Between English Humour and National Stereotypes – Translating Stephen Clarke's Novel *Merde Happens* into Italian

Sabrina Fusari

University of Trento

Ilaria Montagni

University of Bologna at Forlì

Abstract

This paper discusses the translation into Italian of *Merde Happens*, a novel by Stephen Clarke, an English author who has lived and worked in France for over a decade. This novel is relevant to intercultural communication because it satirizes three nations and cultures at the same time: French, English and US American. Irony based on national stereotypes is usually considered to be very difficult to translate, and this sometimes discourages publishers to the point that very valuable fictional products end up not being translated. Our aim is to show that a novel like Clarke's can (and indeed, *should*) be translated: we argue that playing on national stereotypes and laughing about them can be one of the most effective ways of fighting prejudice, and we show that this can be achieved in translation through a careful balance of foreignizing and domesticating choices.

Keywords: Stephen Clarke, translation, intercultural humour, national stereotypes, diatopic varieties, culture bound terms.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on some problems involved in translating intercultural humour: our study (1) concentrates on the translation into Italian of *Merde Happens*, a novel by Stephen Clarke, an English author who has lived and worked in France for over a decade. During this time, Clarke wrote a humorous trilogy which aims at satirizing the idyllic, idealized view that travel literature tends to give of France (an example is Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence*, which Clarke explicitly refers to in the title of the first volume of his trilogy, *A Year in the Merde*). The presence of a swearword (admittedly quite widespread in informal everyday speech in France) in the title of all the volumes that make up this trilogy (*A Year in the Merde*, 2004; *Merde Actually*, 2005; and the last one which we focus on in this paper, *Merde Happens*, 2007*)* is testimony to the desecrating irony that pervades the novels. It is also quite easy to realize that all the titles include an intertextual reference (the first one to Mayle's novel; the second one to a well known Hollywood film (2), and the last one to a common slang phrase usually found in merchandising articles, like bumper stickers (3), sold in the United States).

Before we start discussing intercultural humour in this novel and in its Italian translation, it is perhaps worthwhile to briefly introduce the plot of Clarke's trilogy: in the first novel, the Englishman Paul West, the main character (and declared alter ego of the author), moves to France for his job, and he is entrusted with the task of opening a tea room in central Paris. The second novel goes on to narrate Paul's difficulties in adapting to the Parisian way of life, and it introduces some of the characters that we see in the third and last novel, especially Alexa, a proud-to-be-French young woman that Paul falls in love with. The last novel, which we concentrate on in this paper, sees Paul travelling to the US on behalf of a national tourist board, *Visitors Resources Britain*, to promote Great Britain for "Tourist Destination of the Year" in a global tourist contest.

The reason why we chose this volume as a case study for the translation of intercultural humour and national stereotypes from English into Italian is twofold: firstly, *Merde Happens* is a very recent novel (2007) which follows in a tradition well established in English contemporary fiction, that of satirical travel literature (4); secondly, this novel is set for the most part in the United States, and this allows the author to satirize three nations and cultures at the same time (America, which the characters are visiting; France, the nation that Alexa is proud to belong to; and finally, England, which is humorously represented through a fair dose of self-irony).

There is also a third reason why we consider it useful to select this novel for our case study: the first volume of the trilogy was translated into Italian as *Merde! Un anno a Parigi* (2005), and it was published by Sperling & Kupfer, a quite well-known publisher (5). However, the sales figures were less than expected, so the publisher decided to discontinue the publication of the trilogy on the assumption that this kind of irony was not comprehensible to an Italian audience, probably because there is no reference whatsoever to Italy nor to customs and habits that the average Italian reader is used to in his or her everyday life. In fact it is our belief that, regardless of which nation(s) is(are) satirized in a given fictional product, irony can be understood by the target language public if the right balance of foreignization and domestication is adopted in the translation process, and we try to demonstrate this through a series of practical examples taken from the text.

Indeed, despite their obvious importance in a market economy, sales figures may be a risky element on which to base the decision which works of fiction should be translated and which should be left inaccessible to most readers of a language. In our opinion, other aspects should be taken into account – in this particular case, we refer not only to the entertaining nature of the novel, but also to its capacity to fight the practice of national stereotyping by simultaneously satirizing three cultures. In fact, none of the three cultures that are represented in the novel is ever elected as a model, but all three (including, and possibly most of all, the English one) are seen as interacting on a par, and funny situations are based precisely on the surprise effect that is created when the characters' expectations based on national stereotypes are contradicted (6). In this sense, Clarke's novel can be considered as a product of global literature, much more than it can be ascribed to British satirical travel fiction as such.

2. Methodology

As Koller (1995: 208) emphasizes:

> …the task of translation is to render not the same meaning (Bedeutung) but rather the same signification (Bezeichnung) and the same sense (Sinn) via the medium (i.e. in effect via the meanings) of another language.

The idea of focusing on the effects, rather than the literal meanings of a text, points in the direction of a communicative approach to translation, which seems to be particularly suitable for rendering humour into another language and culture. This is precisely the approach that we adopted for our sample translation of Clarke's novel (7), of which we present a number of excerpts in this paper.

Our methodology consisted in translating a chapter of the novel (Chapter 5, entitled "Miami, Go Ahead, Merde My Day" (8), pp. 158-198 of the original) by applying a series of strategies aimed at making the author's irony comprehensible to an Italian audience: in fact the most difficult aspect of this translation work does not consist in conveying the actual sense of the narration (despite the presence of some wordplays (9), no passage of this novel, including food terms, might be described as "untranslatable" (10)), but in overcoming intercultural barriers so that the text can be entertaining for an Italian public.

As La Roche notes:

> In any literary translation, the translator can enjoy the satisfaction of dissecting the author's style (the most fashionable literary critics use the term "deconstruction"). This is a good opportunity to show that no genre is specific to a culture, and that 'everything' can be translated, including humour (11).

(La Roche 1989: 15).

In fact it is well known that different cultures choose different groups as the target for particular jokes (e.g. in Italy there are many jokes based on the idea that most policemen come from the South of Italy, and the same stereotype used to apply to people of Irish descent in America, see Fusari 2008), and "each targeted group is targeted in relation to *particular* features (one or more). Thus, in the United States, Italians are dirty and violent, but not stupid; Scots are avaricious, but Jews are not, etc. Needless to say, all of these humorous stereotypes are completely fantastic" (Attardo 2002: 187).

In a text like Clarke's, much of the humour is conveyed by the interplay between "linguistic and cultural character. The combination, in variable proportions, of these two factors, makes the translation more or less complicated to carry out" (Laurian 1989: 6). The presence of culture specific aspects (and humour) should thus be considered to influence the degree of difficulty of the translation task, and not the "translatability" or possibility for the target public to understand *a priori*. In addition, "irony is a purely pragmatic phenomenon, without semantic counterpart. What this means is that the semantics of an ironical sentence and of a non-ironical sentence are indistinguishable" (Attardo 2001: 169): the literal component is thus much less important than the pragmatic one when it comes to translating irony (12). This is why "the French expression *Merde alors!* can be translated into Italian as *Cazzo!* (13), completely negating the (scatological) semantics of the test, but respecting fully the pragmatic force thereof. Note how a literal translation would be completely beside the point" (Attardo 2002: 174).

One of the most challenging aspects of translating *Merde Happens* is undoubtedly the sensitivity of the target public to the presence of ironic lines, and entire passages, based on national stereotyping or, more precisely, the extent to which readers of the target text are likely to find these scenes funny. It should be noted that no-one, not even the most politically correct and interculturally aware people, are totally exempt from stereotyping:

> *cultural studies have demonstrated that stereotyping is a fundamental mechanism of perception and categorization, without which orientation, and indeed survival in a complex society such as ours would be virtually impossible. However, although we could not live without stereotypes, there is always a looming danger that stereotypical perceptions can become crystallized into prejudices.*

> (Rieger 2006: 277-278).

And

> *Despite their negative connotations ... it is easy to notice that prejudice and stereotyping are very common, not only in our relationship with minorities, but also in our everyday life: therefore, our way of thinking and evaluating reality is much less flexible and free than we like to think it is.*

> (Mazzara 1997: 7)

Resorting to stereotypes thus always entails the risk of falling prey to prejudicial world views and hurting other people. However, this risk is ever-present when irony is used, and it might even be considered to be the other side of the coin of the solidarity that irony creates: in Attardo's words (2001: 173) (14)

> *Irony may serve two opposed purposes: an inclusive and an exclusive one. On the one hand, irony builds in-group solidarity through shared play; on the other hand, it can be used to express a negative judgment about someone.*

Bearing in mind these important caveats about the semantic/ pragmatic dimension of humour and the role of stereotyping and prejudices, we decided to divide the intercultural problems found in Clarke's novel into:

1. Idiomaticity and register

2. Culture-bound terms

3. Diatopic/ diastratic (15) varieties

In the following section, we illustrate a number of examples for each of these categories, and we provide a brief commentary of how these intercultural problems can be overcome through translation, and why we believe that our solutions allow the text to remain entertaining in the target language and culture.

3. Discussion: examples from the text

In Chapter 5, which we have selected as our sample for this paper, the two main characters, Paul and Alexa, are driving to Miami to organize a promotional event on behalf of *Visitors Resources Britain*. This tourist board has instructed them to travel in a Mini, which is represented as the typical British car.

We present a number of examples for each of the categories of translation-relevant intercultural problems that we have identified in the previous section.

3.1. Idiomaticity and register

In Chapter 5 of Clarke's novel, the expression "to give the thumbs up" (Figure 1) represents a clear example of non-correspondence between Italian and English. In Italian, even though this gesture is recognized and sometimes used by Italians themselves, there is no equivalent verb or term to define it: in fact the seemingly equivalent expression "pollice recto", which comes from Latin where it was associated with gladiatorial combats, would be totally out of register (16); "pollice alzato" is comprehensible, but slightly too generic, especially if we consider that the "thumbs up" gesture is a sexual insult in some areas of Italy (e.g. Sardinia).

Therefore, we decided to add a reference to "the Fonz" ("Fonzie" in Italian), the Italian character in the 1970s series *Happy Days*, which enjoyed enormous success in Italy, and contributed to popularizing this gesture.

Drivers were waving, grinning, giving the thumbs up, all deliriously happy about being together.	I guidatori gesticolavano, sorridevano, alzavano il pollice alla Fonzie, tutti in delirio per la felicità di essere insieme.

Figure 1: Idiomatic expressions (1)

Another example is found in a humorous e-mail that Paul receives at the beginning of the chapter (Figure 2):

'as dark horses go you're jet black paul my son'	'anche se sulla carta non sei il vincitore, mio Paul sei il migliore'

Figure 2: Idiomatic expressions (2)

The idiomatic expressions "dark horse" (to indicate an outsider who manages to win a contest) and "jet-black" (to indicate just how dark this "dark horse" is) have no equivalent in Italian. Our translation is a circumlocution (obviously without any references to horses and colours), to which we added a rhyme (vincitore-migliore) in order to keep the rhythm of this line, and make it sound appealing in Italian (in the novel, this sentence is a humorous invitation to visit a Web link, obviously intended to convince Paul to click it open). By resorting to this strategy, "the underlying message of these jokes is identical; what varies is simply the surface elements" (Chiaro 1992: 79).

The title of the Web link, "Men in Skirts" (Figure 3), is also interesting in terms of communicating its humour load into Italian. While its literal content is immediately translatable, the intertextual reference to the film *Men in Black*, and the ironic contrast between this reference and the actual contents of the website (which is explicitly indicated in the e-mail as a gay website) would be totally lost. We thus decided to render it with a wordplay on the title of a popular Italian talk-show about romantic relationships, "Uomini e donne" (literally "men and women"). The assonance in Italian between the word "donne" (women) and "gonne" (skirts) was exploited.

Men in Skirts	Uomini e Gonne

Figure 3: Intertextual references

The reference to the TV programme "Uomini e donne" is obviously adapted ("e donne" – literally "and women" – becomes "e gonne" – literally, "and skirts"), but the advantage of this translation strategy is that the line in question elicits the Italian reader's smile. In fact the reader cannot miss the reference to this famous TV programme, thanks to the assonance.

3.2. Culture-bound terms

The novel takes place almost entirely in the United States. This means that there are many American cultural references, as well as hints to the other two countries mentioned in the book: France and Great Britain.

One of the first problems that emerged in the translation process is that of food and cuisine in general. In Italian, for example, the word "brunch" (Figure 4) does not have any equivalent. Half-way between breakfast and lunch, it is served especially on Saturdays and Sundays in hotels. Although it bears some similarity to the Italian "aperitivo", we opted for the English original term in order to maintain the American atmosphere. Readers are expected to understand that "brunch" is a meal (17).

The hotel's website invited me to have brunch on the poolside patio.	Il sito dell'hotel mi invitava a un brunch lungo la piscina.

Figura 4: Culinary terms (1)

More specifically, Italian readers are getting more and more used to words like "pancake", "milkshake" and "bacon", especially after the McDonald's invasion. "Sour cream" is less widely known, but we left the original word to suggest the atmosphere of an American diner. Moreover, the whole context guarantees that words like "pancake", "milkshake", "bacon" and "sour cream" refer to food. As Hagfors (2003: 125) points out:

> *If culture-bound elements are foreignized the story can serve as a tool for learning about foreign cultures, times and customs and intrigue readers to find out more about them.*

It would thus be beside the point to domesticate these culinary words with translated terms such as "frittella" for "pancake", "panna acida" for "sour cream" and "pancetta" for "bacon", and it is up to the reader's curiosity to discover what "French toast" or "wheatmeal toast" are. Besides, these meals are mostly American and leaving the original words in the Italian text makes the reader's perspective similar to that of Alexa's and Paul's. Both characters are European and, especially in Alexa's case, not so used to eating American food. Some examples are illustrated in Figure 5:

'Only three eggs with low-fat cheese and sour cream…'	'Solo tre uova con formaggio light e la sour cream…'.
Junior French toast, with eggs, fries and blueberry-flavoured pancakes.	Un French Toast *Junior* con uova, patatine, e dei pancake al mirtillo.
one side order of fried bacon, another of wheatmeal toast.	…un contorno di bacon fritto; un altro di wheatmeal toast.
She stopped piling bacon on to her toast…	Smise di aggiungere fette di bacon al suo toast…

Figure 5: Culinary terms (2)

Another word that does not have any Italian equivalent is "diner". "Ristorante" would trigger entirely different connotations, whereas "bar" would be rather far from the original referent ("un bar" is a coffee shop in Italy). We thus decided to maintain the word in English, leaving the description of this place to the reader's imagination. Anyway, most Italian readers can certainly imagine what a diner looks like from the viewing of such films as *Thelma & Louise* (18*)*, which is explicitly quoted in the diner-scene in this novel (Figure 6):

…and a fried egg that she ordered just for the pleasure of saying 'sunny side up'. I'm sure it made her feel as if we really were living out *Thelma and Louise*.	…e infine un uovo fritto che ordinò solo per il gusto di avere di fronte un uovo all'occhio di bue e rivivere la scena di *Thelma e Louise* con Susan Sarandon cameriera tra le uova.

Figure 6: Culinary terms (3), with intertextual reference to *Thelma and Louise*

This is not the only reference to the film *Thelma & Louise* in the novel: in Chapter 4, Paul and Alexa even choose the nickname "Thelma" for their Mini. Like most Hollywood films, *Thelma & Louise* was dubbed into Italian and it is very well known to the public, so these references do not create any particular translation problems. What is more difficult is finding an equivalent for the expression "sunny side up", which indicates a method for frying eggs without turning the tops, but it is also a reference to the Pink Floyd track "Alan's Pshychedelic Breakfast" ("Sunny Side Up" is the title of the second part of this instrumental track released in 1970). Whereas "sunny side up" could be translated into Italian with a circumlocution ("friggere le uova senza girarle") this is entirely beside the point because the Italian reader would be left wondering why Alexa enjoys uttering this expression. The reference to the Pink Floyd was thus eliminated by insisting on the one to *Thelma & Louise*, which is more transparent to an Italian readership.

Those who have seen diners in American films know that they are eateries, similar to the Italian Autogrills (19): however, Autogrills are typically found along the highways, whereas it is common to see diners also in city areas. This is the reason why we preferred *transliteration* rather than *adaptation* (20), and decided not to postulate any equivalence between Autogrills and diners. Figure 7 illustrates some examples containing the word "diner":

This diner was not a movie set.	Ma non eravamo certo in un set cinematografico.
Alexa was probably the first person to read the whole diner menu since the guy who wrote it.	Alexa è stata forse la prima persona a leggere tutto il menù del *diner* dopo il tizio che l'aveva scritto.
Unsurprisingly, our beige diner wasn't hooked up…	Come mi aspettavo non c'era la possibilità di connettersi in quel piccolo *diner*…

Figure 7: Culinary terms (4)

Merde Happens also contains several references to British politics (Figure 8). Among the political terms used, "royal family" and "royalist" are mentioned (in Italian, we opted for a more generic "monarchico"), together with Tony Blair and the age-long conflicts between English, Scottish and Irish people.

In my experience, no American would believe that a member of the royal family could be a car thief […] From the aggression in her voice, I guessed she wasn't a royalist.	A quanto ne so, nessun americano può credere che un membro della famiglia reale britannica sia un ladro di macchine [...] Dall'aggressività del suo tono capii che non era monarchica.
He introduced himself as Tony, the president of Miamini. 'Like Blair, right?' He said this with a huge smile on his face, as if it was the best thing	Si presentò come Tony, il presidente della 'Miamini'. 'Come Blair, no?'. Lo disse con un gran sorriso come se fosse la cosa più bella del

in the world to share a name with a British politician.	mondo avere lo stesso nome di un politico britannico.
'The Scots and the Irish. What have they got against the English?'	'Gli scozzesi e gli irlandesi. Cos'hanno contro gli inglesi?'.

Figure 8: References to British politics

The reference to these conflicts is not too difficult to understand for Italian readers, as this rivalry within the U.K. is well known. However it is interesting to notice that, in Italian, the adjective "britannico" is not very widely used: "inglese" tends to be used as a general term, regardless of the fact that this excludes British citizens of non-English descent. In the translation, we used the general terms "britannico" for British, regardless of its rareness (21) in Italian, to avoid reinforcing the (totally wrong, but widespread among Italians who do not know English language and culture) idea that all British people are in fact English.

However, in the United Kingdom itself, the debate on so-called Britishness (22), i.e. the opposition between those who prefer being identified with Great Britain and those patriotically attached to their specific nation (England, Ulster, Scotland and Wales), is still open. As Condor (2000: 199) points out:

> …*among the Anglo-British in particular, the construct of 'nation' is rather loosely used and imperfectly understood. Part of this confusion may be traced to the unusual constitution of Britain as a multi-national state […]. People living in England are confronted with an immensely complex set of discourses concerning 'national' territory, statehood and citizenship.*

Another distinction that is not readily understandable by Italian readers is that between the French language of France and Québécois. Most Italians see French as the language of France, and could not make the difference between a French and a Canadian person by hearing them speak. Figure 9 illustrates two references to Québécois language and culture:

Alexa stood and watched them with open-mouthed shock. Not because of the woman's aggression. It was the first time anyone had ever accused her of being a Quebecker, and it hurt.	Alexa rimase imbambolata, guardandoli traumatizzata e a bocca aperta. Non tanto per l'aggressione della donna, quanto per il fatto che per la prima volta qualcuno l'aveva accusata di essere del Québec. E questo non poteva che ferire una francese.
He was going to need some English lessons before coming back to his homeland, I thought, otherwise no one would understand him. Except perhaps the golfing Quebeckers.	Avrebbe dovuto prendere alcune lezioni d'inglese prima di tornare nel suo paese d'origine, pensai, altrimenti nessuno l'avrebbe capito. A parte, forse, i turisti dal Québec.

Figure 9: Reference to Québec

In this example, the reference to golf as being a very popular sport in Canada has been omitted by replacing "golfing" with "turisti" ("tourists"): such a generalization seemed to be more comprehensible to Italian readers, who are extremely unlikely to know that Quebeckers are fond of golf.

3.3. Diatopic/ diastratic varieties

This category includes all references to accent, pronunciation, and slang. American slang terms of address like "dude", "guy" and "bro" were rendered in our translation with the Italian vocatives "amico", "fratello", accompanied by some pet phrases and expressions used in Italian young people's slang, such as "cioè", "tipo", "appunto". Figure 10 illustrates a series of examples:

'Ha, no, dude.' Apparently, now that we'd steered the conversation on to cars and women, we were *dudes* together.	'Ah, no, amico.' Ora che la nostra conversazione era caduta sull'argomento 'macchine e donne', sembravamo diventati *amici*.
'I want your car, bro'…	'Dammi la macchina fratello'…
'No way, bro,' the gunman finally said. 'No one want that big shit no more, Hummers an shit. They use too much gas, you know wham sayin? Price of gas juss kill that muthfuckin bidness. Small cars and them new hybrids, they the way to go, you know wham sayin? No one want that big shit no more.'	'No, no, fratello', disse infine l'uomo con la pistola. 'Nessuno vuole più quella merda ormai. Niente Hummer o merda del genere. Consumano troppa benzina, capisci che intendo? Lo shock petrolifero, insomma, il prezzo della benzina fotte quel cazzo di mercato. Le macchine piccole e le ecologiche, quelle sì che spaccano, capisci che intendo? Nessuno vuole più delle cazzo di macchine grandi.'

Figure 10: American accents and vernaculars (1)

This sequence of the novel is dramatic rather than comical (this character is threatening Paul and Alexa at gunpoint) but the original English text is ironic in its treatment of the gunman's accent and vernacular features of language. Clarke's attempt to transliterate American pronunciation (e.g. "wham sayin", "juss", "bidness") and some grammatical characteristics of Black vernacular English (e.g. absence of "s" in the third person singular, see Vital 1991; Crystal 1995, 96-97; Labov 2001: 418-421) is entirely omitted in the Italian translation. Replacing this variety with an Italian dialect would have been too forced, given the extreme nature of a domesticating strategy that sees an African American character speaking Neapolitan, especially in a dramatic, rather than comical situation (23).

This is the reason why we opted for a translation into standard Italian: more specifically, some typically Italian pet phrases were added, and the swearwords were replaced with expressions taken from young people's slang – like "spaccare" and "fottere" – in order to render a general idea of this character. It is up to the reader's imagination to trace this carjacker to the stereotype of the American tough guy, well represented in American films.

A sequence in which diatopic and diastratic varieties are of paramount importance is the one that opens Chapter 5: Paul and Alexa stop in a parking lot on the highway to have some rest after driving all the way from Washington D.C. to Florida. A very scruffy, unfriendly couple walk up to them in a furious mood, convinced that Paul and Alexa are trying to steal their truck (Figure 11).

'Hey, wotcho doon tar fuggen truck?'	'A belli, che state facendo al nostro camion, cazzo!'
'They tranna steal are fuggen truck!'	'Cioè, stanno cercando di rubarci il camion, cazzo!'
'Oh *yeah*?'	'Maddai?'.
'Well yalkan gitcher fuggen hands offenar fuggen truck thin.'	'Allora cavate le vostre zampacce dal nostro camion, cazzo!'.
'Waddat bitch jess sayda me?'	'Oh, che m'ha detto quella stronza?'
'C'mon babe,' he cooed. ''Sokey. She's *Canadian*.'	'Dai, baby', disse in tono amorevole,'è tutto ok, è *canadese*'.

Figure 11: American accents and vernaculars (2)

Clarke uses spelling to try and imitate the American accent, whereas the Italian translation maintains the swearwords that are in the original, and adds a series of pet words ("cioè") and vocatives in the regional dialect of Rome ("belli" and "maddai"), widely popularized by Italian comedy, and thus readily comprehensible by all readers. The use of a regional variety in this case allows the translation to maintain

the diatopically and diastratically marked flavour of the American expressions in the source text. In fact while the choice of rendering diatopic varieties in the source text with other diatopic varieties in the target language has been challenged at many levels (Galassi 1994; Pavesi 1994; Murri 1996) it is regularly found in translated products, especially audiovisual ones (Raffaelli 1996; Fusari 2007).

However, there are cases in which it is nothing short of impossible to render the differences between British and American English. The quotation below (Figure 12) is a typical textbook example of lexical difference between the two varieties, that between "petrol" and "gasoline":

'Right. Sorry. There's not much petrol - I mean, gas - left, but'	'Capisco. Scusa. Non c'è rimasto molto diesel, insomma benzina, ma…'

Figura 12: American vs. British English (1)

Although "the existence of language variety is a major source of humour, in speech and writing, in everyday language and in literature, all over the English-speaking world" (Crystal 1995: 406), such differences cannot but be left out in Italian. Therefore, the lexical distinctions between British and American English (24) are omitted (e.g. biscuit/ cookie; flat/ apartment; garbage/ trash; gas/ petrol), and the humour of the puns correlated with the diatopic variation is irremediably lost (in this sequence, Paul was actually using the word "gas" to try and sound more American).

Throughout the chapter, metalinguistic comments on accents are quite frequent (Figure 13):

She had what sounded to me like a Deep South accent, though this was no Scarlet O'Hara. Unless Scarlet had spent the last century or so on a diet of booze and smoking materials.	A quanto ne so, aveva un accento del sud più sud degli Stati Uniti, ma non era Rossella O'Hara. A meno che Rossella non avesse trascorso all'incirca tutto il secolo scorso seguendo un regime a base di sbornie e fumo di ogni tipo.
I gave her my poshest English accent.	Mi rivolsi a lei con il mio più impostato accento inglese.
…one of the girls told me in heavily accented English…	…una delle ragazze mi disse con un accento particolare…
'Paul West? We're due to meet up this morning?'. I felt that adopting the American way of giving out information as a series of questions might help the message get through.	'Paul West? Dobbiamo incontrarci questa mattina?'. Avevo la sensazione che adottando l'intonazione americana, cioè dando le informazioni come una serie di domande, avrei fatto recepire meglio il messaggio.

Figure 13: American vs. British English (2)

Although the Italian reader is not expected to know much about English accents or patterns of intonation, we believe that the translation of these lines can be entertaining anyway (for example, the self-irony of "il mio più impostato accento inglese" carries over into Italian even without knowing what "the poshest English accent" actually sounds like).

But the character who best represents the ethnic humour that characterizes this novel is Jake. An American poet who has moved to Paris, Jake has created his own particular language, a mixture of French and American which is often untranslatable. Unfortunately the Italian rendition is not always as entertaining as the English text, partly because French is a Romance language just like Italian, and borrowings from French are much more difficult to identify in Italian than they are in English. However, in some cases (like the one shown in Figure 14), the irony carries over into Italian thanks to some Gallicisms that can be recognized as such by the average Italian reader thanks to the narrator's metalinguistic comments:

My first email was from Jake, a quick note telling me that he was 'coming in America very soon' and asking, 'Can you please pass me your coordinates for when you will be in Florida.' My coordinates. It was classic Jake. I knew that he wasn't trying to find me with his satellite location system. He wanted my 'coordonnées', my address and contact info.	La mia prima e-mail era da parte di Jake, giusto un appunto per dirmi che stava 'venendo in America molto presto' e per chiedermi se potevo passargli le mie 'coordinate' di quando sarei stato in Florida. Le mie 'coordinate'. Tipica espressione alla Jake. Sapevo che non mi stava cercando con il suo sistema di locazione satellitare. Intendeva le mie 'coordonnées', cioè il mio indirizzo e i modi in cui contattarmi.

Figure 14: Borrowings from French

The last example is a reference to English folk dance, which would be particularly difficult, if not impossible to translate into Italian, if it were not for the gloss that the author himself provides through his protagonist and alter ego, Paul. In fact Morris dancing is unknown to most Italians, and so it is to the female French protagonist, Alexa (Figure 15):

'…We could have had a display of Morris dancing.' 'Morse dancing?' I understood why Alexa looked confused. In French, '*morse*' means walrus. No, I explained, Morris dancing did not usually feature aquatic mammals. I did my best to reconstruct childhood memories of bearded men, flowery hats, bells on knees, and hey nonny no's around a ribbon-tressed maypole.	'…Avremmo potuto insegnare il ballo del Morris.' 'Il ballo del Morse?' Capivo perché Alexa era perplessa. In francese '*morse*' significa tricheco. Allora le spiegai che il ballo del Morris di solito non riguarda i mammiferi acquatici, ma che è una danza popolare inglese. Feci del mio meglio per ricostruire i ricordi di quando ero bambino, di uomini barbuti, cappelli a fiori, campanelli alle ginocchia e persone che cantano a festa tutte intorno all'albero di maggio decorato di nastri.

Figure 15: References to English folk culture

To conclude our commentary on the three main categories of intercultural problems that characterize the translation into Italian of the novel *Merde Happens*, it is perhaps worthwhile to notice that our idea of overcoming intercultural problems by finding a balance between domestication and foreignization is characteristic of travel literature more generally. As Smecca (2003: 21) highlights:

> *Another example is when the traveller reports some expressions in the original language of the country visited, in order to give a touch of local color. Here, the translator can either leave them in the local language, so as to reproduce the same exotic effect as they had for the traveller's audience, or translate them into his own language, if he considers this necessary for his readers to understand the meaning.*

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we concentrated on Stephen Clarke's novel *Merde Happens* to demonstrate how intercultural humour can be maintained in translation. Clarke's book represents a particularly interesting case study for intercultural communication because it is a humorous novel which satirizes three nations and cultures at the same time (English, French and US American).

In our contribution, we presented a sample translation of this novel into Italian, and we tried to demonstrate that the product of this translation can be entertaining to the Italian public even if the novel contains no reference to the Italian language and culture. Some publishers maintain that this kind of literature cannot be translated because Italian readers would not be able to identify with the characters, since none of them are Italian: however, our contention is that novels such as Clarke's not only *can*, but

should be translated, as a way of fighting national stereotypes generally, by playing on them and using prejudice as the object of humour, regardless of which particular nation(s) and/ or culture(s) are satirized.

Our translation strategy was based on looking for the right balance between foreignization (i.e. introducing new concepts into the target culture) and domestication (i.e. replacing culture specific references with concepts that are more familiar to the target public). Translating means choosing, weighing up all the alternatives, but also re-writing a foreign author's words into another language and culture. What we have attempted to do is create an Italian version which could entertain the reader, by overcoming intercultural problems with a generally target oriented translation strategy.

Although the Italian culture is not represented in this novel (the protagonist, Paul, is English; his girlfriend Alexa is French; they cross the United States on a promotional tour on behalf of a British tourist board), we have argued that the irony can be understood and enjoyed by an Italian readership anyway, and we showed a series of examples taken from the text. As Chiaro (1992: 77) emphasized,

> *…to suggest that a common linguistic code is all that is needed in order to appreciate jokes and word play would be extremely naïve.*

A shared language and culture between author and readers is obviously very important to understand humour, but it is not the only element, and we hope we have demonstrated that translation can make humour and irony understandable and enjoyable to a foreign public even when the public's own language and culture are not represented in the source text, but the jokes involve other languages and cultures.

A risk that is always looming with ethnic humour, as we have seen, is the fact that national stereotypes may be offensive, or even become crystallized into prejudices. On the other hand, ignoring their presence in culture would be naïve, and some scholars have even argued that:

> *It is actually the stereotypes which constitute the most widely shared cultural competence, the lowest cognitive common denominator among the members of a society...*

> (Dufays 1993: 86)

Translating this novel into Italian entailed, in some cases, a process of rethinking and rewriting the text, as we showed in some of the most domesticating choices we made, especially as concerns intertextual references (Figure 3 and 6) and regional accents (Figure 10 and 11). However, we like to think of the translator as a leading actor in the construction and progress of languages and cultures, and we firmly believe that this enterprise is shared by writers and readers alike. As Bassnett and Lefevere (1998: 10) argued about rewritings,

> *Rewriters and translators are the people who really construct cultures on the basic level in our day and age.*

Playing on national stereotypes, laughing about them, and even *translating* them can thus be one of the most effective ways of effectively fighting prejudice.

5. Appendix: An Interview with Stephen Clarke

Stephen Clarke was interviewed by Ilaria Montagni on June 15, 2007. Our gratitude goes to Stephen's agent at Bantam Press, Selina Walker, for putting us in contact with the author.

1. You have said that your works are "pointless comedy novels". So, do you write just for fun or is there any moral in your books?

When I said that my books were pointless, I was actually being slightly arrogant. Because I think the best art is pointless. A painting is pointless – it's simply a beautiful object. Music is not at all useful – it just gives us pleasure when we listen to it (the exception, of course, being certain French

singers). My books aren't meant to educate, they're just meant to entertain. Perhaps "pointless" isn't the right word, because entertaining people is actually a very worthwhile thing to do. Making people laugh is one of the best things you can do for humanity. When people are laughing, it is pure, spontaneous enjoyment – unless of course they're sadists or racists and it's cruel laughter. Despite what the classicists might say, for me, comedy is ten times more noble than tragedy. In my books, death doesn't exist. They're all about life.

2. **In this globalization era, can we still talk about English Humour or people from different countries share the same concept of** *divertissement***?**

Every individual has different ideas about what's funny and what's not. I simply write things that I find funny. It was one of the biggest surprises of my life when I first saw someone reading *A Year in the Merde* and laughing. Having talked to lots of people about humour, though, I think there is a peculiarly English thing that others find funny, and that is our deadpan way of laughing at things, including ourselves. That, plus our sense of fun. We hate taking life seriously, we have to joke. A successful politician has to be able to make jokes, otherwise he or she won't be respected in Parliament.

3. **Your books are based on stereotypes about French people. Anyway, France loves you very much. Are they masochist or what? Shouldn't they be offended by what you write?**

No, the French aren't offended, because they accept that what I write is true. If it were just clichés, they wouldn't like it. But I describe them from the point of view of someone who has lived amongst them for years, and not just some journalist who comes here for a month's sabbatical, sits in a café at St Germain des Prés reading Sartre and thinks that he understands the French. When the jokes are accurate, the French love to laugh at themselves. They're flattered by the attention. They have an expression: "parlez moi de moi" – "tell me about myself." Also, I always tell them that I'm not mocking them, I'm teasing them, and that you only tease someone you're fond of. And they believe me.

4. **Translating your book is such a challenge to me because there are a lot of puns, cultural references and strong English elements. What do you suggest I should do, as a young translator who tries to render your book into Italian culture and language?**

Don't try to translate jokes literally – they don't work. You have to think of an equivalent. For example, in *A Year in the Merde*, there was a joke where one of Paul's colleagues said he'd worked in America, "in high tea". Paul has no idea what he's talking about, but nods approvingly, thinking at least it has something to do with tea. It turns out the colleague meant "IT" – computing. This didn't work at all in French, so I suggested to the translator that the colleague say "Haiti", and Paul thinks, why is he talking to me about the Caribbean?

The same goes for cultural references. You have to remember who's reading the book. An example – in *Merde Actually* there's a chapter entitled "Maybe it's because I'm not a Londoner". This is a reference to a song title "Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner". I added the "not" because in this chapter Paul feels lost in London. The translator didn't know what to do, so I suggested "Ils sont fous, ces londoniens", a reference to a favourite saying in Asterix: "ils sont fous, ces Anglais". It's an equivalent pun.

Similarly, some of the dialogue was hard to do. In the English version of the books, the French speak English very phonetically – "Ah yem vairy eppy to work wiz you". An English reader can understand this. But the French would have had difficulties, so I suggested changing the strategy, using correct English words, but bad grammar that the French would notice – "I very happy work with you". It was the same for Paul's French. In the English books we can tell he's speaking bad French because he says things like "I am punctured" or "I happy yesterday". So in French, it was simple – he had to make typical English-speakers' mistakes.

I was often doing the translator's job for him, but I think sometimes translators don't dare take the risk of straying totally from a literal translation. On the contrary, I say, the translation has to be a

funny book in its own right, the text has to live. You don't change the plot or the characters, of course, but on a linguistic level you can take liberties and have some fun.

5. You've chosen France as your target. You've lived and worked there, plus Great Britain and France have always been political enemies. But now you've written a book about the USA. Aren't you afraid of political repercussions? The UK has always been a sort of "American prosthesis"…

Actually it was Americans who started asking me to write about them. They said that they needed to be laughed at – not in the usual "American globalizing capitalist bastard" way, but more subtly, like I do with the French. The only political repercussion I'm afraid of is that it's almost impossible to use the word "merde" in the American media. The New York Times refused to review *A Year in the Merde* because of the rude French word in the title. They're so politically correct that they don't want to take the risk of insulting a French reader. Radio and TV are often the same. I asked one radio interviewer, "what would you do if George Bush means fat idiot in Romanian?" He didn't laugh.

6. Why don't you write something about Italy? It would be nice to see how Paul West behaves in our messy country…

The simple reason is that I don't know the Italians well enough. I'd just be a tourist. Paul West talks as if he's just discovering everything about France and America, but don't forget it's all written by someone who's lived in France for 14 years and who's had American friends and colleagues, and travelled widely in the USA for even longer.

7. The title I've chosen for the Italian version of *Merde Happens* is *Shit everywhere! Da Parigi agli Usa*. In Italian "Merde" also means "fucking bastards", so I decided to use the English word. Doesn't it add some British style? What do you think about it?

I can't judge how the Italians will view a title. It looks a bit long, that's all I'd say. *Merde Happens* is an adaptation of the American saying "shit happens", which is their version of existentialism. There's no actual shit in the book this time – Americans don't let their dogs poo on the pavement.

Notes

1 Sabrina Fusari wrote sections 2, 3 and 4; the translation was made by Ilaria Montagni, who is also responsible for the final interview. The introduction and conclusion are the result of the joint work of the authors.

2 *Love Actually* (2003), written and directed by Richard Curtis, starring Alan Rickman, Bill Nighy, Colin Firth, Emma Thompson, Hugh Grant, Liam Neeson, and Keira Knightley.

3 As seen, for example, in the film *Forrest Gump* (1994), written by Eric Roth, directed by Robert Zemeckis, starring Tom Hanks, Robin Wright Penn, Gary Sinise, Mykelti Williamson, and Sally Field.

4 This literary field has a successful precedent in Italy in Tim Parks' books (*Italian Neighbours*, 1992; *An Italian Education,* 1996*; A Season with Verona*, 2003). Parks enjoys some success in Italy and has participated in several editions of the Mantua Festival of Literature ("Festivaletteratura"), one of the main cultural events in Italy dedicated to literature.

5 Founded in 1899, Sperling & Kupfer is one of the oldest publishers in Italy. It is best known historically for its key role in diffusing European (especially German) literature in Italy, and for providing books and journals to Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci in the 1920s, during his detention in a fascist prison, through an unlimited credit account opened by the Italian-born Cambridge economist Piero Sraffa at the Sperling & Kupfer bookshop in Milan. However, Sperling & Kupfer's target and main areas of interest have changed many times since its creation.

6 A good example, to which we return, is the character of Jake, who clearly represents the figure of the "displaced immigrant". Jake has lived in France for so many years that he seems to have forgotten about his language and culture, in an attempt to be more French than the French. However, Jake does not come from a place traditionally seen as an emigration country, but he is from the United States of America.

7 This kind of strategy should obviously not be restricted to humorous texts. As Flamand notes, "Like the philosopher, the translator must perceive the solidarity, the interrelation among the various elements. Stepping out of yourself to reach the other – regardless of whether this 'other' is a person or not – requires the sense of objectivity and universality. These qualities are essential for translators to discover a text, to grasp the meaning of a particular text which resists their own analysis, and the particular reading they give of the text. The text transcends me as a translator: it is outside of me; it exists in itself" (Flamand 1981: 352, our translation). On the role of the translator as a mediator of ideas and emotions, see also Dussart (1994).

8 This is yet another intertextual reference, in this case to the film *Sudden Impact* (1983), starring Clint Eastwood playing Lieutenant Harry Callahan (the original quote is "Go ahead, make my day"). The chapter was selected because it is particularly rich in metalinguistic references to American and British English (see Algeo 2006), and thus very testing in terms of the alleged untranslatability of diatopic varieties (see Galassi 1994; Pavesi 1994; Murri 1996).

9 On wordplays and puns, see Chiaro 1992: 4-16; Delabastita 1993, 1994, 1996; Henry 2003.

10 "Untranslatability" is a very debatable concept in itself, see Ricœur 2004: 29.

11 All translations from French and Italian are ours.

12 On the distinction between irony and humour, see Attardo 2001: 166.

13 However, this was not done in our translation of Clarke's novel. This French expression is uttered by Alexa on page 171, but we considered it appropriate to leave it in French to maintain the foreignizing effect of those few lines of Alexa's that are kept in French in the original (usually to underline the character's annoyance, alarm, or offence).

15 In sociolinguistics, the term "diatopic" refers to geographical variation across a single language; "diastratic" refers to variation based on social class and/or social groups, including such factors as age and gender.

16 The importance of register for humour is underlined by Attardo's treatment of so-called "register humour", i.e. "humor caused by an incongruity originating in the clash between two registers. Registers may be pre-theoretically defined as language varieties associated with a given situation, role, or social aspect of the speaker's experience". (Attardo 1994: 230).

17 There are 85 instances of the word "brunch" as a borrowing from English in the CORIS corpus (the Reference Corpus of Written Italian, a 110-million word corpus developed at the Centre for Theoretical and Applied Linguistics of the University of Bologna), only 9 of which contain an explanatory gloss to indicate what a brunch is. In one hit found in the CORIS, brunch is described as "inventato dagli inglesi" (invented by the English), whereas in 7 hits it is presented as an American tradition (in one of the examples, it is even described as "americanissimo").

18 Released in 1991, written by Callie Khouri, directed by Ridley Scott, starring Geena Davis, Harvey Keitel, Brad Pitt and Susan Sarandon.

19 Autogrill is an Italian-based chain of highway restaurants. Autogrill restaurants can also be found in railway stations and airports in Italy and abroad. The company is chaired by clothing magnate Gilberto Benetton.

20 See Vinay & Darbelnet (1958).

21 Only 3,418 instances in the CORIS corpus, as against 14,952 of "inglese". In many cases, "inglese" is used to mean "British", as in "l'inglese British Aerospace", "il primo ministro inglese", "Dipartimento ambientale inglese", "l'economia inglese", "il ministro all'Agricoltura inglese", etc.

23 In comical situations, the translator seems to have much more freedom, at least in the Italian dubbing tradition: for example, an African American character in the animated series *The Simpsons* speaks with a strong Venetian accent in the Italian version (Fusari 2007: 13-14).

24 See Algeo 2006 and the section "American and British English" (pp. 306-311) of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (Crystal 1995).

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About the Authors

Sabrina Fusari is a researcher of English Language and Translation at the Department of Literary, Linguistics and Philological Studies of the University of Trento, Italy. She teaches English language, English linguistics, and Translation from English into Italian in undergraduate and graduate courses. Sabrina holds a PhD in Intercultural Communication from the University of Bologna at Forlì, and in 2005 she obtained a fellowship from the Center on Philanthropy Archives at Indiana University-Purdue University. Her research interests include applied linguistics, corpus linguistics, intercultural rhetoric, translation of political and persuasive discourse, the language of nonprofit organizations (especially fundraising ones in Italy and the United States), and most recently, audiovisual translation and humour studies.

Ilaria Montagni is an Italian translator and writer, winner of the Valerio Gentile Prize 2008 for young writers. She graduated magna cum laude in Translation from English and French into Italian at the Advanced School of Modern Languages for Interpreters and Translators (University of Bologna at Forlì), and she currently works as a freelance translator of websites for small and medium-sized companies and nonprofit organizations. She has authored two novels, *From Florence with Love*, and *Bulimic Blog* (Premio Gentile 2008).

Authors' Addresses

Sabrina Fusari
University of Trento
Department of Literary, Linguistic and Philological Studies
Via Santa Croce 65
38100 Trento, Italy
e-mail: sabrina.fusari@lett.unitn.it

Ilaria Montagni
University of Bologna at Forlì
Advanced School of Modern Languages for Interpreters and Translators
Corso della Repubblica 136
47100 Forlì, Italy
e-mail: ilariamontagni@libero.it

22 See the 2005 report entitled *Citizenship and Belonging: What is Britishness?* Commission for Racial Equality, UK, London: ETHNOS Research and Consultancy, http://www.ethnos.co.uk/britishness.htm.

14 See ibidem, pp. 175-182 for an analysis of "jocular abuse" (i.e. playful insults) and people's reactions to it. See also Eisterhold, Attardo & Boxer 2006.