

TWELTH ST. JEROME TRANSLATION CONTEST

Sponsored by the UN Department for General Assembly and Conference Management

English

First prize – Ms. Miriam Gartenberg

Gift of the Gab

Juan Villoro, El País, April 10, 2011

In a little shop near Princeton University, I happened upon one of the most curious inventions of the age of consumerism: a spray that enables the user to speak with an Irish accent. The blurb said that a single spritz would suffice to alter pronunciation—although it didn't specify whether any knowledge of English was required for this Saint Patrick-worthy miracle to occur.

That little spray can led me to reflect on the allure of the slight exotic accent and Lichtenberg's observation that, while linguistic errors made by foreign men may be annoying, they can be quite enchanting when spoken by an attractive woman.

Ireland excites the North American imagination as a land of poets, musicians, Celtic charmers and beguiling redheads. That particular bit of folk theory was not what the product was pushing, but anyone attempting to use it is clearly seeking to infuse himself with "otherness".

And there is some logic in using sound to do so. Telemarketing firms often exploit foreign accents to entice customers. After all, who likes having their day interrupted just to be sold on a retirement plan or a pack of frozen seafood? But one might not mind so much if the interruption comes in an ear-pleasing Colombian twang.

The manufacturers might even want to diversify a bit. After all, it's one thing to blather on like an Irishman who's spent too much time down at the pub, and quite another to emulate an Abbey Theatre thespian, a Ryan Air pilot or a flamboyant Gothic priest. Pushing the envelope of the lively Irish lilt, they might consider specialty sprays that reproduce the languorous, mellow liquids of Catalan, the appealing aspirations of the Andalusian accent or the soft shush of Argentine Spanish. Could there come a time when, with a simple intake of breath, one's voice could acquire the subtle, rich and cultured airs of a Doctor of Laws?

This multifaceted ruse would have the opposite effect of a Tower of Babel: we'd all be speaking the same language, but in a variety of captivating tones. À la carte combinations could be offered, as well. For example, the voice of a Miss Venezuela, resonating with the intellect of a biochemist, the kindness of a noble soul who dedicates her free time to charity and the spirit of an avid football fan cheering on a team that just happens to be our own.

Could the achievement of utopian communication ultimately be based not in sense but in sensibility?