



## Humor and Translation

**Mark Herman**

hermanapter@cmsinter.net

### I Am the Very Model

**In 1880**, *The Pirates of Penzance* by Gilbert and Sullivan had its premiere, and one song from that operetta, “I am the very model of a modern Major-General,” has ever since been considered the quintessential Gilbert and Sullivan patter song, perhaps the quintessential model for all English patter songs. As anyone who has heard it knows, the song, while seemingly proclaiming the accomplishments of the singer, in fact

comically demonstrates his absolute incompetence at his job.

Over the years, many songwriters have written imitations. Some satirized the original song, and some, such as Tom Lehrer’s “The Elements,” demonstrated the amazing ability of their composers to fit a long list into the required rhyme scheme and stress pattern. But most were used to satirize other occupations, and it was inevitable that one would eventu-

ally be written about the profession of translation. Not to worry, though, the lyric in question, written and submitted by Irina Zubanova and Victor Lanchikov, is not about working translators any more than the original is about working soldiers. In true Gilbert and Sullivan fashion, it pronounces every (i.e., e-ve-ry) possible syllable, unnecessarily uses capital letters, and occasionally stresses an unimportant word:

I am the very model of a modern Translatologist,  
Well versed in every theory, both Linguist and Philologist.  
Of Nida, Catford, and Saussure I can concoct a potpourri,  
And I relax reciting the twelve axioms of Savory.

I’ve been in every conference from Atabaska to Madrid,  
My dissertation’s title takes a doctoral degree to read.  
Sound Untranslatability is my domain of preference,  
And I like few things better than an exophoric reference.

Inquiring of my work I view as an act of iniquity,  
In fact, translating texts is something way below my dignity.  
But in the realm of theory, both Linguist and Philologist,  
I am the very model of a modern Translatologist.

I’m sure you do not hold it true that I could burn in effigy  
All folks who’re unaware of Firth and foreignizing strategy;  
But it’s the stuff that on my list rates high because, for Heaven’s sake,  
Translating Dostoyevsky and Balzac does not a tenure make.

To waste my time on gewgaws of this sort I have no hankering -  
What do translation studies have to do with that translation thing?  
I’d rather polish to perfection, not to lag behind the time,  
My novel gender-deconstructing content-focused paradigm.

And don’t forget I did not miss the cognitive linguistic boat;  
I also know precisely what Ortega and Venuti wrote.  
So in the realm of theory, both Linguist and Philologist,  
I am the very model of a modern Translatologist.

*ata*

---

*Herman is a librettist and translator. Submit items for future columns via e-mail to hermanapter@cmsinter.net or via snail mail to Mark Herman, 1409 E Gaylord Street, Mt. Pleasant, MI 48858-3626. Discussions of the translation of humor and examples thereof are preferred, but humorous anecdotes about translators, translations, and mistranslations are also welcome. Include copyright information and permission if relevant.*