

The Dimension of Wit in Translation: Rendering Wilde's Pun Ernest/Earnest into Italian

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The present article examines different translation strategies adopted by three Italian translators of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895): Luigi Lunari, whose translation had great success and was repeatedly reprinted¹, Masolino d'Amico, who has translated and edited many books of Wilde's works², and Guido Almansi, who translated Wilde's play in collaboration with Claude Béguin³. As the translations into Italian of Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* are conspicuous for their number and their diversity, a comparative approach to some of them may offer the advantage of pointing out the various working processes and the different policies adopted by translators. Great importance is here attributed to the approaches to the source text adopted by each translator: translator's notes and introductions are considered an additional channel to understand the diverse renderings of Wilde's humour. The textual analysis made here is limited to two elements: wordplay and puns, but it includes theoretical considerations to indicate the great linguistic potential of Wilde's text. The general aim of the article is to demonstrate that the translators have different concepts of 'optimal' translations for puns and different ideas for rendering the cultural context of the source text. Anyway, for all the differences between these translations concerning the strategies adopted, the fact that Wilde's wordplay is an element of inexhaustible potential for translation underlies them all. Though preserving and prising the originality of each different translating solution, the present study uses a descriptive method, inspired by Translation Studies, according to which the horizon of a translation is set within the target culture⁴, and it is not intended as a prescriptive comparison of different translations according to their similarity with the original, to support the traditional prescriptive approaches to translation⁵. The aim of this modest attempt at translation criticism is thus not to state what the translators should have done, but rather to describe what they have managed to do.

Oscar Wilde's epigrammatic style is most intellectually daring and provocative when it employs the pun, often defined as a «play on words», a device out of which Wilde is able to create ingenious and original mockery. The use of wordplay distinguishes Wilde's writing from contemporary Victorian writers' and makes the interpretation of his jokes a controversial question,

especially when the 'interpreter' is a translator who has to render words enlivened by original linguistic play into another language. It turns out that in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the title, introducing the comic atmosphere of the whole play through the pun on the expression 'being Ernest', is generally seen as the central problem to solve. As has been pointed out by Kaplan and Bernays, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is «a play about names and a play on names»⁶. The very title of Wilde's play exploits the homophony between the name *Ernest* and the adjective *earnest* and the translator immediately has to deal with a problem: is the name Ernest to be maintained in its original form or to be reformulated? When the policy of renaming is adopted, is the name to be translated reproducing the ironic allusions to the values of earnestness? Can the Italian translator find equivalents to the original pun in meaning? It is obvious that the choices of translators are of the utmost importance, since this is one of the cases when «failure to translate puns can mean failure to translate the whole play»⁷.

Choosing how to translate the title, like any other step in the process of translation, is an intentional act, determined in this case by the possibilities to attribute an ironic meaning to the phrasing *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In this light a particular translating choice corresponds to an interpretative, thus intentional, activity, as it is the translator who, acting as an interpreter, may attribute irony, or not, to the title and the text of the play⁸. As far as translation is concerned, issues of intentionality are advisedly raised: the job of a translator cannot simply correspond to rightly comprehending the author's intentions, because the translator has to enter into the 'creative dimension' involved in the production of literary translation and consequently has to propose his/her personal interpretation of the source text. Returning to the example of the title, Wilde puns on the words *Ernest* and *earnest*, creating the 'new' proper name *Earnest*. The pun falls within a particular category of jokes identified by Otto Jespersen as «a peculiar class of roundabout expressions in which the speaker avoids the regular word, but hints at it in a covert way by using some other word, generally a proper name, which bears a resemblance to it or is derived from it»⁹. Wilde's pun is in a position of pre-eminence since it appears in the title: Wilde plays on the similarity among *Ernest*, *earnest* and *honest*, thus the idea of earnestness, implicit in the proper name *Earnest*, is the primary target of Wilde's mockery.

To understand Wilde's pun one has to recognise that the title is a manifesto of the intentions of the author: through wit Wilde hopes to unmask the false seriousness of high society, and the characters in the play continuously mock the ideal of earnestness. Victorian moral earnestness is grounded on the idea that «God did not send [men and women] into the world merely to eat, drink, and be merry»¹⁰, but the protagonist of Wilde's play, Algernon Moncrieff, precisely embodies the «casual, easy-going, superficial, or frivolous attitude» that was attacked by those whom Walter

Houghton calls «the prophets of earnestness»¹¹. Algernon is characterised by his passion for food¹² and his lack of money, and these aspects of his personality are censured by a governess with stern moral values, Miss Prism, in the first drafts of the play: when she knows that Ernest (Algernon) does not pay his bills at the restaurant, she comments, «There can be little good in any young man who eats so much, and so often»¹³. Algernon's behaviour is a constant breach of etiquette and indicates disregard for English formal conventions. For instance, the cucumber sandwiches that Algernon orders for his aunt and then eats are there to give him an appetite and are never meant to satisfy Lady Bracknell's appetite; as Barbara Belford declares, «in *Ernest*, Wilde satirizes the British obsession with tea to the extent that Act One seems to be all about cucumber sandwiches»¹⁴. A strong physical desire for food contradicts the morally 'serious' conception of life, but the pleasure that the physical act of eating gives to Algernon is emphasised when he says: «I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins very calmly. It is the only way to eat them» (341). As for Ernest, he too does not completely exemplify serious social attitudes. Indeed, Wilde ironically hints at 'the importance' of being *Earnest* to demonstrate its contrary, that a man, even if he is called *Ernest*, can be true to himself only when he *is not earnest*. Both men are, at different points of the action, the same person, *Ernest*. When Ernest, who is initially presented in the cast of the comedy as «John Worthing, *JP*» proposes to Gwendolen Fairfax, she says to him: «My own Ernest!» (62); when Algernon visits Hertfordshire and meets Cecily Cardew, the girl he will fall in love with, she declares: «You, I see from your card, are Uncle Jack's brother, my cousin Ernest, my wicked cousin Ernest» (98). In the play earnestness is merely a role that man accidentally plays, but earnestness was for the Victorians a mission in life, a value of 'vital' importance. The Victorians believed in earnestness insofar as it represented the strength of anybody «called upon to struggle with all his power against the forces of evil, in his own soul and in society»¹⁵ and this strength was displayed especially in the intellectual sphere.

At a time when the commitment of the educated man in the social sphere was considered a duty, Wilde subversively created characters who make this 'proper' behaviour look silly. Lady Bracknell ranks first in making Victorian behaviour rules seem ridiculous: she tests the earnestness of her daughter's suitor, Jack Worthing, by asking if he smokes, and when he replies «Well, yes, I must admit I smoke», she declares: «I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is» (68). As Anne Varty says, Lady Bracknell is «the epitome of inflexibility, and its representative in the upper classes»¹⁶, but when the great matriarch refers to a principle, she reduces it to nonsense. All her questions and her reactions to Jack's affirmations are the opposite of what one would logically expect¹⁷.

Wilde's male characters are idle smoking dandies who take pleasure in playing with words: when Algernon finds out that his friend's name is not *Ernest* but *Jack*, their conversation is a sort of linguistic game made of discrepancies between what one says and what the other understands:

Jack: Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette case was given to me in the country.

Algernon: Yes, but that does not account for the fact that your small Aunt Cecily, who lives at Tunbridge Wells, calls you her dear uncle. Come, old boy, you had much better have the thing out at once.

Jack: My dear Algy, you talk exactly as if you were a dentist. It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn't a dentist. It produces a false impression (46).

Such characters, who continuously make puns and banter and never are «in earnest» but pass their time producing «false impressions» on others, become «eccentric» if put in the context of an epoch where man is «serious» only if he has «[a] passionate and sustained earnestness after a high moral rule, seriously realised in conduct»¹⁸.

Wilde's style of wit, paradox, and wordplay developed in a country and in an epoch when to play with words was as shameful as to play with ideas¹⁹, but it was inevitable since he had inherited some of the 'playful attitude to language' typical of his native country, Ireland. Vivian Mercier writes about Irish wit that «Ireland continued to produce wits all through the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries and to export a considerable amount of them», so that «any serious discussion of wit in the English language inevitably leads to the mention of several Anglo-Irish names – Shaw and Wilde being the two most likely to occur»²⁰. Wilde's finished and amusing style was highly praised by George Bernard Shaw who commented on the Irish origins of Wilde's style in a review of one of his plays using the following words:

All the imperturbable good sense and good manners with which Mr Wilde makes his wit pleasant to his comparatively stupid audience cannot quite overcome the fact that Ireland is of all countries the most foreign to England, and that to the Irishman (and Mr Wilde is almost as acutely Irish an Irishman as the Iron Duke of Wellington) there is nothing in the world quite so exquisitely comic as an Englishman's seriousness²¹.

The central point made by Shaw is that both he and Wilde use their wit to express contempt for whatever is ludicrous and absurd in English manners. Shaw's remark clarifies that wit is less a matter of style than a point of view, and Shaw's wit is an outstanding example of this concept, since his wit relies upon a skilful juxtaposition of ideas²². Wilde's wit relies more than Shaw's on «verbal facility», as critics like David Gordon have demonstrated²³, but it is precisely this element that links Wilde with his Irish predecessors like Jonathan Swift or Richard Brinsley Sheridan.

Luigi Lunari, who in his translation attributes great importance to Wilde's use and display of verbal skills, misconstrues Wilde's intentions in using those verbal skills, as he starts off his introduction to *L'opera di Wilde e L'importanza di chiamarsi Ernesto* giving an odd and personal definition of Wilde's writing style:

Abbiamo detto più sopra che il talento di Wilde si esprime soprattutto nelle opere minori e di più marcato disimpegno. Non poteva essere altrimenti. Se accettiamo il fatto che [...] non possono nascere capolavori dall'acquiescenza facile e interessata a una committenza come la società per cui Wilde scrisse, ecco che per strappare il meglio dalla sua penna dobbiamo attendere il momento del *divertissement*²⁴.

Lunari does not recognise the importance of satire in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a feature that Wilde's play shares with the works of other Irish authors like Shaw. Lunari goes on to affirm that Wilde's witticisms are written with the specific intention of giving free play to his verbal skills (13-14), but he does not do justice to the audacity of Wilde's style: the light and witty tone of the play which Lunari calls *divertissement* is exceptional if one considers that Wilde 'wrote for' people looking at men of wit with suspicion.

One point on which at least everybody can agree with Lunari is the identification of the most vital aspect of Wilde's theatrical dialogues with wordplay and pure linguistic jokes free from any social constraint. The very title, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, shows that a pun is the best instrument to introduce a play that lays no claims to being instructive and does not have a moral point of view to defend. It is evident that the Italian version *L'importanza di chiamarsi Ernesto* cannot have the same effect for the Italian public, because *Ernesto* is a name which does not allude to stern behaviour as *Earnest* does, nor does earnestness have the same value in Italian society. If the public does not know the cultural context in which Wilde operates, they do not understand the joke, and consequently the title does not make sense.

The Italian title does not reflect Wilde's ironic allusion to the English 'obsession' about being earnest and does not adapt it to the Italian cultural *milieu*, but the translator finds a way to compensate for the loss of the initial amusing effect through a metatextual discourse. Lunari writes that he sees in the paradoxical and nonsensical aspect of the Italian title a way to pay homage to the «fondamentale aspetto di *nonsense*» (25) of the play; he makes his point in the preface – but it is a subjective and not always acceptable point of view – saying that in the play the reader comes across expressions like «a cloakroom at a railway station [...] could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognized position in good society» (74), and he argues – unconvincingly – that these expressions do not mean anything but are the key to interpret the play. Lunari wants the title, like any other paradox contained in the play, to be considered a nonsensical phrase, as he stresses the importance of pure

nonsense when it comes to translating Wilde's wordplays. His point is that to regard Wilde's playful tone as «parodia dell'aforisma» would mean «caricare la commedia di una volontà che non possiede e che non vuole possedere» (15). Lunari's affirmations give rise to a series of observations. It is true that puns do not always have a target, that is to say that they are not necessarily directed against particular cultural or social elements, so that Wilde's puns or any other form of wordplay could well be considered a pure *divertissement*, or the signal of a desire to amuse, but Lunari, deciding to replace *Ernest* with the Italian correspondening form *Ernesto*, chooses not to see an ironic meaning where Wilde meant it²⁵, as there is no ironic correspondence between the name and the morals of society. Moreover, Lunari says that if English names like *Gwendolen* were put next to Italian names like *Franco*, the translation would not be acceptable: «[N]on si può parlare di Algernon, Gwendolen e "Franco", né si può evitare che usando il nome di Frank il gioco di parole venga del tutto perduto» (24). Lunari's translation and the words he uses in the preface point out the substantial untranslatability of Wilde's title. On the one hand Lunari, adhering to the norms of the current use and calling all the characters by their English names, loses the ironic connotations of *Ernest*. Wordplay with names can produce comic effects, and it is obvious from Lunari's example that keeping the original English name, in its source form or in its direct Italian translation, does not create the same humorous impact on the audience. The crucial question to consider is that Wilde intentionally changes the spelling of the word *Ernest*, attributing a new meaning to the proper name and adding a new signified, «serious, stern» to the existing neutral one²⁶. This becomes apparent at the beginning of the play, when Algernon, after having been told that Ernest's name is «Jack» exclaims: «You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest» (46). Lunari concedes that the best translation would be *Franco* with a capital letter (25, 26), revealing that maybe the best solution to recreate the original text is to replace *Ernest* with a target name that also considers the ironical implications of the original, but finding the Italian original name corresponding to *Earnest* is such a difficult task that ultimately Lunari translates the name in a literal way.

The translation of the joke on *Ernest/Earnest* presents great difficulties, as it raises the issue of the presence or absence of the legendary «earnestness»²⁷, a concept that has essentially English connotations: Italian translators are then keen to look for any detail about the context in which Wilde operated. In his preface Lunari reflects on the social position of Wilde, as he repeatedly claims to pay attention to the peculiar «uncommitted» position of the author in writing the last of his social comedies which is so much in contrast with the theatre of ideas of such authors as Shaw and Ibsen²⁸. The effect of pleasant nonsense is the result of Wilde's use of words and in turn Wilde's use of

language comes from a precise aesthetic ideology: it indicates a 'divorce' of art and rationality, it is «a clear affront to bourgeois utility and rationality», and «an apparent indication of the art world's divorce from middle-class life»²⁹. In the light of these considerations, the pun in the title is not a mere linguistic difficulty to solve, as the translator is also concerned with the position of the author who invents the pun: in other words, he has to consider not only what Wilde writes in the title, but also who Wilde is. Wilde is a dandy, «the critical yet entertaining marginal man», as Regenia Gagnier skilfully defines him, «presenting a glowing image of the age while exposing its underlying ugliness», adopting witty language that exposes all the emptiness of social life. Wilde exposes the faults of English society most critically because he does not belong to it completely: as an Irishman he is substantially an outsider. Wilde's attitude towards his audience is characterised by exceptional directness, as the title demonstrates: the play is full of pointed remarks, set forth by an author of Irish origins, on the supposed virtue of the English upper classes, and the translator of the play has to keep it in mind. Wilde as Irishman «criticised and attracted» the English upper classes³⁰ because, as Barbara Belford writes, «he knew just how far to go with social criticism; the audience should savor scandal without being offended»³¹. Indeed, in challenging Victorian domestic morality, Wilde was as revolutionary and iconoclastic as Ibsen or Shaw³². Pointing out social obsessions with earnestness, Wilde attacked English society at its core while making his public laugh. As Cecily will later on declare in the play: «There is something in that name [Ernest] that seems to inspire absolute confidence» (Act II, 128), and the name surely had a strong impact on the Victorian public too; theatre audiences and actors were all exposed to the pervasive spirit of social 'earnestness'.

The Victorian public's reaction to Wilde's polite attacks is not so different from the modern reader's, as Wilde's wit is generally associated with a kind of pleasant absurdity. One advantage of focusing the translation of Wilde's title on the effect of 'nonsense' created by Wilde's playful style is that as a consequence of this translation choice Lunari has the possibility of enriching his version of the play with unprecedented puns. He can partly compensate for the loss of the wordplay, for instance, by adding a proper name when it is not present in the original. The translation of «I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest» (Act III) as «mi sono reso conto ora, per la prima volta in vita mia, dell'essenziale Importanza di Essere un Serio Ernesto» (193), creates additional effects of nonsense, as Lunari connects two proper names, *Serio* and *Ernesto*. In this way the nonsensical aspect of the wordplay in the title is transferred to the dialogue in the translation. However, Lunari's translation cannot give Wilde's wordplay full weight, as Lunari is the only translator of Wilde's comedy who considers the fact of not translating the pun *Ernest/Earnest* as a 'gain' rather than as an irrecoverable loss.

Almansì's choice to translate the pun in the title using the name and adjective 'Fedele' represents his attempt to find an Italian counterpart of the pun on *Ernest/Earnest*. The comic effect of the title consists in the declaration of the importance but at the same time of the impossibility of being 'Fedele' for both man and woman in a married couple, since «in queste scorrerie matrimoniali il sesso femminile fa crollare tutte le convenzioni sociali alle quali sembrano così attaccate: il matrimonio stesso, la fedeltà, le buone maniere, l'educazione, il galateo, la famiglia»³³. *Fedele* is not as common a name in Italy as *Ernest* in England³⁴ but, yet, the irony is understandable. Anyway, the expression «essere Fedele» preserves the irony implied in 'being earnest' only partially, as the name evokes the idea of being faithful in the context of a marriage, and the idea is not contradicted by any particular behaviour of Ernest, that is to say that the public do not necessarily believe him to be 'infedele'. In particular, the pun at the end of the play is not translated by Almansì: «Al contrario, zia Augusta, per la prima volta mi rendo conto come sia vitale l'importanza di chiamarsi Fedele»³⁵. Ernest says «chiamarsi Fedele» but he does not say «essere Fedele» provocatively alluding to the fact that he has been or will be unfaithful to Gwendolen, and the question of conjugal fidelity remains unresolved. On the whole, the meaning in the target language is not exactly the same as in the source language, since the moral values that the names *Ernest* and *Fedele* recall are different and imply different ways of reading the play.

Masolino d'Amico has a third different approach to the pun *Ernest/Earnest*. He finds his solution by translating the name as *Probo* only in the title and in the final line of the play and motivates his choice as follows: «*Probo* – che comunque non è *earnest* – può dare un'idea dei valori antiquati di cui Wilde vuole prendersi gioco»³⁶. In Italian the name dates back to the tradition and fashion of the late XIX century, and since the name is not used nowadays as *Ernest* was in the Victorian era, d'Amico chooses to keep the 'immortal' original name: he does not translate *Ernest* as *Probo* in the play. As in the case of Luigi Lunari, the meaning of the humorous name *Ernest* is omitted in the play, but it is here preserved in the title.

According to the traditional source-oriented approach to translation: «Whenever the translator can discern the author's intentions [behind the choice of a name] the translator's unwritten code ought to determine him to transpose them into the target language»³⁷. From the analysis of the three translations of the title mentioned above, it appears that the effort to render the intentions of the author underlies them all: Lunari aptly strives to render in Italian the nonsensical aspects of the play, Almansì strives to find Italian equivalents to the original, d'Amico opts for translating into Italian Wilde's polite playfulness. In order for the Italian public to get the linguistic joke on *Earnest*, translations can use lexical addition in the text, as in the case of Lunari, or total transformation of the name *Ernest*, as in the case of d'Amico and Almansì. A particular choice for translating the title does not necessarily

preclude the translator from using different strategies when the same name *Ernest* appears in the play. According to d'Amico, who also translated the title of the play as *L'importanza di essere onesto* (1985), to translate the name in the title and to keep the name *Ernest* in the play is a suitable strategy, but to underline the connotative aspect of this name he also resorts to lexical addition, as he adds some words in the core of his translation to motivate the attraction of Gwendolen and Cecily for this name³⁸.

The choice of Almansi is peculiar because it indicates that Wilde has «interessi forti, anzi fortissimi, sia sul piano della morale contemporanea che della critica sociale»³⁹, and it suggests that the concept of loyalty, together with the concept of earnestness, are the keys to interpret the play. The name Almansi uses, *Fedele*, has in Italian the double meaning of 'trustworthy' and 'faithful': it symbolises two of the qualities – but by no means the only ones – which in the Victorian English world, as well as in the Italian cultural context can be considered important for any marriage 'made in Heaven', namely the absolute trust in the partner and the faithfulness to him or her. If the term *Fedele* does not correspond to *Earnest*, at least we can say that marriage is a frequently evoked theme in the play: Algernon declares he is shocked by marital faithfulness: «The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It's simply washing one's clean linen in public» (52). His aphorism, «Divorces are made in Heaven» (Act I, 40) which goes against the saying 'marriages are made in Heaven' confirms his cynical views regarding the values ruling in the present day society. The question of conjugal fidelity offers great opportunities for jokes: for instance, when Jack pretends Cecily is his aunt and clearly she is not, Algernon refuses to give his consent to Ernest's marriage to Gwendolen if he does not «clear up the whole question of Cecily» (42), as he suspects that Jack may have an affair with her⁴⁰. The Italian title hints at Wilde's ability to perceive the limits of his society, and ironically suggests 'the importance of being married'; this is, anyway, only a partial translation of the complex implications of *Being Earnest*. Moreover, for the Italian reader the name *Fedele* is associated with positive values and it conveys a strong moral message when it is put in the context of the play: eventually Jack, whose affection for Gwendolen is authentic, finds out that «all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth» (190) not because he has always been E(a)rnest, but because he has always been a devoted and faithful *fiancé*. Almansi manages to transmit the light tone of the original only partially, as the comic effect in the final line, where the name *Earnest* ends the play in a circle recalling the message of the title in a deeply ironical way, is almost completely lost.

Wilde's plays on words, as in the examples just mentioned, derive their comic quality from the effect of surprise they generate in the audience, and often it is not merely obtained by a double meaning within one word. Critics have repeatedly shown how humorous effects are obtained by subverting the

expectations of the audience⁴¹. It is obvious from the examples quoted above that Wilde's wordplay cannot be easily translated, and it is not possible to come to a generalising conclusion as to the problem of 'translatability' of wordplay: different but equally profitable renderings of the same passages indicate that the notion of 'optimal translation' is highly subjective. If a general conclusion is possible, it is that wordplay in translation, as in the original, derives its humorous potential from its linguistic nature, and that it is not always possible to find corresponding Italian terms to wordplay in meaning. Wilde's wordplay is often seen as a mark of his Irish upbringing because, as Vivian Mercier has put it, «the Irish reputation for wit, in so far as it is deserved, is in the last analysis a reputation for playing with words»⁴². In Wilde's witticisms the element of verbal play is very important, and the close resemblance of the two key words *Ernest/Earnest* in the title increases the reader's pleasure in the witticisms scattered all over the play. Wilde is considered one of the best representatives of Anglo-Irish wit and *The Importance of Being Earnest* is rightly located in the Anglo-Irish tradition established by William Congreve, Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Oliver Goldsmith⁴³: Oscar Wilde's works preserve into modern times something of the playful attitude to language typical of Irish literature and culture.

Endnotes

¹ The edition of Lunari's translation here considered is the sixteenth reprint: *L'importanza di chiamarsi Ernesto*, BUR, Milano 2003. The first edition of the translation dates back to January 1990.

² The edition of Wilde's works here examined is the sixth reprint, edited by Masolino d'Amico: O. Wilde, *Opere*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano 1993. The first edition of the translation dates back to October 1979.

³ The edition of Wilde's works is: O. Wilde, *Il ventaglio di Lady Windermere, L'importanza di essere Fedele, Salomé*, Garzanti, Milano 2007. This is the sixth reprint and the first edition dates back to March 1993.

⁴ For instance: *Translation/History/Culture: A Sourcebook*, ed. by A. Lefevere, Routledge, London 1992.

⁵ See for instance P. Newmark, *A Textbook of Translation*, Prentice Hall, New York 1988, and A. Bantas, *Names, Nicknames, and Titles in Translation*, «Perspectives: Studies in Translatology», 2, 1994, pp. 79-87.

⁶ J. Kaplan, A. Bernays, *The Language of Names: What We Call Ourselves and Why It Matters*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1997, p. 172.

⁷ H. I-min, *Puns*, in S. Chan, D.E. Pollard (eds.), *An Encyclopaedia of Translation: Chinese-English, English-Chinese*, Chinese UP, Shatin 2001.

⁸ See L. Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, Routledge, London 1994, p. 13.

⁹ O. Jespersen, *Language; Its Nature, Development and Origin*, Ghose Press, Salt Lake City 2008, p. 300.

¹⁰ C. Kingsley, *Yeast*, quoted in W.E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, Yale UP, New Haven 1968, p. 220.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 222.

¹² G. Almansi, introduction to O. Wilde, *Il ventaglio di Lady Windermere, L'importanza di essere Fedele, Salomé* ..., cit., p. xix.

¹³ The quotation is taken from *The Gribby Episode*, a part that appears in the draft of the play written in 1894 but not in the final version, and it is quoted in J. Bristow (ed.), *The Importance of Being Earnest and Related Writings*, Routledge, London 1992, p. 91.

¹⁴ B. Belford, *Oscar Wilde: A Certain Genius*, Bloomsbury, London 2001, p. 51.

¹⁵ W.E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind ...*, cit., p. 221.

¹⁶ A. Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*, Longman, New York 1998, p. 203.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the comic impact of the dialogue between Lady Bracknell and Jack see S. Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1996, pp. 179-181.

¹⁸ R.W. Church, *The Oxford Movement*, quoted in Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind ...*, cit., p. 231.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 225.

²⁰ V. Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition: The Keybook of Irish Literary Criticism*, Souvenir Press Ltd, London 1995, p. 78.

²¹ Review of *An Ideal Husband* signed 'G.B.S.' in the «Saturday Review» (12 January 1895), quoted in K.E. Beckson (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge, London 1970, p. 199.

²² V. Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition ...*, cit., p. 79.

²³ For a detailed discussion of the influence of Wilde on Shaw see D.J. Gordon, *Shavian Comedy and the Shadow of Wilde*, in C.D. Inness (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to George Bernard Shaw*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 1998.

²⁴ O. Wilde, *L'importanza di chiamarsi Ernesto ...*, cit., p. 150. From now on the quotations from the text will be followed by the number of page in brackets.

²⁵ See J. Kaplan, A. Bernays, *The Language of Names ...*, cit., p. 172, where the pair *Ernest/Earnest* is defined as «heavily freighted» with ironic motivations.

²⁶ For neologisms in puns see S. Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, Walter de Gruyter, New York 1994, p. 127 ff.

²⁷ R. Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*, Stanford UP, Stanford 1986, p. 111.

²⁸ Lunari writes: «George Bernard Shaw stava conducendo la sua battaglia per un teatro di tesi e di idee ed è ben comprensibile la sua riluttanza ad accettare quel disimpegno così totale e rigoroso che abbiamo visto essere caratteristica portante dell'*Importanza di chiamarsi Ernesto*» (17).

²⁹ R. Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace ...*, cit., p. 11.

³⁰ Ivi, p. 117.

³¹ B. Belford, *Oscar Wilde: A Certain Genius ...*, cit., p. 188.

³² Ivi, p. 189.

³³ O. Wilde, *Il ventaglio di Lady Windermere ...*, cit., p. xix.

³⁴ See L. Dunkling, W. Gosling (eds.), *The Facts on File Dictionary of First Names*, Facts on File Publications, New York 1983, p. 86.

³⁵ O. Wilde, *Il ventaglio di Lady Windermere ...*, cit., p. 152.

³⁶ O. Wilde, *L'importanza di essere Probo*, in *Opere ...*, cit., p. 532.

³⁷ A. Bantas, C. Manea, *Proper Names and Nicknames: Challenges for Translators and Lexicographers*, «Revue Roumaine de Linguistique», 35, 3, 1990, p. 189.

³⁸ See O. Wilde, *L'importanza di essere onesto*, trad. it. M. d'Amico, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Cles 1985, p. 34.

³⁹ O. Wilde, *Il ventaglio di Lady Windermere ...*, cit., p. xiii.

⁴⁰ The list of all the jokes on the theme of marriage would be too long to be fully presented here. Consider for instance that Lane, Algernon's servant, says referring to his marriage: «That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person» (Act I, 36) and when Algernon replies «I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane», Lane, in turn, says: «No sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself» (ivi).

Later on in the play, Lady Bracknell will demonstrate the superficiality of marriages declaring: «To speak frankly, I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable» (170).

⁴¹ S. Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1996; R. Gagnier (ed.), *Critical Essays on Oscar Wilde*, G.K. Hall, New York 1991; R. Gagnier, *Idylls of the marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*, Stanford UP, Stanford 1986; G. Woodcock, *The Paradox of Oscar Wilde*, Macmillan, New York 1950, and many others.

⁴² V. Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition ...*, cit., p. 79.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

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