

TWELTH ST. JEROME TRANSLATION CONTEST

Sponsored by the UN Department for General Assembly and Conference Management
Judges Remarks (English)

Judging at the Westminster Dog Show is nothing compared to judging a translation contest. The judges at Westminster judge what is observable, measurable and objective, namely the physical attributes of individual dogs, and compare that dog to a breed standard. More important, the judge does not have to explain his or her decision or comment on the qualities of the winners. Judging translation, on the other hand, is a multifaceted task entailing the evaluation of qualities that are intangible and open to subjective interpretation. And then the judge has to explain the conclusions to an audience such as this. Next year, I think I will pass on Saint Jerome and seek a gig at Westminster.

This year's piece for translation into English is a lighthearted essay from the Spanish newspaper *El País* which explores such serious topics as the relationship between the way one speaks and the identity that the outside world assigns to us, and the power of cultural stereotyping.

The springboard for the author's reflections was his coming across in a shop near Princeton University an aerosol spray that endows the user with an Irish accent.

Although the text is stylistically challenging, its theme is simple. Most contestants understood just about everything, and yet no one translation stood out as uniformly excellent. The difficulties lie mainly in the area of vocabulary and the combination of unlikely words. An important choice was whether to simply translate culture-specific concepts (such as references to Spanish regional accents) or adapt them for an English-speaking audience. One translator, for example, chose to turn the characteristics of Catalan, Andalusian or Argentine speech into "a winsome Southern drawl, a hearty Scottish burr, or the clipped consonants of Received Pronunciation". Others transformed "Miss Venezuela" into "Miss Jamaica", "Miss America" and a generic "beauty queen". One has to give these daring contestants high marks for creativity.

The title of the piece proved to be a litmus test. The two winners translated it the same way: "Gift of the Gab", thereby referencing the Blarney Stone, which, according to legend, confers on those who kiss it the gift of eloquence. The other contestants used either "languages" or "tongues", including six who rendered the title as "The Gift of Tongues", a New Testament term describing the ability of the apostles to speak foreign tongues and hence inaccurate in the context. One contestant sought to give the title an Irish twist with the translation "The Lord of Languages", presumably a reference to Michael Flatley, whose Irish dance troupe performs a programme called "The Lord of the Dance". Ingenious, but irrelevant.

Several other key expressions separated the sheep from the goats.

"Pelirrojas de peligro", literally "dangerous redheads". Of 35 contestants, 13 translated it this way. I liked "fiery colleens", which nicely introduces the Irish Gaelic for "girl" but misses out the reference to red hair, and "auburn-haired sirens", which captures both the female gender and dangerous nature of these women. Other variations included diabolical, rash, formidable, risky and rakish. The latter, generally used for males, was wrong on two counts.

"Un flamígero sacerdote", literally "a flamboyant priest". Of a person or behavior, it means florid, ostentatious or showy. "Flamboyant priest" was the choice of 18 contestants. Others described

our Irish priest as fire-breathing, fiery, fired-up, illuminated, illuminating, gregarious, ebullient and vivacious. The latter, generally used for women, was a particularly poor choice. Incidentally, this was not the same contestant as the one who gave us “rakish redheads”.

I hope that these few examples convey the challenges of the contest. To the hardy souls who ventured to try their hand at recreating the text in English, hearty and heartfelt congratulations. We hope to see you back next year. But as for me, I will be going to the dogs. Judging a dog show is far easier. And at my age, I am increasingly going for the easy.