



Revue de Traduction et Langues Volume 23 Numéro 02/2024  
Journal of Translation Languages مجلة الترجمة واللغات  
ISSN (Print): 1112-3974 EISSN (Online): 2600-6235  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52919/translang.v23i2.1005>



## *The Translation of Uma Thurman’s Pun in “Pulp Fiction”: Ensemble of translations from the perspective of Relevance Theory*

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### **To cite this paper:**

Sitjà Márquez, P. (2024). The Translation of Uma Thurman’s Pun in *Pulp Fiction*: Ensemble of translations from the perspective of Relevance Theory. *Traduction et Langues*, 23(2), 84-95.

**Received:** 07/06/2024; **Accepted:** 07/07/2024; **Published:** 30/07/2024

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**Keywords**

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*Pun translation;  
Relevance  
theory; Pun  
correspondence;  
Target reader;  
The story of the  
family of  
tomatoes;  
Wordplay  
translation*

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**Abstract**

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*This paper is framed by the Relevance Theory as applied to the translation of a pun in Quentin Tarantino's cult film Pulp Fiction into nine dubbed versions. Entitled "the story of the family of tomatoes", this pun is particularly difficult to translate because of its linguistic and cultural characteristics. The paper starts by classifying the kind of pun in question and describing its function in the original film. From here, the paper proceeds to a close examination of each of these translations, using Relevance Theory in the analysis of how each version revises the pun for the target audience. The analysis instead focuses on interpretative similarity, rather than fixed or standard equivalence to the source text. In this case, the study will establish how each translation develops the intended meaning of the pun by adjusting to the cognitive environment of the target audience. This paper therefore adopts Relevance Theory, which explains how individuals process information with regard to context and cognitive effort involved, in testing how well the translations could maintain original humor and communicative intent without being strictly tied to specific lexical or syntactic structures in the source text. It is also beyond the surface linguistic features, taking into consideration how pragmatic factors-like cultural references and the audiences' expectations-are accounted for in each dubbed version. This article, then, insists on the preeminence of pragmatic context over literal lexical and syntactical equivalence. In so doing, the research provided challenges the more traditional notions of translation fidelity-particularly in instances where puns or other wordplay resist direct translation. Relevance theory in this analysis examines the complications of humor translation and how these different dubbed versions face such challenges, while fidelity to source materials is imposed on them with imperatives to engage their particular target audiences.*

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**Palabras Clave**

Traducción del chiste; Teoría de la relevancia; Correspondencia de juegos de palabras; Tipo de lector; La historia de la familia de tomates; Traducción de juegos de palabras

**Resumen**

*Este artículo, basado en la Teoría de la Relevancia, examina la traducción de un juego de palabras del icónico film Pulp Fiction de Quentin Tarantino a través de nueve versiones dobladas. El juego de palabras, conocido como “la historia de la familia de tomates”, presenta desafíos únicos de traducción debido a sus matices lingüísticos y culturales. El estudio comienza categorizando el tipo de juego de palabras y definiendo su función en la película, para luego analizar en detalle las distintas traducciones, aplicando la Teoría de la Relevancia para evaluar cómo cada versión adapta el juego de palabras a su audiencia. En lugar de buscar una equivalencia fija o estándar con el texto original, el análisis prioriza la similitud interpretativa, considerando cómo cada traducción reconstruye el significado del juego de palabras adaptándose al entorno cognitivo de la audiencia. La Teoría de la Relevancia, que se centra en cómo las personas procesan la información según el contexto y el esfuerzo cognitivo, ofrece un marco para evaluar si las traducciones preservan el humor original y la intención comunicativa sin seguir de manera rígida las estructuras léxicas o sintácticas del texto fuente. El artículo enfatiza la importancia del contexto pragmático sobre la equivalencia léxica y sintáctica directa. De este modo, el estudio cuestiona las nociones convencionales de fidelidad en la traducción, especialmente cuando se trata de juegos de palabras, que a menudo presentan dificultades para ser traducidos de manera literal. A través de la Teoría de la Relevancia, el estudio ilumina las complejidades de la traducción del humor y muestra cómo las diferentes versiones dobladas equilibran la fidelidad al material original con la necesidad de atraer a sus respectivas audiencias.*

**1. Introduction**

It is a well-known fact that puns are found agreeable in English-speaking countries. Although Quentin Tarantino’s movies are not necessarily known for their humor, *Pulp Fiction* (1994) has been referred to as a black comedy due to a number of hilarious jokes highlighted throughout the film. The jokes used by Tarantino are generally in the form of dialogue and reactions more than they are punchlines, as the humour has to be found in the essence of the characters themselves rather than in a conventional isolated joke. Humour fulfils this film to such an extent that the story of the family of tomatoes becomes a reflection of Tarantino’s own humour as well as an exception and a *rara avis* worth of analysis as it is unspontaneous and, paradoxically, pretends to be humorless.

It is pertinent to analyse how this pun, a linguistic-formal wordgame, is rendered in the other dubbed versions of this film. Furthermore, given the fact that this film has been dubbed into several languages as well as being amongst the most celebrated pieces worldwide, the analysis is significant for the target cultures as puns are not just a mere linguistic mechanism but a mirror of a social context. The main purpose of this article, therefore, is to analyse this pun from a relevance-theory perspective. As affirmed antecedently (Zabalbeascoa, 2001; Marco, 2004), it is believed that translators are



advisable to propose different types of translation in light of specific translation problems. Thus, the criterion for translation shall not be a fixed standard of equivalence but an interpretative similarity determined by the translation obstacle given that puns are usually seen as particular difficulties. The main cause of that lies in the fact that the semantic and pragmatic effects of the puns of the source text —hereinafter ST— are conceived in peculiar structural characteristics of the source language. Indeed (Marco, 2010), the translator has to display a major linguistical effort to produce something virtuous that seeks hilarity (or non-hilarity that intends to provoke hilarity), as ST are profused with idioms, polysemous words, homophones, etcetera, for which the target language — hereinafter TL— usually fails to produce an equivalent and so the translation of wordgames has to be grappled with other strategies.

## 2. The Type of Pun. Purposes of the Story of the Family of Tomatoes

As aforementioned, the story of the family of tomatoe's pun is peculiar since it has a special component: it is supposedly humorlessly solicited. In a certain way it may be interpreted as a banal pun wisely executed. Anyone who tries to trace the natural quality of the pun, worthy of a young child or an inveterate linguist-punster, will acknowledge that is not so much the words but how this substance of chained phrases complements inherently with the plot of the film, the pragmatic environment as well as the interpretation of Uma Thurman.

The most common priority for a film is to achieve a good audience level alongside being profitable, also being interesting and rouse hilarity, assuming that it is a comedy. It seems natural to think that these will also be the priorities that would be used for the dubbing of comedy films and fixed equivalence at other levels will not matter as much, such as lexical or syntactic equivalence.

It is also interesting to note that usually the viewers watching the dubbed version are made unaware of the original version (Bucaria, 2007). Hence, the relevance, conceived through an interpretative optic, is more determined than the standard equivalence. Zabalbeascoa (2001) noted that “too often, comedies give the impression of having been translated according to criteria applicable to other translation or dubbing situations. If the jokes do not work as good jokes in the ST, what does it matter that each of the words that made them up or their informative content have been faithfully translated?” (p. 258)

In conformity with his classification, the type of pun of the study is a wordgame, a linguistic-formal joke. Its power relies on the dual interpretation of the phrasal verb “catch up” with the similar pronunciation of the word “ketchup”. Uma Thurman —Mia Wallace—, after anticipating that the pun is not funny a couple of times during the film, tells her joke right after suffering an overdose that almost ends her life. It is not obvious if the joke is well linked to the extreme event or not, the fact is that it ends up making John Travolta —Vincent Vega— smile. Mia's pun, which she told already in her series premiere of Fox Force Five, goes as follows:



- (1) [ST] Three tomatoes are walking down the street. Papa Tomato, Mama Tomato and Baby Tomato. Baby Tomato starts lagging behind, and Papa Tomato gets really angry. Goes back and squishes him and says: “Ketchup” (01:02:44).

In accordance with the preceding purposes, one may contend that the primary objective in the translation of the tomatoe’s pun into other languages is not to strive for rigid equivalence across all grammatical levels, or to produce a circumvent literal rendition of the word “ketchup”, but to prioritize the target environment and accurately convey the ambiguity while reproducing the double meaning. The phrases “ketchup” and “catch up” are homophones in English, meaning they are pronounced similarly but have distinct meanings and spellings. This phonetic resemblance lends itself to wordplay and double meanings in various contexts. Double meaning puns are generally perceived in English culture as clever and humorous because they showcase the flexibility and richness of the language. The cultural context plays a crucial role in assessing the quality and impact of a translation. This is especially true when it comes to translating humor, as jokes and comedic elements often rely on cultural nuances, wordplay, and references that may not easily transfer between languages. Therefore, the effectiveness of humor in translation is often harder to judge because it depends heavily on the cultural understanding of the audience.

### 2.1 A linguistic-formal joke

The linguistic-formal joke (Zabalbeascoa, 2001) hinges on linguistic phenomena such as polysemy, homonymy, rhyme, metalinguistic references, and others. Some of these type of jokes could be easily translatable, but the linguistic restrictions makes them valuable and occasionally even cryptic. There is not usually a linguistic equivalent or coincidence so that the language of the TL is not capable of reproducing the same wordgame. This category of linguistic-formal jokes includes wordgames that have no other aim than to show certain links between linguistic signs and their pragmatic uses. Indeed, these jokes are usually mutable and difficult to adapt, as it shows the linguistic finesse and artistry of the authors. In general, those jokes are utterly loaded with double meanings, as we have seen in the tomatoe’s pun.

Zabalbeascoa (2001, 2004) states that puns and jokes substantially are extremely complicated to translate due to the linguistic virtuosity exercised by their authors. He also highlights that translators shall always propose various types of translation subject to specific translation issues. For instance, paralinguistic jokes are sharper and more challenging than linguistic-formal ones considering that they depend on a combination of elements, verbal and non-verbal. A paradigmatic example of this is the square in the same *Pulp Fiction* film, when Mia literally draws on the screen, which in English is well understood as the last word of the sentence (verbally initiated) “don’t be square” it is ended with her air drawing a square shape. This scene plasms the uncertainty of humour



translation and hurdles that translators constantly deal with, availing themselves of instrumental principles and strategies.

### 3. Relevance Theory and Pun's Translation

Relevance Theory offers a lens through which to examine puns and their translational dynamics. It underscores the significance of discerning the intentions of punsters, posited by the present discourse as a pivotal determinant distinguishing punning from ambiguity. As previously affirmed, an inherent asymmetry exists between language and the external reality it represents (Delabastita, 1994; Jing, 2010). This asymmetry, exemplified by the multiplicity of referents for a single linguistic expression, is indispensable for communicative efficiency but concurrently engenders ambiguity—a state wherein a word, phrase or a sentence encompasses multiple interpretations—, potentially leading to diverse misapprehensions or even breakdowns in communication, hence necessitating meticulous handling. Conversely, punning constitutes a deliberate exploitation of language's inherent ambiguity to elicit particular effects in specific contexts and cultures. The pun, acting as a semantic nexus, amalgamates disparate meanings into a cohesive construct.

According to Relevance Theory, the translator's task involves evoking dual interpretations within the cognitive realm of the target audience, where recognition of the punster's intention and discernment of the relevance of the dual meanings assume paramount importance for communicative efficacy. As it has been indicated, "human communication creates expectations of optimal relevance. In other words, both addresser and addressee will pursue optimal relevance in communication. In this sense, any act of communication carries an assumption that the addresser intends his or her utterance to be relevant" (Díaz-Pérez, 2015, p. 281).

Moreover, Relevance Theory refutes the notion of puns being inherently untranslatable. By virtue of their distinctive characteristics, carrying usually the compression of two meanings within homophonic or polysemous effects for specific moments, the equivalence criteria, operating in both lexical and contextual dimensions, has to be substituted. As highlighted by Attardo (2002), "we know, after Saussure, that no two utterances *even in the same language* are ever the same, it follows that no two utterances in different languages can ever be exactly the same. Thus we have to relax our criterion of meaning persistence from identity to mere similarity" (p. 174). Thus, it is acceptable to violate the semantics of the ST but to respect fully its pragmatic force.

#### 3.1 Methodology

The research design employed for this study entailed a deliberate and methodical approach towards the selection of languages constituting the sample, albeit with a semblance of randomness imbued within the process. The rationale behind this methodological choice was multifaceted, aimed at achieving a diversified linguistic representation to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of translation practices across





varied linguistic contexts. While the selection was not purely random, as it was underpinned by the researcher's intention to encompass a spectrum of languages for the purpose of unveiling diverse translational strategies, a degree of stochasticity was maintained to avoid undue bias in language selection.

Central to the sampling strategy was the utilization of the web pages; imdb.com and opensubtitles.org as the primary sources for accessing dubbed materials and subtitles. This second platform served as a rich repository of subtitled content spanning across eight languages (nine versions of subtitles), thereby affording an extensive pool from which to draw samples for analysis. The inclusion of languages beyond the primary focus of Italian, which held particular interest to the researcher, underscores a deliberate effort to broaden the scope of inquiry and capture the nuances inherent in translation across disparate linguistic landscapes and cultures.

The selected languages, in addition to the first sample in Italian, encompassed a diverse array, including Catalan, French, German, Portuguese from both Portugal and Brazil, Spanish and Turkish. This deliberate inclusion of multiple linguistic varieties aimed to enrich the dataset with linguistic diversity. Based on the above theory, this article will elucidate, from the perspective of Relevance Theory, diverse translations by analysing nine different dubbed versions of the tomatoe's pun.

#### 4. Tarantino's Pun Abroad. Analysis and Correspondances

According to the study from which our focus derives (Jing, 2010), pun correspondence manifests in three distinct types: homophonic, polysemous and allusive matching. In the case under examination, it embodies a homophonic correspondence. Looking firstly in Italian it is evident that a perfect homophonic match cannot be unequivocally attained, as homophones in the ST "catch up" and "ketchup" cannot seamlessly transpose into the TT without compromising the original meaning. Were the jest translated literally as "ketchup/*stai al passo*", it would not evoke laughter, as there exists no perfect homophone for "ketchup" in Italian. Let us consider the first dubbed version of the pun:

- (2) [ITA] Tre pomodori camminano per la strada. Papà pomodoro, Mamà pomodoro e il pomodorino. Il pomodorino cammina con aria svagata e Papà pomodoro allora s'arrabbia e va da lui, lo schiaccia e dice: **"Fai il concentrato"** (01:02:44).

As it has been acknowledged, the translator must actively discern the most pertinent homophone within the cognitive framework of the target reader, thereby enabling the latter to discern the punster's intent without undue cognitive exertion. Indeed, from the Italian example, it is discernible that, owing to interlinguistic coincidences or the translator's inventiveness and creativity, the effect of the pun in the ST can be replicated through a corresponding pun in the TT. In Italian, "ketchup" is replaced with "(pomodoro) concentrato". "Concentrato di pomodoro" is an Italian term that translates to "tomato



paste” in English. Together, “concentrato di pomodoro” directly translates to “concentrate of tomato”, indicating a product derived from the concentration of tomatoes. It constitutes a wordplay with the expression “fare il concentrato (focus)” which bears resemblance to the Italian idiomatic expression “stare al passo”, compensating the English phrasal verb “catch up”.

Due to linguistic and cultural disparities, preserving the pun imagery from the ST in other languages may not invariably yield the desired effect in the TT. As posited by Relevance Theory, when maintaining both the form and content of the ST becomes untenable, paramount significance is accorded not to fidelity but to effectiveness, whether the original writer’s intention can be discerned by the target reader. To this end, the translator may opt to abandon the original imagery and seek an alternative wherein the dual meanings remain accessible to the recipient in light of the fact that pragmatic environment prevails.

The following French dubbed versions of the pun are notable for discussion:

- (3) [FRE] Trois tomates se baladent dans l’avenue. Papa tomate, maman tomate. Bébé tomate traîne, regarde les belles nanas. Papa tomate se met en rage, lui balance une claque et lui dit: **“Qu’est ce’ t’as t’es tout rouge?”**.
- (4) [FRE] La famille Citron se balade. Papa, maman, et bébé Citron. Bébé Citron est à la traîne. Papa Citron se met en boule le rejoint et l’écrabouille en disant: **“presse-toi”, Citron pressé.**

As it has been noted, previously the Italian iteration achieves the desired effect through the double meaning and homophones “fare il concentrato” and “concentrato di pomodoro”. Following an analogous mechanism, the first French rendition introduces a different imagery suggesting the double meaning of turning “rouge” —perhaps due to embarrassment felt by the distracted little tomato amidst the girls playing, which is intentionally incorporated as novel information— with turning red from the slap he receives, unlike the Italian translation in which he was smashed. In contrast, the second French version innovatively engages in a bona fide wordplay. Unlike in other languages, the version substitutes the tomatoe with a lemon opportunely, as the French verb “presser” (to hurry) is a homophone of “presser” (to squeeze). In this instance, the translator adopts “the strategy of sacrificing the secondary information of the pun based on his assessment of the specific context and the accessibility of the preserved information in the cognitive environment of the target reader” (Jing, 2010, p. 92).

Compared to the first version, which changes the image and somehow infantilizes it (let us remember the baby tomatoe is not crushed but slapped and blushed with shame), the second version effectively conveys the source writer’s pun intent with enhanced relevance. Despite the sacrifice of the tomatoe imagery, the additional cognitive effort required to grasp the pun in “citron pressé” (so that is a hurried and squeezed lemon) is offset by the heightened pun effect achieved through the homophones.





As for other languages the pun is translated literally:

- (5) [CAT] Tres tomàquets van passejant. El papa tomàquet, la mama tomàquet i el tomaquet. El tomaquet comença a caminar a poc a poc i el papa tomàquet s'enfada molt. Aleshores, es tomba, l'esclafa i diu: **“Quètxup”**.
- (6) [GER] Drei Tomaten gehen auf der Strasse spazieren. Papa Tomate, Mama Tomate, Baby Tomate. Baby Tomate bleibt ein bisschen zurück und Papa Tomate wird ziemlich wütend. Er geht zurück, zermatscht Baby und sagt **“Ketchup”**.
- (7) [POR] Três tomates andando na rua. Papai Tomate, Mamãe Tomate e Tomatinho. O Tomatinho vai ficando pra trás e Papai Tomate fica furioso. O pai vai até lá, pisa nele e diz: **“Ketchup”**.
- (8) [SPA] Tres tomates van por la calle. Papá tomate, Mamá tomate y Bebé tomate. Bebé tomate se queda atrás y Papá tomate se enfada muchísimo. Vuelve atrás, le aplasta y dice: **“Ketchup”**.
- (9) [TUR] Sokakta yürüyen üç tane domates var. Baba domates, anne domates ve bebek domates. Bebek domates geride kalıyor ve baba domates ona kızıyor. Geri dönüyor, bebeği eziyor ve ona şöyle diyor: **“Ketçap”**.

In Catalan, German, Portuguese (from Portugal), Spanish and Turkish translators opt for a literal rendering of the term “ketchup” thereby obliterating the intended pun’s effect. In consequence, the integrity and humour of the ST are compromised, leading to the failure of reproduction in the dubbed versions. Furthermore, in certain instances, such as the Brazilian Portuguese rendition, translators resort to explanatory interpolations enclosed within parentheses:

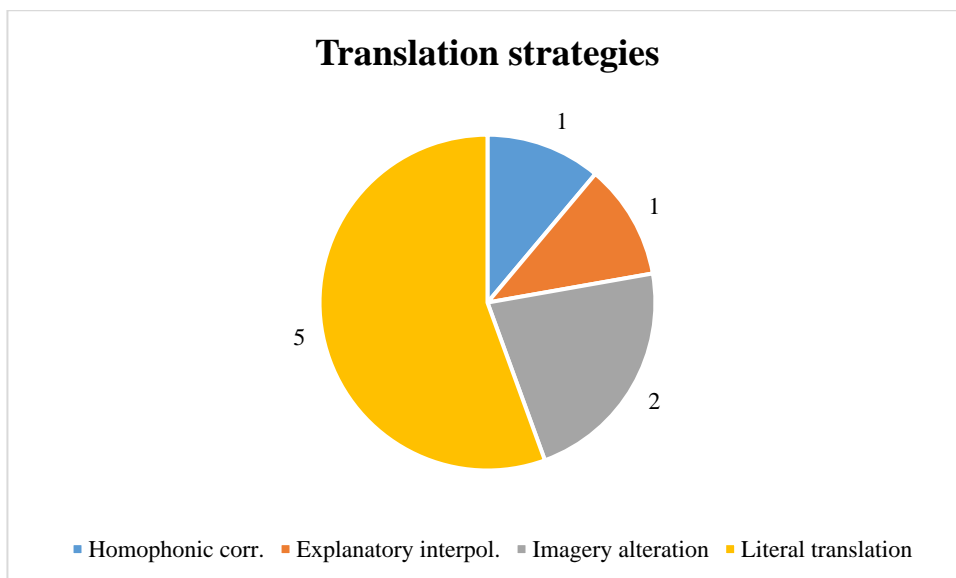
- (10) [POR] Três tomates andando na rua. Papai Tomate, Mamãe Tomate e Tomatinho. O Tomatinho vai ficando pra trás e Papai Tomate fica furioso. O pai vai até lá, pisa nele e diz: **“Não te atrases (catch up/ketchup)”**.

As for comprehending the joke, explanatory interpolations with parentheses disrupt the natural flow of the TT. This adherence to a literal translation strategy not only detracts from the subtlety and wit inherent in the original pun but also highlights the inherent challenges in transposing puns across different cultural and linguistic contexts. In this transpositional process, “it is necessary to bear in mind the cultural differences existing between the speakers of the two languages in the range, frequency and emotional intensity of the expletives they use” (Fernández Dobao, 2006, p. 240).

To recapitulate, the results gleaned from the translation strategies employed for the chosen pun reveal a predominance of literal translations (in Catalan, German, Portuguese from Portugal, Spanish and Turkish), a homophonic correspondence (in Italian), two instances of imagery alteration (in the two French examples proposed) and



explanatory interpolations within brackets (in Brazilian Portuguese).



**Figure 1.** Relation of translation strategies implemented

## 5. Conclusion

The discernment of the pun's intent ultimately rests upon the perceptiveness and cognitive engagement of the target reader. Their willingness and capacity to decipher the underlying connotations, coupled with an inclination to exert additional cognitive effort, dictate the extent to which contextual effects intended by the author can be realized.

The translator bears the responsibility of meticulously assessing the cognitive milieu of both the source and target readerships. This ensures that the nuanced double meanings inherent in puns can be effectively elicited within the specific contextual framework, thereby optimizing relevance in the translation process.

In conclusion, the translatability of puns is indeed feasible, as it demonstrates the example of homophonic correspondence (in Italian); however, adherence to the criterion of interpretative similarity is imperative, rather than rigid equivalence. Indeed, the translation strategies employed reflect a predominance of literal translations (in Catalan, German, Portuguese from Portugal, Spanish and Turkish) and it is not advisable to use the explanatory interpolations within brackets, as we have seen in the Brazilian Portuguese version, because they break the natural rhythm of the text. Moreover, the translator's ingenuity and creative acumen play a pivotal role in navigating the intricate terrain of pun translation, as we have confirmed in the two instances of imagery alteration (in the two French dubbed versions). Thus, the trilateral relationship between author, translator and target reader emerges as paramount in the successful transmission of puns, as well as the

cognitive environment of the target reader.

Finally, this article imposes limitations on the depth and breadth of the examples provided, thus potentially compromising the exhaustiveness of the argument. Thus, there exists a pressing need for access to a more extensive array of dubbed versions and samples spanning diverse languages, supplemented by a deeper exploration of the matter.

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## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the scientific committee for providing me with the opportunity to present my work at the event focused on “L’umorismo dell’altro, l’umorismo nell’altro. Forme e rappresentazioni del comico tra lingue e culture / Humor of the Other, Humor in the Other. Forms and Representations of the Comical Between Languages and Cultures,” which took place at the University for Foreigners of Siena (Università per Stranieri di Siena). It was a great opportunity to network with both new and old friends who have guided me throughout my career to date.

## Author Biodata

Pau Sitjà Márquez (Manlleu, 1994) holds a Bachelor in Philology and a Masters in Education. He has been a Lecturer at the University for Foreigners of Siena and at other Italian universities, such as the University of Bologna and the University of Siena. He is currently a Ph.D. student at the University of Barcelona while lecturing part-time at the University of Barcelona and the University of Vic. His research focuses on the analysis of the prosody, phonetics, acoustics and intonation of Catalan as a foreign language, specifically on the analysis of the melodic features of the Catalan interlanguage spoken by Italian speakers. He has translated work of the Italian poet Elisa Biagini into Catalan (*Filaments*, 2024), and he is also a member of the translation and revision staff of the scientific journal *EuroAmerican Journal of Applied Linguistics and Languages*.

## Declaration of conflicting interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of the article.



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