

## TWELTH ST. JEROME TRANSLATION CONTEST

Sponsored by the UN Department for General Assembly and Conference Management

### English

*Second prize – Ms. Sarah-Louise Raillard*

#### **The Gift of Gab**

In a store near Princeton University, I came across one of the strangest inventions consumer society has ever produced: a spray that gives you an Irish accent. The instructions promised that just one application would have you pronouncing things differently. They didn't, however, specify whether you needed to know English for this Saint Patrick-style miracle to occur.

This innocuous little spray gives us a chance to ponder the appeal of the slightly exotic accent. Lichtenberg once noted that linguistic mistakes bother us when they are uttered by foreign men, but that they become simply enchanting in the mouths of beautiful women.

The North American imagination is drawn to Ireland as a magical land of poets and musicians, Celtic mages and diabolical redheads. While the peculiar spray I spotted in the shop did not explicitly endorse such fantastical folklore, it is evident that anyone inhaling it is expressing a desire for alterity.

Hearing obeys its own kind of logic. Telemarketing companies often exploit foreign accents to reel in customers. No one wants their life interrupted to be sold a retirement plan or two pounds of frozen seafood. However, exceptions can be made if the bothersome phone call is delivered in a charming Colombian accent.

In the future, the spray's manufacturers may well diversify their product offerings. Speaking like an Irishman who's spent a little too long in the pub is not the same as speaking like an Abbey Theatre actor — or, for that matter, a Ryanair pilot, or a Catholic priest spewing fire and brimstone. Going beyond the borders of the Emerald Isle, sprays could also be designed to reproduce a winsome Southern drawl, a hearty Scottish burr, or the clipped consonants of Received Pronunciation. Will there come a time when we can just purchase the accent of a rich but well-bred man with a prestigious law degree?

This melting pot would be the complete opposite of the Tower of Babel: we could all say the same things, but in a more captivating tone. Perhaps, in this future, we'll even be able to pick and choose different components — for example, the voice of Miss Venezuela, but in the well-educated tone of a biochemist, with the warmth of a part-time Mother Theresa and the temperament of an ardent Manchester United supporter.

Might it be possible to live in a utopia where communication is not based on meaning, but on prosody alone?