiple addressees*. It is important that the addressee(s) are present and can hear the uttered expletives (*you bastard, you shitface, you son-of-a-bitch*, etc.). From a pragmatic point of view, insults require a close interaction between the interlocutors. Usually, there is no point in insulting an absent third person who, after all, is not going to be targeted, except for the cases where we share our insulting moment with some *comrade(s)* and direct our insults to an absent third party (*Them assholes, those fucking bastards are here again*, etc.). There is a third kind of insult (not really used as linguistic weapons) which people include in their utterances but without a deliberate intention to insult anybody. Those insults have a phatic component, as we will discuss later, in order to increase the illocutionary force of our speech: *I saw those good-looking boys again yesterday* uttered as *I saw those fucking good-looking boys again yesterday*. Paradoxically, insults can also be flattering and show admiration towards the interlocutor: *You lucky bastard, you got it again!* Insults are then perceived as a sign of camaraderie, although they are usually followed by the right intonation, gesture or paralinguistic mechanism to avoid unwanted interpretations: “face-to-face insults carry different implications depending upon the relationship of the parties and the para-verbal cues given off by the insulter. Calling a friend a ‘faggot’ can even be a non-sexual term of comradeship if spoken correctly” (Fine, 1981: 54).

In the next sections we will try to devise a possible approach to the translation of insults from a communicative and cognitive perspective. Specifically, we will apply Sperber and Wilson’s *relevance theory* and its *ad hoc* terminology. This application will eventually yield a taxonomical proposal including the different communicative situations where insults are used.

2. Relevance theory, interpretive use, and insults

Sperber & Wilson’s (henceforth S&W) relevance theory (1986/95, henceforth RT) is a cognitive theory of human communication which centres around the importance of intention and inference in every communicative act. In their approach to intention, S&W underline the addressee’s recognition of the addresser’s *informative intention*, with the help of the parallel recognition of the *communicative intention* underlying that utterance (or *stimulus*, as S&W prefer to call it). The explicit manifestation of one’s intention that something becomes (mutually) manifest for the hearer becomes an *ostensive communicative action*. Ostensive stimuli must satisfy three requirements (S&W, 1986/95: 153-154): (a) attract the audience’s attention; (b) focus it on the communicator’s intentions; and (c) reveal the communicator’s intentions.

As far as inference is concerned, S&W (1987: 697) think that inference can fill the gap between the semantic representation of utterances and the message that this utterance eventually communicates. They emphasize the role of the communicators in manifesting both their *communicative* and *informative intention* with their utterances, while hearers try to work out different hypotheses on what the correct interpretation is. With this pragmatic approach, S&W avoid traditional views that explained communication as a simple, straightforward decoding of the messages encoded by the communicator.

S&W define inference as the process by which an assumption is accepted as true or probably true on the strength of the truth or probable truth of other assumptions. In their theory, S&W support
the nondemonstrative view of inference, since no model can explain the cognitive operations in our minds that result in the correct interpretation, nor are there ways to measure the degree of success in the formation of inferences: “in demonstrative inference, the only form of inference that is well understood, the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusions. In nondemonstrative inference, the truth of the premises merely makes the truth of the conclusions probable” (S&W, 1987: 701). In such a way, the kind of inference in which S&W are interested is one’s spontaneous mental operations based on assumptions which are not subjected to rigid models of logical deduction.

In their interpretive model, S&W also stress the importance of deduction, which is the result of bringing together new information \{P\} and old information \{C\} previously stored in the hearer’s mind. S&W name this cognitive operation contextualization (S&W 1986/95: 108). This contextualization can produce contextual effects. A contextual effect is generated when the context is modified in a certain way by the new information. This modification of context results in the strengthening or weakening of former assumptions.

All this theoretical background is the base on which S&W place the central proposal of their theory, which can be summarised in four statements (Wilson, 1994: 44): (a) every utterance has a variety of possible interpretations, all compatible with the information that is linguistically encoded; (b) not all these interpretations occur to the hearer simultaneously, some of them take more effort to think up; (c) hearers are equipped with a single, general criterion for evaluating interpretations; and (d) this criterion is powerful enough to exclude all but at most a single interpretation, so that having found an interpretation that fits the criterion, the hearer looks no further.

In a nutshell, for S&W interpretation depends on the addressee’s choice of one interpretive hypothesis (among many other possible hypotheses) that is consistent with the addressee’s communicative intention. However, processing the information underlying ostensive communication is subject to risk and effort: the risk of not being completely sure of what assumption, in a range of multiple other assumptions that every communicative activity can produce in the hearer, is the one that the speaker wants the hearer to process; and the effort of choosing one proposition and processing it, after having compared it to previously stored information. This is why every ostensive communicative activity carries the guarantee of its relevance, that is, the speaker is aware of the cognitive effort that the hearer has to make, and presupposes that despite this, the benefits of the eventual interpretation of the utterance are worth this effort.

From this perspective, we can deduce that different degrees of relevance are generated from the fact that every information-processing activity demands a certain amount of mental effort from the hearer, and the bigger this effort, the less relevant. In conclusion, the definition of relevance can be formulated roughly with two preliminary conditions (S&W 1986/95: 125): (1): an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large. (2): an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small. When these two conditions are satisfied, the utterance is consistent with the principle of relevance. If the hearer finds a (first) interpretation that satisfies these conditions, the process of interpretation will stop at this point.

Basically, with RT the search for a relevant interpretation is pictured roughly as a three-stage process:

(1) Logical form. Comprehension starts off with the hearer’s identification of the semantic representation of the speaker’s utterance (S&W, 1986/95: 9), which yields a preliminary incomplete logical form. Logical forms can be either stored in conceptual memory as assumption schemas (which can be later completed into fully-fledged assumptions), or completed into the speakers’ (intended) propositional forms. This phase is decoding, the only context-free phase of interpretation according to RT. Subsequent enrichments to yield propositions are inferential.
(2) **Propositional form.** The hearer then completes and enriches this logical form inferentially, with such cognitive operations as reference assignment, disambiguation, enrichment and loosening: “a semantic representation must be selected, completed and enriched in various ways to yield the propositional form expressed by the utterance” (S&W, 1986/95: 179).

(3) **Explicature/implicature.** The hearer is now in a position to be able to grasp the speaker’s intended interpretation of the utterance, which can be explicitly or implicitly communicated. In either case, the proposition expressed has to be embedded in a higher-level proposition expressing the speaker’s attitude upon communicating the utterance. This attitude may be related to the fact that the speaker believes and intends to communicate the proposition expressed by the utterance, in which case the proposition will be communicated as an *explicature*, or to the fact that the speaker expects the hearer to construct an implicit interpretation arising from the combination of the proposition and contextual information, in which case the proposition expressed will not be communicated, but will be used as one of the necessary elements in order to reach an *implicature*.

Translation of written texts also involves the ostensive communication of explicit/implicit assumptions from an author to the readers, in this case filtered through the translator’s transformation of the source text (ST) into the target text (TT). Besides the explicit/implicit duality, S&W’s notion of *interpretive resemblance* has been underlined as a key term to understand what is involved in the communicative act of translation (cf. Gutt, 1991 and next section). According to S&W (1986/95: 228-229), “any representation with a propositional form, and in particular any utterance, can be used to represent things in two ways. It can represent some state of affairs in virtue of its propositional form being true of that state of affairs; in this case [S&W] say that the representation is a *description*. Or it can represent some other representation which also has a propositional form—a thought, for instance—in virtue of a resemblance between the two propositional forms: in this case [they] say that the first representation is an *interpretation* of the second one, or that it is used *interpretively*”. For instance, the propositional forms of the examples in (2) *interpretively resemble* their counterparts in (3):

(2)

a. I live three kilometres from Alicante.
   b. This room is a pigsty.
   c. *[In a downpour, with a dissociative attitude]* It seems to be raining.
   d. Tom warned me that it would be impossible to find my wallet.

(3)

a. I live two kilometres, eight hundred and fifty metres from Alicante.
   b. This room is extremely filthy.
   c. *[In an apparently sunny day, with an endorsing attitude]* It seems to be raining.
   d. Tom: “it will be impossible to find your wallet”.

All the instances in (2a-d) are used interpretively because other more literal propositions such as the ones expressed by the utterances in (3a-d) do not reach the same degree of relevance, for example obtaining a worse balance of cognitive effects and processing effort. Take, for instance, (2a) compared to (3a) as an answer to *how far do you live from Alicante?* In most ordinary cases, there is no reason to expect an exact answer such as (3a); (2a) will communicate the same information without so much processing effort and without risking the extraction of unwanted implications. In other words, “there is no reason to think that the optimally relevant interpretive expression of a thought is always the most literal one. The speaker is presumed to aim at optimal relevance, not at literal truth” (S&W, 1986/95: 233).

It should be stressed that an utterance can resemble other utterances (i.e., public representations), but they can also resemble a thought of the speaker’s: “We see verbal
communication as involving a speaker producing an utterance as a public interpretation of one of her thoughts, and the hearer constructing a mental interpretation of this utterance, and hence of the original thought. Let us say that an utterance is an interpretive expression of a thought of the speaker’s, and that the hearer makes an interpretive assumption about the speaker’s informative intention” (S&W, 1986/95: 230-231).

When an utterance is used interpretively, it can be either an interpretation of some attributed thought or utterance, or it can be an interpretation of some thought which, for some reason, is or would be desirable to entertain in a certain way. Specifically, insults can either refer interpretively to a thought of the speaker’s about a negative quality of the hearer’s, or to a thought about some action of the hearer’s that is criticised. For example, in preadolescent obscene talk, a boy who does something which is considered ‘childish’ is accused of being gay. The remark does not usually imply that the boy is disliked, let alone that he is homosexual, but that his action is deemed improper or immature (Fine, 1981: 57). This duality (person as...; person’s action as...) is crucial for the analysis of insults, since these typically involve a public manifestation -by means of an utterance- of an interpretive relationship between the propositional form of the insult and a thought of the speaker’s, the latter referring to some quality of the hearer’s or to an opinion about some criticisable action carried out by the hearer. Consider (4b) and (5b) in situations (4a) and (5a) respectively:

(4) a. [Tom enters Peter’s room which is incredibly filthy and untidy]
   b. Tom: “You are a pig!”.

(5) a. [Peter has just told Tom that he is having an affair with his wife]
   b. Tom: “You bastard!”.

In (4b) Peter will not have problems identifying the intended interpretation of Tom’s utterance. Peter surely has an encyclopedic schema containing such stereotypical assumptions as the fact that pigs are filthy and untidy. This, together with the mutually manifest (physical) environment of the untidy room, will lead to the strong implicature that Tom intends to communicate his negative opinion about Peter’s habits. In other words, (4b) interpretively resembles a thought of Tom’s concerning Peter’s habits.

In (5b) Tom also has a thought about Peter, which interpretively resembles, to a lesser extent this time, the proposition expressed by the utterance, both sharing a contextual implication concerning a negative propositional attitude towards an action carried out by Peter. As will be explained in the next sections, the translator of insults should aim at finding expressions in the target language which interpretively resemble the thought of the speaker’s in similar ways, even if the literal interpretation of the insults differs in both languages.

3. Translating insults interpretively

Within RT, a translation is not pictured as an exact copy of the the source text in the target language. Rather, it is viewed as a communicative process in which the translator plays the role of a bridge trying to make the target text as relevant (in its balance of cognitive effects and processing effort) as the author of the source text intended it to be.

In theory, a good translation should convey both the explicit and the implicit content of the original, and extend to connotations and other emotional aspects of meaning as well, for example the illocutionary force (i.e., the propositional attitude) underlying the utterances translated (cf. Mateo,
The problem is that there is “a logical interdependence between explicatures, implicatures, and
the potential context - or, more technically, the cognitive environment- in which a text or utterance is
processed” (Gutt, 1990: 145). When a stimulus is interpreted in a potential context which differs in
information from the one envisaged by the original communicator (for example different linguistic
communities), we are dealing with a secondary communication situation (Gutt, ibid.). This is the kind
of situation in which the translation of insults may turn out problematic. In Mateo’s (1998: 174)
words,

The translator’s task includes the generation of presumptions of relevance in the target
language similar to the ones originated by the source message. It is crucial that the
communicative goals achieved between the ST author and the TT reader should coincide with
those experienced by the ST reader. As these presumptions do not often come out the same
when they are transferred from one language to another, a process of adaptation must take
place so that similar cognitive effects and inferences are reached and the intended meaning is
understood. TT readers are asked to adapt their expectations to a new cultural environment.

An example of implicit meanings derived from the envisaged interpretation of the ST, and which are
not grasped by the TT reader due to the translator’s inability to create a TT which offers a similar
outcome of implicit meanings (even if the TT is linguistically adapted to the peculiarities of the target
language) can be found in the translation into Spanish of Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye (1958). In
a nutshell, in this case the translator replaces essential features of the protagonist’s idiolect with
alternative expressions which are more literary but fail to create the same (implicitly conveyed) picture
of the protagonist’s attributes as the source text (cf. Yus, 1996). For example, repetitions of
utterances, a typical feature of adolescent discourse, are removed and replaced by more literary (but
not as relevant) counterparts:

(6) a. I started horsing around a little bit. *I horse around quite a lot* (p. 25).
b. Me puse a hacer el ganso. *A veces me da por ahí* (p. 28).

(7) a. He started cleaning his goddam fingernails with the end of a match. *He was always
cleaning his fingernails* (p. 26).
b. Empezó a limpiarse las uñas con una cerilla. *Siempre estaba haciendo lo mismo* (p. 29).

Limitations in the pragmatic quality of the Spanish translation of The Catcher in the Rye can also be
applied to the translation of insults. Consider the following example:

(8) a. You’re a dirty stupid sonuvabitch of a moron (p. 48).
b. ¡Eres un cochinó, un tarado y un hijoputa! (p. 52).
c. ¡Eres un gilipollas hijo de la gran puta! (our suggested translation).

A good translation of (8a) should yield the same degree of relevance in the implicit contextual effects
and illocutionary connotations of the insult. This is not the case of (8b). Firstly, it is arguable whether
the Spanish word *cochinó* has the same intensive force as *dirty*, since the former is generally perceived
to be rather prudish and we very much doubt that a native-born Spanish adolescent would use it in this
context. Besides, *cochinó* has a connotation of (literal) dirtiness which *dirty* lacks. Actually, the
modifiers *dirty* and *stupid* are used in this context to enhance the derogatory force of *sonuvabitch*,
which in (8c) we have reproduced by resorting to the more emphatic form *hijo de la gran puta.*
These practical examples illustrate the way in which explicit features and the implicit connotations of messages are conveyed to the reader in the target language depends on the translator’s skill. When dealing with insults, the translator’s role normally favours the existence of a double interpretive resemblance: On the one hand, the ST insult interpretively resembles a thought of the ST author’s; on the other hand, since translations of insults are also presented in virtue of their resemblance with an original, it seems they fall naturally under the category of interpretive use (Gutt, 1990: 147). In this sense, an important point about interpretive resemblance is that it is not an absolute but a comparative notion. Utterances can interpretively resemble one another to varying degrees, depending on the number of implicatures and/or explicatures that they share. Sharing them all is impossible in secondary communication situations due to the fact that inference is context-dependent and the TT readers cannot access the interpretation of the ST in the very same context that the author envisaged (Gutt, ibid. 149). In any case, “the importance of preserving the properties of the original does not lie in their intrinsic value, but in the influence they have on the interpretation of the stimulus” (ibid, 150).

The reader’s interpretation of the stimulus has to do with the extraction of explicatures and implicatures based on a criterion of relevance. The latter are harder to convey in the TT in their relevant balance of effects and effort. For example, sometimes the translator tends to compensate implicatures by adding comments, but these can alter the original author’s intention. In Guillén Galve’s (1997: 41) words,

The problem with additions, which usually prove to be a vehicle for the explication of implicatures, is that they can sink the original author’s intention of getting his audience to make use of their inferential abilities to a relatively predetermined degree. Consequently, additions in particular and the explication of implicatures in general should be restricted to a relevant minimum. This minimum would fulfil two functions: first, it would enable the reader of the translation to familiarize himself somewhat with the context assumed by the original communicator; secondly, the familiarity thus acquired would not have a distorting influence on the weight of the stylistic properties devised by the original communicator because most of them would be preserved.

Gutt (1990, 1991) distinguishes direct translation versus indirect translation. The former is the translation which provides the same communicative cues as the original. The latter is a much wider and interpretive-use-based notion. Besides, “a receptor language utterance is a direct translation of a source language utterance if and only if it purports to interpretively resemble the original completely” (Gutt, 1990: 154), something which cannot be achieved in typical secondary communication situations in which ST language and TT language differ. One requisite of direct translation, that “the success of any attempt to communicate the original interpretation will require that this target language stimulus be processed using the context envisaged by the original author (Gutt, 1992: 64) is not possible in secondary situations.

A practical consequence is that in secondary situations the translator presumes only adequate resemblance between ST and TT in relevant aspects, a fact quite applicable to the translation of insults: the translator presents his translation of the insult on the presumption that its interpretation adequately resembles the original in respects relevant to the target audience. All that is needed for an adequate (interlingual interpretive) translation is “to arrive at the intended interpretation of the original, and then determine in what respects his translation should interpretively resemble the original in order to be consistent with the principle of relevance for his target audience with its particular cognitive environment” (Gutt, 1990: 157).
4. The pragmatic translation of insults: An interpretive taxonomy

Translating insults is not an easy task. Insults are related to multiple non-linguistic features which translators have to bear in mind in their search for equivalent insults in the target language which interpretively resemble the source language insults in relevant aspects, that is, insults which provide a similar balance of cognitive effects and mental effort in the target language. For example, Jay (1977: 235) points out that “each dirty word by nature is a multidimensional concept varying along such dimensions as: semantic meaning, degree of offensiveness, frequency of usage, social-physical constraint, and some idiosyncratic variables applied to each word as a function of each individual’s experience with the word”.

As we anticipated above, the translator of insults has to bear in mind at least two pragmatic aspects of insults which directly affect the eventual choice of a relevant interpretive equivalent in the target language: (1) what we may label the target of the insulting activity, which may be offense-centred (when the insult is uttered in order to relieve the speaker’s anger or tension towards the interlocutor in the course of a conversational exchange or in order to communicate the speaker’s opinion about the hearer or some action of the hearer), praise-centred (when the insult is not uttered with the intention to offend the addressee, but to praise him or underline positively some action performed by him/her[^10]), or interaction-centred (when the purpose of the insult is not to hurt the addressee or to praise him, but to reinforce social bonds or the phatic strength of the current conversational exchange); and (2) whether the insulter resorts to typically standardised or conventionalised insults, or rather prefers to create highly innovative words or expressions to produce the insult. These two aspects yield a preliminary taxonomy of five cases which require interpretive parallels in the target language. These will be commented on below.

4.1. Standardised/conventionalised insults with offense-centred intentionality

One of the main uses of insults is, precisely, to offend and hurt the addressee verbally. These are typically the outcome of anger and a heated-up state of mind. In these cases, the insulter will normally produce highly archetypical insults whose mental accessibility is very high since they are stored in our minds as stereotypical chunks of encyclopedic information concerning the use of insults in our community. Standardised or conventionalised insults are thus likely to be picked up in the insulting strategy dominated by a high degree of anger (on the difference between standardised and conventionalised, see below).

In this sense, Fine (1981: 58-59), in his analysis of preadolescent insults, stresses the fact that “in contrast to other forms of insult, angry insults have less art and less complexity. They represent images from the heated heart rather than witty put-downs...Such abuse occurs either when the insulter has just experienced some major frustration or when the target has acted outside the legitimate boundary of preadolescent behavior”. In their heated state of mind, insulters relieve their tension by resorting to the most accessible term at hand. However, these highly stereotypical terms tend to be used so frequently that some of them eventually end up losing their hurting potential. Actually, in Spanish a noticeable tendency is to strengthen the insult with other accompanying words of emphasis. This is the case of *gilipollas* (prat, git), which is frequently strengthened as *perfecto gilipollas* (perfect prat/git), *gilipollas integral* (complete prat/git), *gilipollas de mucho cuidado* (a real prat/git), etc. (cf. Luque et al., 1997: 112).

Angry insulters with an offense-centred intentionality will typically use standardised or conventionalised insults. In standardisation, the hearer infers the connotative meaning of a phrase or
sentence (i.e., its implicit meaning) more readily than its actual denotative meaning (its explicit, literal meaning):

a form of words is standardized for a certain use if this use, though regularized, goes beyond literal meaning and yet can be explained without special conventions... there is a certain core of linguistic meaning attributable on compositional grounds but a common use that cannot be explained in terms of linguistic meaning alone. The familiarity of the form of words, together with a familiar inference route from their literal meaning to what the speaker could plausibly be taken to mean using them, streamlines the process of identifying what the speaker is conveying (Bach, 1998: 713).

This is the case, for instance, of the request *can you pass the salt?*, which is always treated as a request beyond the literal yes/no question on the hearer’s ability to pass the salt (cf Yus, 1999 for discussion):

the requestive use of [*can you...?*] short-circuits the SAS [speech act schema], the hearer identifying the speaker’s requestive illocutionary intent without having to identify the literal intent of questioning. He does this by relying on the precedent for the form’s being used requestively. This precedent and the hearer’s unthinking reliance on it depend on the form’s being specifiable in some syntactically determinate way, and it must be such that the connection between the literal force/content and the indirect force/content is simple and systematic (Bach and Harnish, 1979: 706).

This picture of standardisation refers to the availability of encyclopedic knowledge and how stereotypically certain utterances are understood: “chunks of assumptions about the typical contexts in which particular linguistic strings are usually processed for relevance become accessible in a single step, thus avoiding the need for more complex inferencing (Žegarac, 1998: 343-344; on standardisation vs. conventionalisation, see also Nicolle and Clark, 1998). However, one key difference between standardisation and conventionalisation is that the standardised word or expression can also be used denotatively (i.e., explicitly) if the contextual attributes favour this interpretation. Returning to the standardised *can you...?*, we can actually find situations in which the ability-interpretation is more relevant than the request-interpretation of the question (Yus, 1999: 496):

(9) a. *A and B are checking a house that they are interested in buying. A suddenly sees B inspecting one of the windows.*
   b. A. Can you open the windows?
   B. Yes, they all seem to be in fine condition.

Therefore, conventionalisation is similar to standardisation, but with an extra layer of stereotypical inferencing. Žegarac (1998) analyses how conventionalised phatic words such as hello or hi do not contribute to the interpretation of the utterances in which they appear in virtue of their linguistic meaning (either because it has become suppressed, or because they have none), but rather in virtue of people’s encyclopedic knowledge about their use” (p. 347). In Nicolle and Clark’s (1998: 185) words:

When Mary says *hello* to Peter, (1) he forms a description of the act of ostension: *Mary has said HELLO to me*, (2) he accesses some relevant contextual assumptions about how *hello* is usually understood: “*hello*” is an informal greeting, and (3) he uses (1) and (2) as premises in deriving the conclusion: *Mary has greeted me informally*. Because *hello* is a
conventionalised expression, the contextual assumptions used in stage (2) of the utterance interpretation process are immediately accessible to Peter. The only difference between conventionalised expressions and standardised expressions like *how are you?* on this account is that standardised expressions also encode some linguistic meaning in addition to making encyclopedic knowledge about their use immediately accessible.

Insults can also be standardised and conventionalised in the same way. An insult such as *son of a bitch* would be an example of *conventionalised insult* which has no meaning beyond the fact that it is used systematically with a specific (offensive- or praise-centred) intentionality, and which do not have (literal) linguistic meaning beyond its illocutionary force. Other insults such as *bastard* are standardised, since they may also encode additional meaning beyond the mere ostensive act of insulting, and used literally in certain contexts, as we have seen above.

However, at least at this level of heated-up, offense-centred insulting activity, insults -including standardised ones- are normally used without any reference to a possible alternative encoded meaning of the insult, and are effective simply by being uttered with the ostensive intention to offend the addressee. “For example when we call someone a bastard it is unlikely that we are questioning the legitimacy of his birth. More likely we are expressing dislike for him or something he has done. The connotative usage of dirty words is linked to expression of emotion, not denoting a specific property of the person in question” (Jay, 1977: 244). Also, Foote and Woodward (1973, in Jay, ibid.) point out that “in actual usage the meaning of obscenity is much more related to expletive, emotional release through epithet and is probably rarely connected to the denotative referential domain of the obscenity being used”.

Animal-related insults are examples of words which encode meaning (some of which is interpretively mapped by the insulter onto the “insultee’s” own attributes), and which are used systematically with an offense-centred intentionality based on shared negative values of the animals concerned. There is a standardised rule mapping interpretively the semantic domains of animals and the insulted person. But not all references to animals will do: only those animals whose qualities stereotypically lead to offense will be chosen in the insult. In this sense, Leach (1974: 43-44) wonders why expressions such as ‘son of a bitch’ and ‘pig’ carry offensive connotations which ‘son of a kangaroo’ or ‘polar bear’ do not. When the name of a specific animal is used as an insult, it indicates that certain animal categories are in some sense taboo, which implies a shared encyclopedic assumption about how certain words on animals are to be used.

Another example of how certain animal-related words become standardised in their insulting function is the highly stereotypical metaphoric mapping between women and animals. According to Whaley and Antonelli (1983: 219-220) these “range from the indisputably negative (pig, bitch, cow, shrew, biddy and chippie) through the relatively neutral (chick and bird) to the admirable from a male perspective (fox, foxy, lady, Playboy Bunny and sex kitten)”. These metaphors “may be viewed as part of the deep-seated bias against females in our patriarchic culture” (p. 220).

The translator of this kind of insult has to look for alternative words and expressions in the target language which effectively resemble the source-language ones in relevant terms, specifically reproducing the same degree of standardisation and/or conventionalisation. As far as possible, the translator should find standardised and/or conventionalised expressions which foreground the offense-centred intentionality underlying the act of ostension, and which at the same time short-circuit the inferential processing of the possible alternative meaning encoded by these words or expressions. Sometimes, the fact that the word has lost its denotative meaning through a shared convention makes its translation easier. Take, for instance, the Spanish word *cabrón*, whose main metaphoric mapping with the ‘insultee’ is “someone whose wife is unfaithful to him”. Nowadays, this insult is used in a
wide range of (offense- or praise-) centred situations and it has acquired alternative connotative meanings, making it translatable to other languages such as English:

(10) [Tom has just discovered that Peter has revealed an important secret to a competitor].
    Tom: “Peter, eres un cabrón!”.  
    Tom: “Peter, you are a bastard!”.

But when used in its main metaphoric meaning it has no counterpart in English, a fact which can be made extensible to other metaphoric terms in the same semantic field, such as astado, cornudo, cabestro, or vikingo. In this case a paraphrase may be necessary:

(11) a. [Tom has just discovered that Sam’s wife is unfaithful to him, and he’s telling Peter].
    Tom: “Peter, ¿sabías lo de la aventura de la mujer de Sam? El pobre no sabe que es un cabrón!”.
    b. Tom: “Peter, did you know about Sam’s wife’s affair? The poor guy doesn’t know his wife is cheating on him!”.

4.2. Innovative insults with offense-centred intentionality

Although speakers have a whole range of insults to choose from when displaying their offense-centred intentionality, these are not the only possible words or expressions which can be used with that purpose. Often, skilled insulters rely on highly innovative expressions to carry out their offense. In these cases the norm for the translator is the same: to try and produce a target-language expression which is interpretive resembles the source-language expression in relevant terms, in this case trying to equate the expressions in their degree of innovation displayed. Below some (real) examples of innovative insults are quoted:

(12) a. Oh my God, look at you. Anyone else hurt in the accident? (Don Rickles to Ernest Borgnine).
    b. I'm not having points taken off me by an incompetent old fool. You're the pits of the world (John McEnroe to tennis judge Edward James).
    c. You're like a pay toilet, aren't you? You don't give a shit for nothing (Howard Hughes to Robert Mitchum).

4.3. (Whole range of) insults with interaction-centred intentionality

Sometimes the intention of the speaker upon uttering the insult is not to offend the interlocutor, but rather to reinforce social bonds or guarantee the efficient management of the communicative channel, what ordinarily is called phatic communication (cf. Žegarac, 1998; Nicolle and Clark, 1998; Žegarac and Clark, 1999a, b; Ward and Horn, 1999). In this case, the speaker intends to make mutually manifest the fact that no offense is intended with the insult, and that it should be taken solely as a socialising and purely interactive conversational strategy.

This type of insult satisfies the requirements which are typically signalled as foregrounding a phatic strategy (Žegarac and Clark, 1999: 328, adapted to insults):

(a) The insult is used as a mode of action, rather than for the transmission of thoughts.
(b) The whole situation in which the exchange takes place consists in, and is largely created by
’what happens linguistically’.

(c) The mere meaning of the insult is almost irrelevant. Rather, the insult used fulfils a social function.

(d) This social function may be to ‘overcome the strange, unpleasant tension caused by silence’ and/or to establish an atmosphere of sociability and personal communion between people.

This is the case of ritual insults which were mentioned above in passing. For example, Fine (1981: 55-56) in his analysis of insults in preadolescent talk found many interactional and ritualized “insults which build upon each other, increasing in a crescendo of abuse. The later abuse can only be said because of what has gone before, and thus is an interactive achievement created jointly by the participants. All speakers in this interaction are orienting their talk in the same direction... Friends are allowed, and even expected, to insult each other, as a show of camaraderie. The nature of the insult is signalled by a smile or grin, permitting the target to “accept” the insult or even playfully to act in accord with it... Participants in these interactions recognize that the overt meaning of the remarks is not what they really mean”. A taped example is quoted in (13) (Fine, ibid., 57):

(13) Barb: You’re worth shit, Jordan.
      Tom: You’re fucking right.
      Jerry (to Barb): You got your cork [tampon] in?
      Barb: Shut up.
      Tom: Hey, Barb, you got your cork in?
      Barb: Rich lost his balls. They were all eaten up by, they had real teeth marks in them from Tom Jordan.
      Tom: Hey, fuck you.

Similarly, Murray (1983: 190) relates ritualized insults to socialization when he states that the former are an invitation to ‘play’. The appropriate response is verbal rather than physical violence. Within a group, violence in any form other than verbal is regarded as a failure to match wits. Here, what is manifest is the intention to make manifest the intention to engage in a game, and thus no offense is to be taken.

The translator of this kind of insult has to bear in mind the overall non-offensive and overtly interactional attribute of these insults. A text which interpretively resembles the original text in relevant ways has to reproduce the speakers’ underlying non-insulting propositional attitude. On many occasions -maybe most- a literal translation may be insufficient to transfer this intentionality as intended in the source text.

4.4. Standardised/conventionalised insults with praise-centred intentionality

The same insults which fit section 4.1. above within an offense-centred intentionality can be used with the opposite intention, that of praising the interlocutor or some action performed by him/her. The main variation lies in the drastic change in the speaker’s propositional attitude upon uttering the insult, an attitude which cannot simply be noticed by the interlocutor, but becomes mutually manifest, otherwise the speaker will be risking the effectiveness of the conversational exchange.

Normally, in order to secure the interpretation of the praise-centred insult, the speaker will use some additional contextual information -tone of voice, paralanguage, nonverbal behaviour, etc.- providing a relevant degree of redundancy foregrounding the right sense of the term or expression (that is, the right pairing of the encoded information of the insult and the speaker’s propositional
attitude upon uttering it):

(14)  

Peter has just inherited a large sum of money from a distant relative].

Tom: [with an exaggerated tone of voice] “You lucky bastard!”.

To a certain extent there is a similarity between this type of insult and the interaction-centred (phatic) insults commented upon in section 4.3. above. In both cases the cognitive effects obtained in the comprehension of these insults crucially depend on the evidence presented in the act of ostension (a communicative intention underlying the intention to use the insult in a non-offensive way), that is, an optimal degree of relevance achieved in the mere act of uttering the insult (cf. Žegarac, 1998: 338). Even though the insult does have a semantic meaning which is somehow transferred to the interlocutor, it is short-circuited by the mutually manifest non-offensive intentionality in the current conversational interaction.

Difficult as it may seem sometimes to distinguish between offense-centred, interaction-centred, or praise-centred insults, translators should look for those contextual clues which will help them to disambiguate the utterance or written text. On many occasions, the author has to resort to this additional contextual information in order to guarantee a correct reading of the text. The translator of this text should also reproduce them in the target text so that there is a similar degree of relevance between the two versions of the insult.

4.4. Innovative insults with praise-centred intentionality

These work in a similar fashion to innovative offense-centred insults (4.2. above), but this time the speaker makes it mutually manifest that he or she is uttering the insult without any intended offense. Again, the existence of supplementive contextual information will secure the right interpretation. From the translator’s point of view, he or she will have to look for a parallel innovative expression in the target language, and reinforce it with similar supplementive information, so that the degree of interpretive resemblance between the two versions is as high as possible.

5. Concluding remarks

Insults are varied and their eventual effect on the ‘insultee’ depends on several factors which the translator, in an interlingual situation, has to bear in mind when undergoing the task of turning a source-language insult into a target-language insult. Within a relevance-theoretic approach (which views insults as metaphoric expressions which interpretively resemble a thought of the speaker’s), we have addressed two of these factors: (a) the target of the insulting activity, basically offense-centred, interaction-centred, or praise-centred; and (b) whether the speaker resorts to standardised and/or conventionalised insults, or prefers to use a more innovative word or expression. These two factors yield a five-case preliminary taxonomy of insults, each of which demands special attention from the translator in his/her attempt to reach a close interpretive resemblance between source and target texts.

Notes

1 Insulting rhymes are very popular in America, especially in insulting duels where wit is more important than the very nature of the insulting word or utterance, and people do not feel as offended as when insults are not rhymed (see Labov, 1972; Kochman, 1970; Abrahams, 1962; Murray, 1982; Tannock, 1999). Most of the times they take place in a playful context. A variety is the ritual insult
or insulting routines, colloquially known as sounding and playing the dozens which involve “an extended and competitive exchange of insults, in which two (or more) individuals attempt to out-perform one another by coming up with insults that are ever more outrageous or clever” (Tannock, 1999: 322). They were originally used by afroamericans, but recent studies have shown their use among other social groups basically young ones. The problem arises when this kind of insult has to be translated into other languages that hardly ever or never resort to rhyme when insulting. As oral dueling is not uncommon in languages like Spanish, the translator could adapt the source language to target social use at the expense of losing illocutionary force, idiosyncratic and cultural gist and style.

2 We understand swearing and cursing as synonymous. We do not want to make any moral or ethical distinctions between the two: swearing having a religious intention and cursing a more civil and taboo purpose related to sex, excretion and so on.

3 We have previously referred to this activity as cursing and it is not one of our targets for the present paper.

4 Specifically, (2a) is an example of loose talk; (2b) is an example of metaphor; (2c) is an example of irony, which interpretively resembles a parallel utterance (3c) with an irony-producing dissociative attitude; and (2d) is an example of report of another person’s utterance.

5 This is typical of insults: “The mechanism of insult... is simple: semantic extension, comparison... On the one hand, there are unpleasant or contemptible things or beings; on the other, the mechanism of relating the insulted person to the former” (Luque et al., 1997: 25).

6 The interpretive metaphorical mapping between the addressee and the insult may be harder to grasp than it might be concluded by this example. Take, for instance, the very same insult, pig, used when the ‘insultee’ is a woman. Firstly, since both slim and fat people can be called pigs, weight cannot be a key attribute generating the metaphorical mapping. Whaley and Antonelli (1983: 222) conclude that the reference to pigs has something to do with a male perception of female serviceability, reciprocity, and certain lack of competition in male-female relationships. Women called pigs are perceived as sexually accessible and of potential service to the male because they are considered less competitive than some other women in the dating/mating marketplace. On the other hand, a metaphor such as fox is different (ibid., 223): a fox is an exotic animal that may be as clever and predatory as the man who hunts it. When men refer to women as foxy they are expressing admiration for an able quarry in the hunt, and issues of dominance, status, and the thrill of the chase are close at hand. However, the translator must be careful because in other languages such as Spanish fox becomes an insult (whore, prostitute) when applied to women but, interestingly enough, no to men (in which case it normally means cunning, witty, etc.).

7 This opting for literariness affects four aspects of the translation: The first one has to do with the special link established between the author and the reader, a link which is favoured by the insistent repetition of the second-person pronoun you, and which helps Salinger to sound as if he was speaking to the reader in face-to-face interaction These you-links are systematically suppressed and replaced by more varied alternatives. The other three aspects affect the protagonist’s poor idiolect, with unnecessary repetitions, intensifying expressions, and explicit slang register. In all these aspects of the source text, an option for literariness has taken place in the target language which deprives the translation of the degree of pragmatic equivalence (same balance of effects and effort) that the
translator should have achieved.

And these are always context-bound, forcing the translator to generate alternative implicit meanings in different languages. Pym (1992: chapter 5) points out that “absolute explicitness can be understood as textual completeness, as the ideal presentation of all the axioms, definitions and descriptions needed to understand the exact meaning of each proposition made. This ideal would require the creation of a specific self-contained world wholly inscribed in the text, assuming no prior knowledge and making no presuppositions of extra-textual material. Such a text would remain meaningful and stable throughout even the longest cultural trajectory. But it would be fair to say that there exists no such text”.

Gutt (1992: 41) distinguishes the interpretive use of utterances where both the ST and the TT are in the same language (intralingual interpretive use), and the interpretive use when ST language and TT language differ, called interlingual interpretive use.

An insult has many functions depending on the context in which it appears. Needless to say, it is still a powerful instrument to injure, humiliate, denigrate, etc., but it can even be praising or a sign of admiration towards a person (Luque et al., 1997: 19).

“[T]he more a representation is processed, the more accessible it becomes. Hence, the greater the amount of processing involved in the formation of an assumption, and the more often it is accessed thereafter, the greater its accessibility” (S&W, 1986/95: 77).

References