

## TWELTH ST. JEROME TRANSLATION CONTEST

Sponsored by the UN Department for General Assembly and Conference Management

### English

*Student prize – Ms. Amy Mendenhall*

*(Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, USA)*

### The Gift of Language

By Juan Villoro, El País, 10 April 2011

In a store near Princeton University, I found one of the strangest things that consumer culture ever invented: a spray that endows the user with an Irish accent. According to the marketing material, one application is enough to change your pronunciation; it does not specify, however, whether this miracle worthy of St. Patrick requires prior knowledge of English.

This little aerosol invites one to ponder the allure of a moderately exotic accent. It was Lichtenberg who said that we are annoyed by linguistic errors in a non-native speaker unless she is a beautiful woman, in which case we are enchanted.

For the North American imagination, Ireland holds a certain magnetism as a land of poets, musicians, Celtic deities and redheaded temptresses. The curious spray that I saw in the store does not promote that folklore, but those who use it are clearly seeking an infusion of otherness.

There must be a specifically aural logic to explain this allure. Telemarketing firms frequently use foreign accents to attract customers. Practically nobody cares to have their life interrupted by someone peddling a retirement plan or frozen shrimp. Yet if the interruption comes with a winsome Colombian accent, exceptions will be made.

Perhaps in the future, the manufacturers of this spray will diversify their product offering. After all, speaking like an Irishman who spends too much time at the pub is not the same as speaking like a player at the Abbey Theatre, a Ryanair pilot or a fiery priest. Leaving behind the rainy realm of Ireland, one could imagine sprays that specialize in duplicating the fluid Catalan I, the charming Andalusian elisions or the silky Argentinian II. Might we one day be able to mimic, with just a puff of air, the accent of a rich but cultured law school graduate?

This artifice would have the opposite effect of the Tower of Babel, in that we would say the same thing, only now in captivating tones. You could even have à la carte combinations: the voice of Miss Venezuela, for example, but with the knowledgeable tone of a biochemist, the kindness of someone who spends their free time at an NGO and the temperament of someone who can rally an intense cheer for what just so happens to be our soccer team.

Could we eventually achieve utopian communication based not on meaning but on prosody?