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The English discourse particle ‘oh’ in Spanish translations: evidence from a parallel corpus

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Abstract

This paper explores the translations of the English discourse particle *oh* into Spanish. Discourse particles are particularly problematic in translation because of their multi-functionality, their high degree of grammaticalization, and their strong culture-bound character. The interjection *oh* is one frequent discourse marker in English spoken discourse, conveying text-organising and interpersonal functions. This study will focus on the translations of *oh* in the 2.5 million-word English-Spanish parallel corpus PACTRES. The aim is to provide an inventory of translation solutions in Spanish for the various functions of *oh* in English texts.

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the various translational options of the discourse particle *oh* in Spanish translations of contemporary English texts. Discourse markers are short words or phrases, particularly frequent in spoken communication, which do not add major propositional content to the utterance they belong to, but rather express the speaker’s attitude towards the listener, negotiate background assumptions or express other types of interpersonal or textual meanings that contribute to the overall texture and coherence of discourse. Discourse particles are particularly problematic in translation because of their multi-functionality, their high degree of grammaticalization,

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and their strong culture-bound character. Discourse markers are consequently often omitted in translations into other languages as shown in previous studies: Bazzanella & Morra (2000), Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg (2006), Aijmer (2008).

The interjection *oh* is one frequent discourse marker in English spoken discourse, conveying both text-organising and interpersonal functions. Many previous studies have analyzed the polysemous particle *oh* in English discourse (James, 1973; Heritage, 1984; Schiffrin, 1987; Fischer 2000; Aijmer, 2002). These studies highlight the various functions *oh* has developed as a discourse particle, often overlapping with *well* and *now* in its pragmatic meanings. *Oh* is generally placed in the left-hand position with a loose attachment to the following utterance. It is indexical since it refers backwards and forwards with a connective function. “*Oh* is a typical reception marker which is used to signal a reaction to information provided by another speaker” (Aijmer, 2002: 98). *Oh* is thus used to acknowledge and accept new information or recognize a correction of a previous mistake. But *oh* may also be used as a forwards-looking particle “associated with affect and [...] a reinforcing or intensifying function.” (Aijmer, 2002: 99).

This study focuses on the translations of *oh* in the English-Spanish parallel corpus PACTRES, which will provide the empirical material for the analysis. The PACTRES corpus contains about 2.5 million words of contemporary English texts and their corresponding translations into European Spanish. The corpus-based methodology employed will consist of a careful analysis of the cases of *oh* found in the English subcorpus, followed by a detailed study of the translational options identified in each function or meaning. The aim of the study is to provide an inventory of translation solutions available in Spanish for the various functions of *oh* in English original texts.

2. Data and method

The empirical data used for the analysis in this paper were extracted from the English-Spanish parallel corpus PACTRES compiled at the University of León, Spain. PACTRES contains original English texts and their corresponding Spanish translations. This corpus includes written material from a variety of different registers (fiction, non-fiction, newspapers, magazines & miscellanea) published in the year 2000 or later, thus representing the contemporary stage of the English language, and the corresponding translations published in the European variety of Spanish. Today PACTRES comprises nearly 2.5 million words, approximately 1.2 million words per language. The English source texts and their corresponding translations into Spanish are aligned at sentence level and can be searched with the Corpus Work Bench browser (CWB).

All the cases of *oh* were extracted from the corpus, together with their corresponding Spanish translations. The various pragmatic functions were identified and checked for their translations. The browser of the PACTRES parallel corpus provided 297 instances of the form *oh* in the English subcorpus. Of these, 4 cases were not included in the study: 1 mistake and 3 cases included in sentences which were entirely omitted in the translation. Consequently, a total of 293 instances of *oh* were analyzed for their translations into Spanish. As the corpus is subdivided into different parts according to register, it was possible to identify the most common source of these uses, which as expected, was the fiction corpus, with 260 cases, 88.7% of the total. This is because of the dialogic nature of the interjection *oh*. In non-fictional texts there were 20 cases (6.8%), in newspapers 9 cases (3.07%) and in magazines only 4 cases (1.36%). No instance was found in the corpus of miscellanea texts.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. The pragmatic functions of ‘*oh*’ in English

The core meaning of the English particle *oh* is to express surprise, although its pragmatic uses are much more varied and include many different nuances depending on the context and including mostly a response of some type to previously obtained information (backwards-looking), or the intensification of following words (forwards-looking). This is also the reason why *oh* occurs mainly in initial left-hand position of the utterance. All the instances of *oh* in the PACTRES corpus were classified following Aijmer (2008: 111), yielding the results shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Pragmatic functions of *oh* in P-ACTRES.

Main pragmatic function	cases	percentage
Drawing a conclusion, recognizing a fact, starting a new turn	164	55.9%
Exclamation (intensification)	102	34.8%
Receiving new and unexpected information	23	7.8%
Suggesting reservation or modification before a new departure in the conversation	4	1.3%
Total	293	100%

Table 1 shows that most often the speaker uses the particle *oh* to begin an utterance with which he or she draws a conclusion from previous facts or recognizes a fact, adding some type of comment or explanation to it in a new turn, as in the example 1. This occurred in our corpus in over half the cases analyzed (55% of the total):

1. Their spouse will do something bad, and they'll say, "Oh, he's just in a crummy mood." (EGM1E.s193)

The second most frequent use of *oh* in our corpus corresponded to a forwards-looking pragmatic marker, with 34% of cases. Here *oh* is used to express an exclamation of surprise that intensifies the following words, which are usually either proper nouns or other interjections that are reinforced by the use of *oh*, as in example 2:

2. "Oh, mercy, save us!" (FWJ1E.s831)

Less frequently (7%), the response marker *oh* may refer to the reception of new and unexpected information just obtained from the previous speaker. In these cases, *oh* has an important nuance of surprise, as in example 3:

3. "I have just received news of Franz Kafka's death." (ESG1E.s733) "Oh, I am sorry." (ESG1E.s734)

Finally, a very small number of cases (1.3%) were found to be used to express some type of reservation or modification before starting a new turn in the conversation, as in example 4 below:

4. "My mother whispers louder than that when she's reading me a bedtime story. (FBT1E.s194) Oh, I know what! (FBT1E.s195) This will prove it!" (FBT1E.s196)

3.2. The translations of 'oh' into Spanish

In this section we will analyze the various translations of the pragmatic marker *oh* into Spanish according to its different functions in the source language. Table 2 lists the translations of *oh* meaning 'recognizing a fact, drawing a conclusion':

Table 2: Translations of *oh* meaning 'recognizing a fact'.

Translations of <i>oh</i>	Cases - %
oh	55 – 33.5%
ah	47 – 28.6%
omission	38 – 23.1%
vaya	7 – 4.2%
bueno	3 – 1.8%
pues	3 – 1.8%
sí	2 – 1.2%

desde luego	2 – 1.2%
ay	1 – 0.6%
venga	1 – 0.6%
uy	1 – 0.6%
bah	1 – 0.6%
ya	1 – 0.6%
no	1 – 0.6%
hombre	1 – 0.6%
Total	164

Table 2 shows that there is a wide range of different translational options for rendering this particular pragmatic meaning into Spanish, including a long list of discourse markers typical of oral conversation in Spanish. However, the three main translational options account for over 85% of the cases. The formal equivalent *oh* is the most common option found (33%) (example 5), followed closely by *ah* (28%) and omission (23%), as in examples 6 and 7, respectively:

5. Longfellow took up the handwritten periodical "published" in installments by his three girls. (FPM1E.s1258)
 "Oh, it seems one of the best you've ever done. (FPM1E.s1259)
 Longfellow tomó la revista manuscrita "publicada" por entregas por las tres niñas. (FPM1S.s1184) - Oh, parece que es la mejor que habéis hecho. (FPM1S.s1185)
6. "Oh well, there's no problem, then, is there? (FCA1E.s1625)
 - ¡Ah, bueno! (FCA1S.s1579) Entonces no hay problema. (FCA1S.s1580)
7. "Oh, I know, I know," says Mundy wearily, in their old spirit of togetherness. (FCJ1E.s305)
 - Ya lo sé, ya lo sé - dice Mundy con hastío, recuperando momentáneamente el antiguo espíritu de pareja unida. (FCJ1S.s297)

According to Chaume (2004: 849), "the Spanish *oh* shows either surprise or disappointment", but not really the pragmatic intention of the English *oh* when it refers to the realization of a fact, where *ah* is more idiomatic in Spanish. As always in the case of discourse markers, omission is a preferred option for translators. The only other option with a relevant number of cases is *vaya*, a discourse marker indicating disappointment or regret in Spanish, as in example 8:

8. "Oh," she said with a slight sneer, "you're one of his private patients, are you?" (FLD1E.s100)
 "¡Vaya!", dijo entonces con cierto desdén. (FLD1S.s105) "Así que es usted uno de sus pacientes privados, ¿no?" (FLD1S.s106)

As for the cases of *oh* functioning as an intensifier, Table 3 shows the list of translations found in PACTRES:

Table 3: Translations of *oh* as an intensifier.

Translations of <i>oh</i>	Cases - %
oh	57 – 55.8%
omission	31 – 30.3%
ay	5 – 4.9%
modulation	2 – 1.9%
vaya	2- 1.9%

ah	1 - 0.9%
bueno	1 - 0.9%
venga	1 - 0.9%
vamos	1 - 0.9%
eh	1 - 0.9%
Total	102

In this case we find much more homogeneity in the translations since over half the occurrences have been translated by the formal equivalent *oh* in Spanish, as in example 9:

9. "Oh Jack," she said, "I feel so much better!" (FBT1E.s202)
 "Oh Jack ", dijo, "¡me siento muchísimo mejor!" (FBT1S.s200)

The second most common option has been the actual omission of *oh*, as in example 10:

10. "Oh, God," he said. (FFK1E.s13)
 - Dios mío - musitó. (FFK1S.s13)

The remaining options are all relatively infrequent. Table 4 shows the translations of *oh* meaning ‘receiving new and unexpected information’:

Table 4: Translations of *oh* meaning ‘receiving new information’.

Translations of <i>oh</i>	Cases - %
oh	8 – 34.7%
omission	8 – 34.7%
ay	3 – 13.04%
vaya	2 – 8.6%
vamos	1 – 4.3%
eh	1 – 4.3%
Total	23

Again, the formal equivalent *oh* and the complete omission of any type of pragmatic marker are the most common options taken by translators, with 34% each. The remaining cases are very infrequent.

The 4 instances in which the English particle *oh* was found to express reservation or modification before a new turn in the conversation were all translated by the formal equivalent *oh* in Spanish.

The results show that there is a wide range of different translations, something which confirms previous studies on the translations of discourse markers (Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg, 2006). The varied nuances that may be involved in the use of *oh* as a pragmatic marker in dialogue implies that translators may employ many different options. However, the percentage of omissions found shows also that it is often easier to lose part of the pragmatic meaning in the source text to maintain idiomaticity.

4. Conclusions

This paper has studied the translations into Spanish of the pragmatic marker *oh* as it appears in the P-ACTRES parallel corpus. The various instances were divided into two groups: backwards-looking particles and forwards-looking particles or intensifiers. In the case of backwards-looking particles we have distinguished 3 different

pragmatic nuances: the use of *oh* to express the recognition of a fact, to convey surprise after receiving new and unexpected information and to express reservation before a new turn in the conversation.

The main conclusion points towards the fact that there is no unique meaning correspondence in Spanish for the meanings that may be realized by *oh* in English, since this particle is much more frequent in English than in Spanish. In Spanish *oh* occurs in only about half the cases as the translation of *oh* when used as an intensifier, and in merely around 30% of the cases when meaning ‘recognizing a fact’. Clearly, *oh* does not cover the same pragmatic spectrum in both languages, with a much wider range of meanings in English. Consequently, other options are selected by professional translators, mainly *ah* when the meaning implied is ‘recognizing a fact’ and the downright omission of any type of marker in the translation in all meanings analyzed, in particular as an intensifier. These omissions are often highly idiomatic and do not result in loss of much pragmatic meaning. The different uses of a polyfunctional item such as *oh* provide, as expected, very different translational patterns.

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