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## **Metaphor and Irony on Reviews for Spanish and American Prisons**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses nearly eight hundred reviews posted on Google search engine about twenty prisons in Spain and the United States. These countries have cultural values that are inevitably reflected in the language of their speakers. Through a qualitative and then quantitative analysis, some differences that could be related to the cultural features that are prevalent in these two countries have been found. However, the analysis has focused primarily on the use of metaphor and verbal irony. In particular, the analysis has revealed what could be called ironic metaphor in both corpora, since in a significant percentage of reviews, the prison is compared to tourist accommodation. Undoubtedly, this comparison would be a metaphor, but likewise, it must also be regarded as irony since prison is the antithesis of a leisure facility. As shown, the cultural differences between these countries are sometimes reflected in the reviews, but also a kind of globalization of the metaphor could be argued.

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## 1. Introduction

On the one hand, we must admit that metaphor and irony coexist with us every day in the ideas we have and in the way we express ourselves. Perhaps this is why Lakoff and Johnson (1980) titled their book *Metaphors we live by* because they are the tools we use for countless linguistic acts, not only as poetic resources but also to offend, to praise, etc. These authors were the first ones who gave an account of metaphors from a cognitivist view, and as this current sees it, concepts and their linguistic manifestations are based on the physical and cultural experience of the speakers. In this article, we do not know for sure if the reviewers lived the experiences they reported, but what they do agree on is the way they structure and describe life in prison through the experiences that they may have lived in tourist accommodations. That is pure metaphor. Since the comparison here is hyperbolic and ridiculous, the use of irony, in this case, is also added.

On the other hand, as mentioned above, our way of thinking and expressing ourselves is to some extent conditioned by the cultural values that we acquire in our enculturation. Cultural differences are usually measured in terms of cultural dimensions (Hall, 1976; Hampden Turner & Trompenaars, 2000; Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede et al., 2010). Therefore, when comparing different cultures, we will usually find differences in the speakers' discourse, always bearing in mind that the context guides the discourse, and it can lead to different uses from those typically expected (Hall, 1976; Schiffrin, 1991). Thus, the hypothesis that this paper explores is that the cultural differences in these two groups will be somehow reflected in the reviewers' discourse because language is a reflection, not only of ideas and feelings but also of the cultural features we inherit through our enculturation (Lister et al., 2020; Martínez Vázquez, 2017; Mendes de Oliveira, 2015). Specifically, this paper aims to focus on how cultural differences may reflect on reviews about such a special context as life in prison is. This aspect has not been studied from an intercultural point of view, in particular, comparing online reviews on Spanish and American prisons.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Traditionally, irony has been defined as a statement that literally expresses one thing but figuratively means the opposite (Sperber & Wilson, 1981), whereas metaphor occurs when there is a difference between what the speaker literally says and what he or she figuratively means, that is when we find one or more words in a statement that are used outside their usual or conventional meaning to refer to something similar (Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The difference between metaphor and irony is that in metaphor, there is a relationship of similarity between what the speaker says and what he or she means, whether this relationship is already a pre-existing one or one created ad hoc by the metaphor. However, the relationship that prevails in irony is not similarity but the opposition between what has been said and what is meant, since the speaker expresses positively to refer to something he or she considers negative (Clark & Gerrig, 1984; Leech, 1983). This definition of irony has always received criticism (Haverkate, 1985) since the phenomenon of contradiction in a statement is not sufficient to describe all phenomena of irony, and there may be ironic statements that do not imply a contradiction. On the contrary, the irony should be studied as a pragmalinguistic phenomenon in which we must consider not only what is said but also the context, cultural aspects, interpersonal relationships, circumstances in which the statement is issued, and so on (Alvarado Ortega, 2006; Roca Marín, 2009). As we can see, irony and metaphor are two representations of non-literal language, which is characterized as having dissonance between what is expressed and what is meant. That is, the speaker of a non-literal statement does not mean what he or she actually says (Winner & Gardner, 1993).

Many of the reviews analyzed here can be labeled as metaphor combined with irony since Google reviewers here compare prison institutions with tourist accommodations, and they do so by rating with comments that seem to be positive but actually mean the opposite, thus acquiring a humorous tone. Even if the review does not criticize the lodging—but sometimes the opposite—in no case can a prison be comparable to a stay in tourist accommodation since prison is the antithesis of the freedom that one feels when traveling. That

said, we must then consider that the metaphors found in this study could also be labeled as hyperbolic since they are exaggerated statements not to be taken literally (Carston & Wearing, 2015). Furthermore, in some of the instances provided by this analysis, the use of similes also appeared. Similes are considered by some scholars as a less sophisticated device than metaphors (Veale & Hao, 2007) because the comparison is explicit. However, in this case, they can be taken as a reinforcement of the original metaphor, as the explicit comparison that the similes display strengthens the relationship between the real and the unreal concepts of the metaphor. In any case, the aim of the tropes found here –irony, metaphor, hyperbole, and similes– are humorous resources used to attract the recipient's attention (Catalá Pérez, 2008), since they represent a break with the Gricean principle that interlocutors should favor communication (Grice, 1975).

A common problem in metaphor and irony is being able to differentiate between what the speaker says and what he or she really wants to imply, which is something different, that is, to clarify that dissonance mentioned above. This problem is compounded because speakers use language to a greater or lesser extent in a way that they imply more than what they say. In this sense, and from a cultural point of view, Hall distinguishes between high context cultures and low context cultures (Hall, 1976). In cultures with medium-high dependence on context, such as the Spanish one, the message is not always clear and explicit, so the recipient must make use of other external elements to interpret it, such as context, tone of voice, relationships between participants, their movements, etc. Thus, the final interpretation of the message is left up to several elements of the context (Würtl, 2006). On the contrary, in cultures with low dependence on context, such as the American one, the message is usually clear and direct, leaving as few possible nuances as possible so that nothing is misinterpreted or misunderstood by the recipient.

That said, could we expect that low context cultures use less irony and metaphor than high context cultures? The reason would be that in those with low dependence on the context, the message that speakers convey is usually clearer and more direct, and, therefore, speakers would not resort so much to these dissonances of

language. As we will see in the analysis of the data, this cultural dimension and some others could account for some of the aspects analyzed here, although not for the use of metaphor or irony.

Finally, this author's research into the field has found that the use of irony in virtual media has been mainly analyzed for commercial purposes, for example, in Amazon reviews (Reyes & Rosso, 2012; Tsur et al., 2010). It is also worth noting some studies that focus on the detection of irony in social networks (Karoui et al., 2015; Ravi & Ravi, 2017). Burgers et al. (2015) presented an interesting analysis about metaphor and irony and their effects on advertising, just to conclude that metaphors cause a greater impression on the audience than irony. Also, the study of irony and metaphor sometimes includes similes (Veale & Hao, 2007) or hyperbole just to argue that they are different tropes of speech (Burgers et al., 2018; Carston & Wearing, 2015). Some studies have linked prison and metaphor, since the former is often used as an image of lack of freedom of action in general, in personal relationships, at work, etc. (Fludernik, 2019; Marks & Marks, 2004). However, the search for studies on the use of metaphor in Google reviews for prisons has not provided any results. Moreover, no studies, including the analysis of the cultural dimensions discussed here and in this context, have been found either. That is why this article takes greater relevance because it analyses the reviews that speakers post about prisons and how they link the image of tourist accommodation with that of a prison, with an evident humorous tone. Besides, this study also considers the hypothesis that the choices that reviewers make can be related to the cultural dimensions of the groups they belong to.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. The Corpus**

This study was conducted from April to June 2021 on twenty prisons in the cities of New York and Madrid. The centers were chosen with Google's search engine, and we only included facilities that appeared as a general correctional institution; that is, they were not military, juvenile, or other kinds of centers. In the case of Madrid, all existing centers in that city appearing in the search engine were included. In the case of New York, we included ten

centers according to the order of appearance, so there were several remaining centers not included in the analysis. The reason is that we did not want to exceed the number of Spanish centers so that the corpora would be comparable in terms of the number of centers (Moreno, 2008). As we will see later, the percentage of comments in relation to the number of centers is an item that has been analyzed here. Finally, as an additional datum, the average population in the prisons was very similar in both cases, with around 1,000 inmates per center (ACAIP, 2021; FBOP, 2021).

The average score that the centers received was 3.3 out of 5 possible stars for the American corpus and 3.2 for the Spanish one. The scores could be interpreted as a *passing grade* for the centers, as they represent more than 50% of the maximum score. However, as we will see in Table 2, the true positive reviews that these centers receive are very scarce –1.22% for American centers and 2.74% for Spanish ones– which can lead us to think that the reviewers were not very honest when marking the center. In other words, it could be inferred that the rating that reviewers gave is consistent with their use of irony and metaphor.

Finally, as for the over 750 reviewers –477 in the American corpus and 277 in the Spanish one– it was not possible to verify their nationality and, therefore, their membership to the cultural groups under study. However, this is a common problem that arises whenever scholars compare the use of digital media in different countries. We can never verify the identity of users of a digital medium due to the anonymous nature of the medium. For this reason, it is assumed that, although there are individuals in the group of informants who are not representative of the group, the bulk of informants make a homogeneous group. For example, in studies comparing the use of Twitter (García-Albacete & Theocharis, 2014) or Facebook (Miranda et al., 2018) in Spain and the USA, it is assumed that among the users of these networks, there are individuals who do not belong to those countries. Even so, these people are not excluded from the analysis –first, because it would be impossible to know, and second, because the fact that there are a few individuals who do not share the characteristics of the rest of the group does not dilute the

consistency of the group's results. The same is true when we include cultural elements in the analysis, as in this case. That is, the cultural traits that describe a group should be taken as indicators at the national, not at the individual level (Bennet, 2004; Bhaskaran & Sukumaran, 2007). The reason for this is that each cultural group consists of individuals who share cultural features, and even though they do not behave the same, they form homogeneous groups, which differ from country to country.

### 3.2. Procedure

The analysis carried out in this study was both qualitative and quantitative. First, after selecting the prisons, all reviews from both groups of centers were collected in two Word documents. Thus, the qualitative analysis consisted of a deductive reading of all reviews to get a general picture of the type of comments that there were. We could identify that some comments had a positive valence as they apparently praised the center, although the intrinsic meaning had a negative valence, as they criticized the center negatively. Other comments had a direct negative valence both in the utterance itself and in the meaning conveyed. Then, a second reading was made to identify and list the various types of reviews: reviews with ironic metaphor, reviews with verbal irony, reviews without comment, positive reviews, negative reviews, and neutral reviews (see Table 2). During a third reading of the comments, it was noted down in the left margin of each one the kind of review it was (Table 2). Later, this process was repeated to check that the examples had been correctly assigned to the type of review, that is, to give more consistency to the analysis. This exercise is called intra-coder reliability, and it is a common way of giving consistency to studies carried out by only one author (Frisby, 2017). Secondly, a quantitative analysis of the results was carried out. Thus, the figures in each group were added and recorded by review type. For example, 74 ironic metaphors were found in the American corpus and 53 in the Spanish one. Next, these figures were converted into percentage frequencies –15.16% and 18.21%, respectively for the examples above– that are shown in Table 2. Finally, the chi-square formula was applied to the results obtained in the quantitative analysis to check if the differences found were statistically significant.

The discussion and explanation of the quantitative results have been presented together with the qualitative analysis of them. In this way, the percentages and general figures can be linked to the cultural dimensions identified in the analysis and then easily understood.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Number of Reviews and Reviewers in Each Group

The first thing that draws our attention is the difference in the number of people who published reviews in both corpora, and consequently, the number of reviews in each group. As mentioned before, the number of prisons that has been analyzed is the same in each corpus –ten for each country. However, in the American corpus, 477 reviewers were

found, giving a total of 488 reviews, while in the Spanish corpus, only 277 reviewers could be analyzed, with a total of 291 reviews. In other words, in all American centers, the number of reviewers was higher. Besides, in both groups, the number of reviews is higher than the number of reviewers because some people made two different comments that cannot be placed in the same category. For example, some people made a negative comment about some aspect and then a positive comment on another. In any case, what is striking is that, although the number of centers was the same in both groups, the number of reviewers and comments for American centers was much higher than that for the Spanish centers. In Table 1, we have indicated the percentages in which the American corpus surpassed the Spanish one.

**Table 1**

*Number of Reviewers and Reviews Found in both Corpora*

	Spanish corpus	American corpus	TOTAL
Number of reviewers	277	477 (+72%)	754
Number of reviews	291	488 (+67%)	779

Two reasons could explain this fact. On the one hand, American discourse tends to reflect the individualist values of this society (Hampden Turner & Trompenaars, 2000; Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede et al., 2010), as, for instance, to give great importance to individual expressions and to express opinions clearly and directly. Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1998) called this cultural dimension specific versus diffuse, and they placed the United States as a cultural group with high specificity. This means that instructions and processes are expressed in a very detailed and clear manner, and the communication style is explicit and direct. Thus, more reviewers would have been found in the American corpus because of the greater tendency to express individual opinions in this cultural group. On the other hand, American discourse has also been defined as low-dependent on the context (Hall, 1976; Würtz, 2006), which means that opinions are expressed directly, leaving nothing to interpretation, and it also implies that freedom of expression is pursued, and people are encouraged to express their opinions clearly. Because of these two cultural dimensions typical of American

discourse, more than double reviewers were found in the American corpus –72% more. We must always keep in mind that –as in other studies above-mentioned– although there may be reviewers who do not belong culturally to the country, the two sets of reviews must be seen as homogeneous because the majority of participants in each cultural group form a strong uniform ensemble.

### 4.2. Types of Review Depending on their Comment

The reviews can be grouped into these categories: ironic metaphors comparing prisons to tourist accommodations, verbal irony, reviews without a comment, positive reviews, negative reviews, and neutral reviews. The two first items –ironic metaphor and verbal irony– are presented separately, despite there being irony in both types. The reason is that in the first item, there is a metaphor, whereas in the verbal irony item, no comparison is made at all, and the comment refers directly to the prison. In Table 2, we can see the different percentages in each of the groups.



**Table 2***Types of Reviews Found in the Analysis*

	American corpus	Spanish corpus
Ironic metaphor	15.16%	18.21%
Verbal irony	15.35%	17.17%
Reviews without comment	43.03%	45.36%
Positive reviews	1.22%	2.74%
Negative reviews	13.31%	7.21%
Neutral reviews	11.88%	9.27%

Below is an analysis of the types of reviews found in the study.

#### 4.2.1. Ironic Metaphor

The type of metaphor found in these reviews is an implicit or pure metaphor because only the unreal image appears in the statement, and the actual image is omitted. Besides, no comparisons are used through prepositional complements, nor are they common metaphors as the actual term is not directly related to the unreal. The peculiarity of the metaphors found here is that they could also be categorized as ironic, as well as hyperbolic, since it is extreme to compare a prison with tourist accommodation, and an obvious ironic and humorous side emerges from that pathos. As we will see in the examples, the reviewers talk about the prisons as if they were tourist lodgings. These descriptions can have either a negative valence, always as if they were criticizing a tourist accommodation, or a positive valence, including positive praise and description as if the reviewers had liked their stay there. In any case, comparing a prison with tourist accommodations is a metaphor because of the similarities between the terms –even if they are distant.

The mappings activated by the metaphors to relate the prisons to tourist accommodations were the following ones:

- a. The prison is a type of tourist accommodation.
- b. The prison can be rated with stars.
- c. The prison is rated according to the location and convenience of the premises.
- d. The staff in prison behave as if they were working in tourist accommodation.
- e. The prison has got room service.
- f. The prison can be praised or criticized for the quality of the beds and the comfort of the room.
- g. The prison offers a buffet, and the quality of food is rated.
- h. The prison has got entertainment and recreational activities.
- i. The prison follows check-in and check-out processes.
- j. There are other guests that may cause inconvenience.

Specifically, the percentages found for these mappings in each of the groups are the ones shown in Table 3.

**Table 3***Percentages Found for the Mappings in Each Group*

	Ironic metaphors in the American group (15.16%)	Ironic metaphors in the Spanish group (18.21%)
Type of accommodation	22.72%	23.38%
Rated with stars	5.11%	8.06%
Location and convenience	9.09%	8.06%
Staff	10.22%	9.67%
Room service	2.84%	4.83%
Comfort of rooms and beds	11.36%	15.32%
Quality of buffet food	20.45%	16.12%
Entertainment activities	10.22%	6.45%
Check-in and out processes	2.27%	3.22%
Other guests	5.68%	4.83%

As we will see in the examples, they are both facilities where there are rooms, people eat in a common dining room, there are showers, sometimes shared, organized activities are offered, there are some timetables to respect, there is a staff attached to the facility, and so on. But comparing prison to tourist accommodation is ironic because of the relationship of opposition and contradiction that separates them. Even if the review has a negative valence, if it is based on comparing the prison to a hotel, it should be considered irony, since hotel accommodation, where people enjoy themselves and have fun, is quite the opposite of a prison, where individuals are deprived of freedom, and they must live with offenders and criminals.

The following are examples of each of the theoretical mappings activated by the metaphors. Spanish-English translations were done by the author of this study.

The prison is a type of tourist accommodation: inn, hostel, hotel, etc.:

- (1)“I recommend staying at a real hotel because this is more like a hostel.”  
Review at Rikers Correctional Center.

In this case, we find the use of a simile embedded in the metaphor, as we have a relational element *–like–* in the original metaphor comparing the prison with a hotel.

- (2)“This hotel complex looks like it is very well located, I just can’t figure out how to book it online. Which app or website should I use?” Review at Rikers Correctional Center.
- (3)“¿Qué más se puede pedir en un albergue de las afueras de Madrid?” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid III. [What else can you ask for at a hostel in the outskirts of Madrid?]
- (4)“Local con pensión completa en muy bien ambiente.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid VII, Estremera. [Lodging with full board and very good atmosphere.]

The prison can be rated with stars –as we do with tourist lodgings:

- (5)“I will not be returning to this so-called five-star hotel.” Review at Rikers Correctional Center.

- (6)“El peor de la cadena de hoteles...”  
Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid III. [The worst of this hotel chain...”]

The prison is rated according to the location and convenience of the premises:

- (7)“Prime real estate right in the middle of the most famous metropolitan areas in the world... or take advantage of the wonderful charter bus that shuttles guests to the island from all over the area.”  
Review at George R. Verno Center.
- (8)“The view of the Manhattan skyline is second to none. You won’t find a better deal anywhere in NYC.” Review at Rikers Correctional Center.
- (9)“Residencial con vistas.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid V. Soto del Real. [Residential with views.]
- (10)“Solo le falta un enlace con el centro de Madrid.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid V, Soto del Real. [It just needs better connections with the city center.]

The staff in the prison behave as if they were working in tourist accommodation:

- (11)“Attentive staff. Always available to attend to your needs and wants.” Review at George R. Verno Center.
- (12)“... but what really sets it apart is the warm embrace of its friendly, courteous, and professional staff... would definitely book another stay.” Review at George R. Verno Center
- (13)“El servicio va correctamente uniformado y aceptan propinas para hacerte mejor la estancia.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid V. Soto del Real. [The staff is properly uniformed, and they accept tips to make your stay better.]
- (14)“Una gran experiencia, y el personal muy atento.” Review at Penitenciaría Alcalá de Henares, Meco. [A great experience and very attentive staff.]

The prison has got room service:

- (15)“Best room service steak I’ve ever had. Will come again.” Review at George R. Verno Center.
- (16)“The beds were uncomfortable, and room service sucks.” Review at Vernon C. Blain Center.
- (17)“El servicio de habitaciones venía sin avisar y te dejaban todo muy

desordenado.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid VI. [Room service came without notice, leaving my room in a real mess.]

- (18)“El servicio de habitaciones era escaso y la habitación estaba fatal decorada. No lo recomiendo.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid IV. [Room service was scarce and the room was horribly decorated. I don't recommend it.]

The prison can be praised or criticized for the quality of the beds and the comfort of the room:

- (19)“Nice place to stay, there's room for improvement. A softer bed, pillow, and blanket would be nice.” Review at Rikers Correctional Center.
- (20)“Pretty great place to stay, at least for a couple of years. The only thing is that the rooms are a bit small.” Review at Manhattan Detention Complex.
- (21)“Teníamos reservada una suite... si aquello era una suite, ¿cómo serían las demás habitaciones? Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid III. [We had booked a suite... if that was a suite, what would the other rooms look like?]
- (22)“Las camas son algo incómodas. Por el mismo precio puedes encontrar cosas mejores.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid III. [The beds are a bit uncomfortable. You can find better things for that price.]

The prison offers a buffet, and the quality of food is rated:

- (23)“Each time I visit here, I get treated to three tasty meals or "feasts" a day.” Review at Rikers Correctional Center.
- (24)“Great view of east river, free meals, free and unlimited stay in the heart of NYC.” Review at Rose M. Singer Center.
- (25)“Lo bueno es que tanto el alojamiento como la comida van incluidas y no tienes que pagar si estás hospedado allí”. Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid III. [The good thing is that both accommodation and meals are included and you don't have to pay if you're staying there.]
- (26)“... la comida, era como en todos los alojamientos, me tenía que levantar yo a por el buffet y estaba recalentada.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid

III. [...the food was like in any lodging, it was reheated and I had to go to the buffet myself.]

Again, here we find a simile embedded in the metaphor, as we have a relational element *–like*.

The prison has got entertainment and recreational activities:

- (27)“I recommend the spa. If you are really adventurous, try the communal showers. It will change you.” Review at Rikers Correctional Center.
- (28)“Recreational activities daily that include gladiator training.” Review at George Vierno Center.
- (29)“No muchas actividades de ocio para ser un hotel.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid III. [There were not many leisure activities to be a hotel.]
- (30)“Chapó por este hotel, comida de 10, multitud de actividades, ubicación inmejorable.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid V, Soto del Real. [Wow for this hotel, food 10, plenty of activities, unbeatable location.]

The prison follows check-in and check-out processes:

- (31)“I tried to check out, but the staff refused.” Review at Manhattan Detention Complex.
- (32)“When I tried to check out at the front counter, I was dazed... and thrown into a black room for seven years.” Review at MDC Brooklyn.
- (33)“El personal de recepción desagradable, me llevo tres horas para que me dieran la llave de la habitación.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid V, Soto del Real. [Nasty front desk staff, it took me three hours to get the key to the room.]
- (34)“La única pega es que no te dejan salir por alguna razón.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid V, Soto del Real. [The only snag is that they won't let you out for some reason.]

There are other guests that may cause inconvenience:

- (35)“Booked a night here for a weekend getaway only to find out that there was another guest in our room!” Review at MDC Brooklyn.



- (36)“Not sure if there was a convention or something, but the other guests were noisy and rambunctious. I would not recommend it.” Review at Vernon C. Blain Center.
- (37)“Había ruido en las habitaciones de alrededor, incluso peleas. No lo recomiendo, no volveré.” Review at Penitenciaría de Alcalá de Henares, Meco. [There was noise in the surrounding rooms, even fights. I don't recommend it, I won't come back.]
- (38)“Los demás huéspedes parecían un tanto embrutecidos.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Ocaña I. [The other guests looked like a bit brutish.]

#### 4.2.2. Verbal Irony

As can be seen in Table 2, a percentage of reviews consisted of ironic comments. Specifically, we find 15.35% of the total reviews in the body of reviews for American centers and 17.17% in the corpus of the Spanish centers. Most of these reviews consist of ironic comments with an apparent positive valence, as they look like positive feedback about the centers, though they actually have a negative valence and convey the opposite. To affirm this, we must simply think that no one can be excited or satisfied with their stay in prison, but by reading the reviewers' comments, it seems so. Therefore, through verbal irony, the reviewer manipulates the value of what he or she asserts, conveying a meaning contrary to what he or she expresses (Haverkate, 2004). The reviews relate to the facilities, how the staff treat prisoners, the relationship with other prisoners, and the experience in general. Thus, in the corpus for American centers, we find comments such as the following ones:

- (39)“Great food, better prisoners!” Review at Queensboro Correctional Center.
- (40)“Very clean, great food, friendly staff, and great cellmates. 10/10 I would commit a crime to come back here again.” Review at Metropolitan Correctional Center.
- (41)“Can't wait to go back!” Review at Rikers Correctional Center.

- (42)“Comfortable, allowing inmates to sit in a cell that is 30 degrees.” Review at MDC Brooklyn.

In the corpus of Spanish centers, we can read ironic reviews like these ones:

- (43)“Es un buen sitio para salir de las depresiones.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid V, Soto del Real. [A good place to recover from depression.]
- (44)“Estábamos totalmente emocionados. Tres comidas al día y buena compañía...” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid V, Soto del Real. [We were totally excited. Three meals a day and good company...]
- (45)“Muy buena cárcel. La experiencia muy enriquecedora. Los guardas muy comprensivos y hacían un uso muy profesional de la porra, la envuelven con una toalla.” Review at Penitenciaría Alcalá de Henares, Meco. [Very good prison. The experience is very enriching. The guards were very understanding and made a very professional use of the nightstick, wrapping it with a towel.]
- (46)“Algunos de los mejores años de mi vida los pasé aquí.” Review at Penitenciaría Alcalá de Henares, Meco. [I spent here some of the best years of my life.]

In light of these examples, it could be argued that irony can be shared interculturally (Roca Marín, 2009), as in this case, where the content of the comments is very similar in both corpora, despite the cultural differences that these two groups show in other contexts.

Within the group of reviews with verbal irony, we identified two small but consistent groups of reviews that included mentions of celebrities or mentions of politicians. The percentages of these reviews are not shown separately in Table 2 but embedded in the final percentage of the *Verbal irony* category. The reason for this is that they actually fall into the category of verbal irony, so they should be there. Besides, the author did not want to overload the table with subcategories and percentages. Now, we can see these percentages in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Percentages of Reviews with Mentions of Famous People or Politicians within the Group of Reviews with Verbal Irony*

	American corpus	Spanish corpus
Total of reviews with verbal irony	15.35%	17.17%
Percentage of them with mentions of famous people	2.04%	0.68%
Percentage of them with mentions of politicians	0%	4.81%

These two subcategories have also stood out for their different results in both groups. Firstly, no mention of politicians was found in the American corpus; however, 2.04% of the reviews were references to famous people from different fields, such as culture, activism, or known criminals. By contrast, in the corpus of Spanish centers, up to 4.81% of the comments were criticism to politicians, whereas only 0.68% of the reviews concerned famous people from the field of culture. We could blame this difference on the cultural dimension of power distance index (Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede et al., 2010) or achievement versus ascription, as described by Hampden Turner and Trompenaars (1998, 2000), in which these two countries show different indexes. The dimension of the power distance index measures the extent to which participants in a culture accept that power is unequally distributed in society. Thus, in a society with a high index, such as the Spanish, people largely assume that society may have a pyramidal structure, and those in the upper part of the pyramid make the decisions, have access to other resources, etc. A different matter is that people agree with this division, and in fact, at the slightest opportunity, as this is the case, they will criticize this inequality, and in particular, the specific people who represent it. Thus, in the corpus of the Spanish centers, we find up to fourteen comments about politicians or entrepreneurs who have been imprisoned for committing financial crimes. Examples include:

- (47)“A la entrada hay fotos de las personas famosas que han pasado por aquí. Casualmente muchos empresarios y políticos de derechas.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid V, Soto del Real. [At the entrance, there are photos of the famous people who have stayed here. Actually, many right-wing businessmen and politicians.]
- (48)“... el otro día me eché un pádel con Bárcenas y desayuné con Rodrigo Rato

qué me contó muchos chanchullos, recomendando visitar.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid V, Soto del Real. [... the other day I had a paddle match with Bárcenas (politician) and I had breakfast with Rodrigo Rato (politician and banker) who told me about rackets, I recommend visiting.]

- (49)“El ambiente es extraordinario, muchos políticos, ministros, empresarios...” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid V, Soto del Real. [The atmosphere is extraordinary, many politicians, ministers, entrepreneurs...]

Concerning comments about famous people found in the American corpus, we could highlight the following ones:

- (50)“Great place here. I even met El Chapo.” Review at Metropolitan Correctional Center.
- (51)“I stayed in Epstein suite, very nice, plenty of privacy, the guards gave me enough rope to hang myself, definitely coming back.” Review at Detention Correctional Center.

#### *4.2.3. Reviews without Comment, Positive Reviews, Negative Reviews, and Neutral Reviews*

The data on three of these sets of reviews are quite similar. Reviews without a comment account for 43.03% in the American corpus and 45.36% in Spanish one; positive reviews were very scarce –1.22% and 2.74% respectively; and neutral comments, which consisted of simple descriptions in which the reviewer neither criticized nor praised the center, accounted for only 11.88% in the American corpus and 9.27% in Spanish. The only noteworthy figures are the ones that refer to negative reviews because numbers in the American corpus almost double those in the Spanish one, that is, 13.31% versus 7.21% respectively –45.83% more in the American group. The fact that the percentage of negative

reviews was nearly double in the American corpus could be due to two cultural reasons. Firstly, as mentioned before, American discourse is described as direct and explicit, where opinions are freely poured, sometimes prevailing the right to freedom of expression over consideration towards the interlocutor. This is due to its high individualism (Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede et al., 2010), as well as its low dependence on context (Hall, 1976), which also pushes the speaker to send clear and direct messages, to the extent that confrontation can be considered positively. Secondly, in tribal-collectivist cultures such as the Spanish one (Leaptrott, 1996), people tend to avoid conflict to a greater extent than in individualist societies. Likewise, in a group with cultural features of femininity such as the Spanish one (Hofstede, 1991, 1998), avoidance of conflict and breakdown of consensus and harmony is something to be pursued, whereas in culturally masculine groups such as the American, conflict and confrontation can be seen as something positive if it leads to an improvement.

Examples of negative reviews in both corpora would be as follows:

(52)“They treat people like animals.” Review at George R. Vieno Center.

This is another clear simile comparing people with animals.

(53)“Not clean at all, doesn't even look like they tried. Poor service. Officers working the desks are arrogant, sarcastic, not condescending...” Review at Vernon C. Bain Center.

(54)“Un desastre de verdad. Qué falta de profesionalidad y ganas de perjudicar a los internos.” Review at Centro de Inserción Social Victoria Kent. [A real mess. What a lack of professionalism and desire to harm inmates!]

(55)“Los funcionarios torturan a los presos y a los familiares que van a verlos los denigran.” Review at Centro Penitenciario Madrid V Soto del Real. [Officials torture prisoners and relatives who come for a visit are denigrated also.]

### 4.3. Chi-Square Results

Finally, in order to check if the different frequencies obtained in the analysis are

statistically significant, the statistical chi-square formula was applied to the absolute figures of each section of Table 2, that is, the types of reviews according to the comment included. The variables, in this case, are, on the one hand, the two analyzed groups, and on the other hand, the six types of reviews. The null hypothesis –H<sub>0</sub>– and the alternative hypothesis –H<sub>1</sub> will relate to the existence or not of an association between the different variables. Thus, the null hypothesis would read:

H<sub>0</sub>: There are no significant differences in the frequencies obtained in the group of American reviews and the group of Spanish reviews.

The alternative hypothesis would be:

H<sub>1</sub>: There are significant differences in the frequencies obtained in the group of American reviews and the group of Spanish reviews.

Thus, following Pearson's table (Velez et al., 2004), the Chi-square formula  $\chi^2 = \sum (O - E)^2 / E$  was applied to the data, with 5 degrees of freedom and 0.05 degree of statistical significance. This means that we can have a confidence level of 95%. The figure obtained after applying the formula was 3.36, far below from 11.07 given by Pearson's table. This means that the differences in the frequencies are not statistically significant. As we have seen, except for the reviews with negative comments, the other percentages obtained were very similar in both groups, to the extent that we could argue that there is a certain consensus in this context, despite the cultural differences that usually separate these groups.

### 5. Concluding Remarks

This paper was aimed at identifying any possible relation between the cultural characteristics of a cultural group and the discourse style used by their participants. The analysis included nearly eight hundred reviews posted on Google search engine about twenty prisons in New York and Madrid. The qualitative and quantitative analysis has shown that the predominant cultural characteristics of a group may influence the discourse generated in that cultural reality. In this study, it was virtually impossible to check the nationalities of all participants in each group. This is a common issue in studies that include participants online and also in intercultural studies at a national

level. However, this fact does not prevent us from establishing cultural differences from country to country because even if not all informants belong to a particular culture, the analyzed groups must be seen as homogeneous and with shared characteristics. Thus, for example, clear, explicit, and direct discourse prevails in the American cultural group because it is a cultural group with strong individualist values (Hampden Turner & Trompenaars, 1998, 2000; Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede et al., 2010) and also its type of discourse has been described as low-dependent on context (Hall, 1976; Würtz, 2006). These cultural traits have been reflected in the fact that the number of reviewers and reviews in the American group is more than double that in the Spanish group. It has also been seen on the fact that negative reviews are nearly double in this group, too, since freedom of expression when criticizing negatively is more common in the American group than it is in the Spanish one. In this group, due to its higher prevalence of femininity traits (Hofstede, 1998) and because of its tribal-collectivist character (Leaptrott, 1996), attempts are made to avoid conflict and direct confrontation (Gudykunst et al., 1996; Leaptrott, 1996). Also, in the Spanish group, we have seen the importance of the cultural dimension of power distance index (Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede et al., 2010) or achievement versus ascription (Hampden Turner & Trompenaars, 1998, 2000), which has been reflected in the greater number of criticisms that reviewers have focused on politicians and wealthy businessmen.

However, no clear differences have been found in other analyzed aspects, such as the number of reviews without comments, positive reviews, neutral reviews, and ironic reviews in general. But above all, the most noteworthy fact is that the type of ironic metaphor used in both groups is the same, that is, metaphors that compare prisons with tourist accommodations. In this respect, we have seen that cultural differences have nothing to say here, but rather, we could think this is a case of globalization of discourse, perhaps because of the very global nature of tourism, bearing in mind that the countries analyzed here are the second –Spain– and the third –the United States– most visited countries in the world (UNWTO, 2019) before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

To summarise, we have seen how the analyzed corpora exhibit some basic differences, reflecting the cultural trends of each group, especially in terms of the dimensions of individualism, low or high dependence on the context, power distance index, or achievement-ascription, and masculinity-femininity. But we have also seen the importance of context in discourse (Hall, 1976; Schiffrin, 1991), as both the metaphors and irony used in the corpora have largely coincided both qualitatively and quantitatively. Once again, it has been shown that discourse cannot be analyzed independently, but the analysis should include sociocultural and contextual factors, especially when we deal with tropes of speech.

Finally, one line of research that could be opened from this study is to include more countries in the comparison to check if the same type of ironic metaphor is found again. Another study that could arise from this research would be the classification and description of percentages and valences, but just of the tropes and figures of speech found here –irony, metaphor, and similes– trying to find any existent pattern of use in them.

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