

# The importance of re-naming Ernest?

## Italian translations of Oscar Wilde\*

Adrian Pablé

Université de Neuchâtel (Switzerland)

The present descriptive study considers different translation strategies adopted by Italian translators of Oscar Wilde's *The importance of being Earnest* (1895). The focus of attention is on the phenomenon of the pun involving the speaking name *Ernest*, whose homophony with *earnest* is exploited in the play's title. Italian translators of *The importance* have thus been faced with the bind of having to decide on whether to render the said wordplay, even though only unsatisfactorily, by replacing the transparent name *Ernest* with a target language 'equivalent', or safeguard the cultural-onomastic 'reality' of the play, i.e. leave the Victorian given name *Ernest* in its source text form. It turns out that the latter policy is generally compensated for — as part of the metatextual/metalinguistic discourse — within prefaces, glosses and, more significantly, via intratextual additions. The translators opting for replacing *Ernest* with an Italian counterpart, in turn, have, as a direct consequence of their basic choice, been able to enrich their versions of *The importance* with unprecedented puns, which underlines the 'creative' dimension involved in producing literary translations. Besides the two core translation policies described above, the translators have also opted for introducing the nativized form *Ernesto*, thus showing little concern with the questions of 'cultural purity' or punning, respectively. The present paper suggests that translators make very different demands on themselves and have very different ideas of what constitutes the 'optimal' strategy with regard to punning and the representation of the source cultural world.

**Keywords:** Italian translations, Oscar Wilde, Descriptive Translation Studies, adequacy vs. acceptability, onomastic wordplay, title translation, intertextuality

### 1. Scope and aim

Oscar Wilde's hilarious comedy *The importance of being Earnest* (1895), which Kaplan and Bernays (1997: 172) have aptly called "a play about names

and a play on names”, constitutes a rewarding object of enquiry for the translation scholar interested in onomastics.<sup>1</sup> I subscribe to the historical-descriptive paradigm (Toury 1985 and 1995) in the present study, for which a selected corpus of 20th-century Italian translations of *The importance* has been subject to scrutiny. As the translations into Italian of Wilde’s renowned play are conspicuous for their diversity, a comparative study offers a remarkable insight into the various working processes and the different (overall) policies adopted by the translators. By way of the latter’s metadiscourse and my own inferences I thus hope to give account respectively of the motivations underlying each target text and of how variable strategies may influence the reception of a translation with respect to the original. I have also seen fit to include theoretical considerations in order to highlight the unexhausted translatability potential when it comes to translating *The importance* into Italian. I have confined my descriptive analysis to three textual norm-governed elements, i.e. personal names, wordplay and title translation, as they function in the target texts under examination, both independently and in relation to the original: in fact, as I will underline in my discussion of the source text, “plot, theme, comedy, and motivation all owe their pulse to one heavily freighted homonym, earnest/Ernest” (Kaplan and Bernays 1997: 172); it is upon this “heavily freighted” homophonous pair that Oscar Wilde’s onomastic wordplay and the play’s very title entirely depend. As will become clear, the present study supports earlier empirical work in Descriptive Translation Studies, according to which the overall orientation of a translation is set within the target culture. I have shunned an evaluative approach and as a consequence refrained from labeling the translations as ‘good’, ‘bad’, or the like. Along the same line goes my rejection of a “philologically inspired concern for a maximally accurate image of the original text” (Manini 1996: 173), which, in the eyes of many a critic, is supposed to guide the ‘serious’ literary translator through his/her decisions. In fact, such a notion, reasonable as it may sound *in abstracto*, lends itself to unfair criticism of translations for not being what one expects them to be.

## 2. *Target-orientedness versus source-orientedness*

Scholars investigating proper names in literary translations have tended to adopt a *prescriptive* stance towards the subject (e.g. Newmark 1981, 1988; Bantas and Manea 1990; Bantas 1994), in so far as they have been concerned with how a particular literary name (or name type) should be, or should have been,

rendered/glossed in a target text, for the author's sake. In this kind of *source-oriented* approach translators are expected to 'do full justice' to the original, the latter being traditionally regarded as 'superior' with respect to its translations (Hermans 1985a: 8). *Prescriptivism* is common among translation critics and, it is fair to say, unavoidable for pedagogical purposes, for instance in translator training, which requires a normative attitude. It is not surprising, therefore, to detect *prescriptivism* in manuals of literary translation and introductory works, notably also in those sections which deal specifically with the issue of proper names and 'proper' naming. The following quotations are meant to illustrate various attempts by scholars and critics at setting up guidelines for this particular translational problem. The principle invoked in dealing with meaningful literary names is generally founded on the notion of *equivalence*, be it *of meaning* or *of effect* (italics added):

Wenn Namen etwas bedeuten, sollen sie dem Leser der Uebersetzung dasselbe bedeuten wie dem Leser des Originals. (Güttinger 1963: 79)

Bei Namen, die keine Bedeutung haben, ist *nur* die Umschrift möglich, d.h. die Beibehaltung des Namens in der fremden Fassung. (Levý 1969: 88–89)

Whenever a proper name is not known in its context it *has to be searched* ... if target language readers are unlikely to be familiar with it, it *has to be glossed*, inside or outside the translation. (Newmark 1998: 89–90)

Whenever the translator can discern the author's intention [behind a name], the translator's *unwritten code* ought to determine him to transpose them [the intentions] into the target language. (Bantas and Manea 1990: 189)

To summarise, if we are pledged to give the reader of translations what the author intended for the readers of the original, translators *have to find* — even hunt — these intentions [behind names], discern them, make sure we have fully grasped or understood them and then strive to render them. (Bantas 1994: 82)

Translation scholars dedicated to *descriptivism*, on the other hand, prefer to focus their attention primarily on the target texts, which they consider to be "facts of the target culture" (Toury 1995: 29); hence, elements below the text rank, such as proper names, are equally approached by them from an entirely non-prescriptive angle (e.g. Manini 1996; Crisafulli 2001). Thus, Toury (1995: 21) suggests that "target texts [should first be] take[n] up ...] from the intrinsic point of view of the target culture, without reference to their corresponding source texts, or rather, irrespective of the very question of the existence of those [original] texts". Scholars subscribing to *descriptivism* profess a *target-oriented*

approach, which is diametrically opposed to the kind of *source-orientedness* outlined above: the former, in fact, “consists ... in contextualising the target text with a view to establishing the situation of the receiving [i.e. target] tradition and the historically determined [target] norms affecting the translator’s choice” (Crisafulli 2001: 2). The concept underlying *target-orientedness* is *acceptability*: the translation scholar wants to find out whether and to what extent a translator has produced an *acceptable translation*, i.e. a work oriented towards the textual/translational norms prevailing in the receptor culture and congenial to the expectations of the prospective readership. Within a *descriptive* paradigm one is thus concerned primarily with how texts have been (rather than *should* have been) translated, or in other words “with translation as an empirical phenomenon” (Crisafulli 2001: 2). This is not to say that a *source-oriented* formulation of a question should be dismissed as ‘non-scientific’ on a general scale: in fact, along with the analysis of *actual translations* it may indeed make sense to explore *potential translatability*, and therefore to speculate on what *could* possibly have constituted alternative translational solutions.<sup>2</sup> What may be regarded as an ‘optimal’ translation varies among translators and scholars, and is determined by idiosyncratic as well as historical and cultural factors, i.e. it depends on a translator’s or a scholar’s concept of *adequacy*, irrespective of whether he/she is primarily *source-* or *target-oriented*. Any source text, in fact, can be conceived of as maximally reproducible in terms of its functional features, independently of target cultural norms.<sup>3</sup> The term *adequate translation* refers to a mental construct formulated in the target language, which represents such an ‘optimal’ interpretation of the source text (to be actualized or not). The *target-oriented* scholar interested in identifying so-called ‘deviations’ from the source text will have to approach the actual translation(s) from the point of view of *adequacy*, relying on a theoretical, i.e. *source-oriented*, element. As a matter of fact, *acceptability* and *adequacy* need not be regarded as mutually exclusive norms, but rather as forming two extremes on a continuum: the translation strategy adopted by a translator may aim at satisfying *acceptability* on one level and *adequacy* on another, which manifests itself to the reader as “inconsistent behaviour” (Manini 1996: 171), or respectively both norms at a time, such as when a translator leaves meaningful names unaltered, because he/she is expected to do so but chooses to comment on their ‘meanings’ as part of his/her metatextual discourse.

### 3. Source text considerations

#### 3.1 *Earnestness* in Victorian England

Wilde's original audience was living in an age of moral/intellectual *earnestness*; ever since the 1830s, adjectives like *serious*, *severe*, *stern*, *strict*, *austere*, *grave* and, of course, *earnest* had been on everyone's lips. Originally arisen within religious circles, this movement had first addressed the lower classes only, but eventually captivated the middle and upper classes, the religiously minded and the philanthropists alike, who adopted the philosophy of *earnestness* as their new creed: its seminal message consisted in emphasizing the importance of having genuine beliefs about the most fundamental questions of life and putting those beliefs into practice according to one's talents and one's social position. Critical minds had been alert throughout the century in pointing out that the upper and middle classes, driven exclusively by social ambitions and pleasure-seeking, had become altogether impervious to the lower classes and their deplorable economic situation. Although often Christians by profession, the former were only so *nominally*, i.e. their religion was pleasant and easy, their sense of responsibility, and in fact their conscience, slumbering. Members of a thoroughly *earnest* society thus needed to become hard-working, dutiful, unselfish, heedless of any conventions and constantly striving towards self-improvement; in short, a society inspired by a vision — an ideal — worth living for; a sincere and truth-loving society, in which the false and the sinful were stamped as such. Those were indeed serious times demanding serious measures: frivolity and idleness needed to be replaced by a fervent spirit of enterprise, wasting away one's intellect by playing with words or ideas was regarded as shameful.<sup>4</sup>

#### 3.2 *Earnestness* satirized within the play

*The importance of being earnest* was performed before "an audience which included many members of the great and the good, former cabinet ministers and privy councillors as well as actors, writers, academics, and enthusiasts" (Raby 1995: 67), who had all in some way been exposed to the pervasive spirit of *earnestness*; the pun on *earnest*–*Ernest* must have had an impact on Victorians that we as a modern audience/readership cannot possibly comprehend in its fullness. In fact, Wilde's play was fraught with topical references and allusions to the intellectual and moral concept of *earnestness*, the latter being ridiculed from different angles and by means of different characters. The very title of

the play, accompanied by the subtitle *A trivial comedy for serious people*, spoke for itself, as genuinely *serious* people would not have allowed themselves to indulge in *trivial* comedies. The most perversely *earnest* character within the play is Lady Bracknell, whom Jack Worthing calls a “Gorgon” and a “monster” (Act I). In Augusta Bracknell’s statements one can indeed find terms typical of someone who is *in earnest*, although they recur in considerably different contexts (*italics added*):

LADY BRACKNELL I do not in any way approve of the modern *sympathy* with invalids. I consider it morbid. (Act I)

LADY BRACKNELL Health is the primary *duty* of life. (Act I)

LADY BRACKNELL I am glad to hear [you smoke]... There are far too many *idle* men in London as it is. (Act I)

LADY BRACKNELL I was not aware that Mr. Bunbury was interested in *social legislation*. If so, he is well punished for his morbidity. (Act I)<sup>5</sup>

Naturally — not paradoxically — Lady Bracknell has “some particular reason for disliking the name [Ernest]” (Act III): after all, she *earnestly* disapproves of the ‘culture of altruism’, whose major exponent in the play is the late Mr. Thomas Cardew, “an old gentleman of a very charitable and kindly disposition” (Act I).

*Seriousness* is a frequently evoked theme in the play: according to Algernon, “one has to be *serious* about something, if one wants to have any amusements in life” (Act II), but goes on to reproach Jack for being “serious about everything”, which in his opinion points to “an absolutely trivial nature” (Act II). Jack, in turn, says, referring to himself:

JACK When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a high moral tone on *all* subjects. It’s one’s duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or happiness ... I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest. (Act I)

Later in the play Jack’s protégée Cecily will come to the same conclusion regarding her guardian’s state of health:

CECILY Dear Uncle Jack is so very serious! Sometimes he is so serious that I think he cannot be quite well. (Act II),

only to be contradicted by her teacher Miss Prism:

MISS PRISM Your guardian enjoys the best of health, and his gravity of demeanour is especially to be commended in one so comparatively young as he is. I know none who has a higher sense of duty and responsibility. (Act II)

The question of the Christian name, however, is what keeps the four younger characters going. Thus Gwendolen, quite unlike her mother, is infatuated with one name only:

GWENDOLEN There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. It is a divine name. The only really safe name is Ernest. (Act I),

which will be echoed by Cecily at a later stage:

CECILY I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest. (Act II)

According to Dunkling and Gosling (1983: 86), *Ernest* used to be extremely fashionable in the latter quarter of the 19th century, which may explain why Gwendolen and Cecily are so keen on marrying a man with that name. In their world governed by appearances, *Ernest*, being nominally congenial to the *Zeitgeist*, is *the* name. To be called *Ernest* (or to be married to one) is indeed *safe* because it ‘saves’ one from being earnest, and at the same time guarantees the ‘safety’ of one’s social identity (the name is literally *an earnest!*). *Ernest*, in short, is a name that “looks everything” — behind which, however, a most secretive and most wicked nature may be hiding, as Cecily and Gwendolen imagine in their romantic reveries. On the other hand, the two ladies decidedly reject the names of *Algernon* and *Jack/John* respectively, because they “produce absolutely no vibrations” (Act I): in fact, the ‘changeling theme’ underlying Ernest’s (i.e. Jack’s) account of his origins “naturally stir[s] the deeper fibres of [Gwendolen’s] nature” (Act II).

That Jack adopts the name of *Ernest* when coming to London in order to escape the seriousness of the countryside is quite ironic, considering the purpose of his regular visits; when being asked what brings him up to town, Jack answers:

JACK Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere? (Act I)

It is equally ironic that by beguiling Gwendolen into thinking that his name is *Ernest* and Cecily that he has a younger brother respectively, Jack has always, though unwittingly, been telling the truth: he has been *E(a)rnest* all the time, he who confides to Algernon that “the truth isn’t quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice sweet refined girl” (Act I). Deception and reality thus merge into one and the same thing, so that being earnest is tantamount to not being earnest.

When Jack (now *Ernest* for good), on being reprimanded by Lady Bracknell for “displaying signs of triviality” (i.e. non-earnestness) in the very final scene, replies:

JACK On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I’ve now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest. (Act III),

he has actually understood the all-encompassing dominance of form: in fact, without a *proper* name, Gwendolen is not going to marry him, and without a *proper* lineage and address — *Victoria Station*, the *Brighton Line* is not considered to be one — there is no hope of becoming Lady Bracknell’s son-in-law. Faced with the ghastly news of being a man who “all his life ... has been speaking nothing but the truth” (a crime, as it turns out, not even a Miss Prism is guilty of), Ernest is promptly consoled by Gwendolen, who feels “that [he is] sure to change” (Act III). In fact, shortly before, the same Gwendolen declared:

GWENDOLEN In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing. (Act III),

a creed that her cousin Algernon fully embraces: what one says needs to be “perfectly phrased” (Act I). Likewise, Cecily, on being asked whether she gives any credence to Algernon’s (sincere?) explanation, denies, adding: “but that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer” (Act III). Along the same line one could say that the title of the play is equally ‘perfectly phrased’ and, more significantly, highly appropriate as a final statement in the mouth of Algernon’s very brother.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Target text considerations

##### 4.1 Oscar Wilde’s *Importance* in Italian

Most noticeable about the numerous Italian translations of *The importance of being earnest* produced so far is the variety of titles under which the play has been published: in fact, out of the 13 texts that I have been able to identify, I have counted 8 different titles.<sup>7</sup> The eight titles marked with an asterisk are the texts that constitute the corpus of translations used for the present study, which spans some 70 years (1922–1993):

\**L’importanza di far sul serio* (1922; translator: Irene Nori Giambastiani)  
\**L’importanza di chiamarsi Ernesto* (1946; translator: unknown)



- L'importanza di chiamarsi Ernesto* (1948; translator: C. M. Franzero)  
 \**L'importanza d'esser Franco* (1952; translator: Ugo Bottalla)  
*L'importanza di essere onesto* (1952; translator: unknown)  
*L'importanza di chiamarsi Ernesto* (1953; translator: Ida Omboni)  
 \**L'importanza di essere <<Earnest>>* (1964; translator: Evi Malagoli)  
 \**L'importanza di essere Severo* (1967; translator: Orsola Nemi)  
 \**L'importanza di essere probo* (1979; translator: Masolino d'Amico)  
 \**L'importanza di essere onesto* (1985; translator: Masolino d'Amico)  
 \**L'importanza di chiamarsi Ernesto* (1990; translator: Luigi Lunari)  
 \**L'importanza di essere Fedele* (1993; translator: Guido Almansi)  
*L'importanza di essere onesto* (1996; translator: Lucio Chiavarelli)<sup>8</sup>

## 4.2 Corpus-based analysis

Since the present descriptive study aims at a better understanding of the translation policy underlying the different Italian versions of *The importance*, I have paid particular attention to the translators' metatextual commentaries as they occur in prefaces, footnotes or introductory chapters. They all provide precious information for the *target-oriented* scholar, who tries to empathize with the translator and the double binds the latter was facing; the metatext is, moreover, "an obvious place to look for indications of [the translator's] poetics" (Crisafulli 2001: 15). Rather than discussing the translations from a chronological, and thus also from a historical perspective, I have preferred to rely on a thematic division, thereby distinguishing the translators unwilling to substitute an Italian name for *Ernest* from those who have done so.

### 4.2.1 Translators concerned with cultural homogeneity

I would like to take as my starting point Masolino d'Amico's preface to his translation *L'importanza di essere probo* (Wilde 1979), in which he formulated his insights into the difficulties that translating *The importance* into Italian comprises:

*The importance of being earnest* significa più o meno "L'importanza di essere onesto". *Earnest* che si pronuncia (ma non si scrive) come il nome proprio *Ernest* vale però "onesto" nel senso di "serio", "solido", "sincero" (senza sfumature, e con totale mancanza di umorismo), ed effettivamente richiama certe virtù vittoriane un po' stolide che Wilde amò prendere garbatamente in giro. Naturalmente, rendere l'allusione in italiano è impossibile. Si è tentato con "onesto", che nella nostra lingua è anche nome proprio di persona; ma a parte che questo nome è raro, e comunque suona incongruo se si mantengono i nomi

inglesi degli altri personaggi (sarebbe concepibile una rimozione dal contesto britannico della commedia, con i suoi giardini, i suoi tè delle cinque e le sue invalicabili barriere di classe?), la parola “onesto” non si presta all’ironia come l’*earnest* dell’originale. *Ernest* è poi in inglese un nome tutt’altro che poco diffuso, e lo stesso Wilde se ne serve in almeno un’altra occasione, sempre, probabilmente, con una punta di malizia: si chiama *Ernest* infatti l’interlocutore più filisteo — il Watson — del dialogo *Il critico come artista*. “L’importanza di essere franco”, soluzione adottata qualche volta, ha il merito di proporre un nome proprio comune, e un aggettivo denotante una qualità positiva. Ma — a parte che lo stesso gioco sarebbe stato possibile anche in inglese, dove *frank* esiste nelle due accezioni — la “franchezza” non ha niente a che fare con la *earnestness*, di cui le manca flagrantemente la componente ... conformista e un po’ filistea. “Probo” — che comunque non è *earnest* — può dare un’idea dei valori antiquati di cui Wilde vuole prendersi gioco, e pertanto l’ho usato, a titolo indicativo, nel titolo e nella battuta finale. Ma benché mi risulti l’esistenza di bravi cittadini a nome *Probo*, generalmente nati verso la fine del secolo scorso, non ho insistito nello scherzo anche nel testo, dove pertanto il fidanzato inesistente delle due fanciulle conserva il suo nome originario e certamente immortale. (N.d.T.) (1979: 532)

It is evident that d’Amico was, at some stage during the working process, looking for possible target onomastic variants (he mentions three of them, *Onesto*, *Probo*, *Franco*), which indicates that to his mind an ‘optimal’ reconstruction of the source text relies on the replacement of *Ernest* by a target given name. At the same time, however, d’Amico feels that any Italian ‘quality’ name he has been able to think of is but a poor equivalent of *E(a)rnest* in its function as an adjective: thus he objects to the use of *Franco*, thereby, perhaps, alluding to Bottalli’s text (Wilde 1952); he goes on to argue that Wilde did not use the English name *Frank* either, which underlines d’Amico’s determination not to exchange just any Italian ‘virtue’ name for *Ernest*. D’Amico adduces another reason for importing the latter name into his text, i.e. its frequency of usage with respect to such names as *Onesto* and *Probo*: as he rightly points out, they are extremely rare in Italy these days — in fact, they were recurrent in the 19th century (La Stella 1993: 276/300) — while *Ernest*, he goes on to claim, still has a certain frequency in the English-speaking world; d’Amico forgets to mention, however, that *Ernest* is no longer a prestige name, in fact quite the contrary is the case.<sup>9</sup>

As a third — and much more significant — point d’Amico introduces the concept of *onomastic intertextuality*, namely the notion that characters, their names included, may be ‘borrowed’, i.e. they can appear in different texts of fiction by one or several authors.<sup>10</sup> Oscar Wilde was such a writer, who bestowed

the name of *Ernest* on at least three occasions, punning on it, as d'Amico fails to mention, in *A woman of no importance* (1893); in the latter play Mrs. Allonby confides to her friends that she is terribly disappointed with her husband Ernest, the reason for this being that Mr. Allonby swore to her, while proposing, that he had never loved anybody before; only afterwards was she to find out that what Ernest had told her was absolutely true. The 'Ernest-not earnest' principle had thus already been exploited by Wilde — if only for a brief episode — before he would compose *The importance of being earnest*: Ernest Allonby's transgression consists in having been *earnest* instead of merely pretending to be so. In view of that, it looks as if Wilde did not envisage his characters called *Ernest* as individuals in the first place, but rather as the embodiment of an 'idea': d'Amico gives no explicit reason for mentioning Wilde's recourse to the name on a previous occasion and how that relates to his choice not to alter the protagonist's given name in his translation of *The importance*. D'Amico may be raising the issue because in neither of his translations, i.e. *The importance* and *The critic as artist* (1890), published within his collection *Opere* (1979), have the two characters called *Ernest* been rechristened.

Thus, by adopting a consistent policy of zero translation in dealing with the charactonyms, both transparent and conventional, d'Amico circumvents the portraying of Wilde's 19th-century England as a hybrid world inhabited by Victorian dandies bearing an Italian given name.<sup>11</sup> Similar patterns of behaviour and motivations have surfaced in Luca Manini's study on Italian translations of English drama: as early as the 1950s, in fact, Italian translators of Restoration comedies and British eighteenth-century plays no longer replaced the numerous transparent names by Italian ones, as the former were believed to convey a genuine sense of local colour (1996: 168–169). As we will proceed, however, it will become clear that meaningful names in comedies with a 'strong British flavour' have in fact been shifted to the target culture, i.e. Italian, in recent times, under particular circumstances (cf. Wilde 1952; 1967; 1993).<sup>12</sup>

In the preface to Masolino d'Amico's *L'importanza di essere onesto* (Wilde 1985), a slightly modified text with respect to his first translation, the translator confirms his policy of leaving all given names, *Ernest* included, in their original form. This time, however, d'Amico decides to make some slight adjustments, as a direct consequence of the very avoidance policy he clings to. What is more, he introduces a target linguistic aspect unmentioned in the foreword to his first translation, without, however, commenting any further on it:

*The importance of being earnest* significa più o meno "L'importanza di essere onesto" (o "onesti") ... "Probo" è forse un aggettivo italiano che può rendere

l'idea delle associazioni legate a *earnest*. Nella mia traduzione ho comunque lasciato il nome originale di Ernest, limitandomi ad aggiungere qualche parola per giustificare l'attrazione che Gwendolen e Cecily ne derivano. (1985: 34)

D'Amico's decision to add "a few words" ('aggiungere qualche parola') is significant, for it brings about a shift towards *adequacy*, but at the same time constitutes a move away from it. The textual additions clearly aim at compensating for the onomastic wordplay that the foreignizing translation tends to eliminate: in fact, any translator has to assume that *Ernest* is a 'meaningless' name for the target reader, regardless of whether he/she has produced an annotated translation or not. Thus it is not plausible why Ernest should be a 'thrilling' name, whereas *John* and *Algernon* are not; for this very reason d'Amico exploits assonance, where Wilde originally relied on homophony. In the Italian text, Gwendolen confesses to Jack, whom she believes to be called *Ernest*:

GWENDOLEN Il mio ideale è sempre stato di amare qualcuno che si chiamasse Ernest. In questo nome c'è qualcosa che ispira una fiducia totale. *Mi fa pensare all'onestà*. (Wilde 1985: 55)

Later on, Cecily tells Algernon, whom she equally believes to be named *Ernest*, the same, namely:

GWENDOLEN In questo nome c'è qualcosa che sembra ispirare una totale fiducia. *Non so, forse l'assonanza con onesto*. (ibid.: 100)<sup>13</sup>

That d'Amico reached back to an already existing title, in spite of his dismissing *onesto* as semantically inadequate in the notes to his first translation (Wilde 1979), has to do with his dissatisfaction with how he had originally rendered the two aforementioned passages. As it turns out, d'Amico has not necessarily produced a more *adequate translation*, but has attained *adequacy* on one level (the play on *Ernest(o)*–*onesto*) and forsaken it on another (*probo* is still his favourite substitute for *earnest*).

As far as the first point is concerned, d'Amico is quite right to suggest that Wilde's title may also be rendered as *L'importanza di essere onesti*, which is the more idiomatic alternative, for adjectival predicates are naturally pluralized in Italian if the proposition is to have a general validity. In fact, *The importance of being earnest* as a title ultimately stands for a maxim embraced by Wilde's Victorian upper classes in general; its formulation, however, originates in the mouth of one of its representatives, Mr. Jack Worthing. The reason why d'Amico did not eventually opt for *onesti* but retained *onesto* must be related to the fact that on the one hand Jack is alluding to his own personal destiny when announcing at the very end of the play that he has realized "la vitale Importanza di Essere

Onesto”, and on the other hand to d’Amico’s (inconsistent) fidelity towards the source text, in which Jack’s final statement and the title of the play are identical. By putting into Ernest’s mouth the very phrase that gives the play its title, in fact, beginning and ending merge into one, as if to deny any advancement in plot and character development.<sup>14</sup>

In his *note al testo e alla traduzione*, Luigi Lunari, the translator of *L’importanza di chiamarsi Ernesto* (Wilde 1990), justifies his decision not to change *Ernest* within the text on similar grounds: like d’Amico, in fact, he explicitly objects to a cultural mismatch in the name repertory, but does not seem to mind nativizing the name *Ernest* in the very final scene. And like d’Amico before him, Lunari is not particularly keen on marking the *Englishness* of the play in any additional ways, e.g. by consistently importing all source address forms into the target text. More significantly, however, Lunari’s *notes* introduce two aspects that have not been given any consideration in either of d’Amico’s forewords:

Il nome che suona come “Earnest” è “Ernest”, e il gioco di parole — almeno sulla carta — è anche facilitato in inglese dall’uso delle maiuscole nei titoli. La traduzione più efficace sarebbe pertanto *L’Importanza di Essere Franco* (ma appunto, già diverso sarebbe scrivere *L’importanza di essere franco* o *L’importanza di essere Franco*). Tuttavia, nell’uso corrente di chiamare i personaggi con il loro nome inglese, non si può parlare di Algernon, Gwendolen e “Franco”, né si può evitare che usando il nome *Frank* il gioco di parole venga del tutto perduto. A questo punto, mi è sembrato più efficace mantenere il titolo nella sua formulazione più nota ... rinunciando certamente a un piccolo gioco, ma — forse — lusingando la commedia nel suo fondamentale aspetto di nonsense. Il gioco è parzialmente recuperato alla fine, nell’ultima battuta, dove “the Importance of Being Earnest” è tradotto con “l’Importanza di Essere un Serio Ernesto”. (1990: 24–25)

Rendering the title *The importance of being earnest* into Italian meets with a particular translational problem, which has to do with a constraint — not identified by Delabastita (1994: 229) — on wordplay translation, namely spelling conventions, which pertain to the domain of textual norms: the latter might in fact differ in source and target culture. Thus, in Italian only proper names — however not adjectives — are spelt with capital letters within titles (it may be for this reason that in some texts the play’s title is capitalized entirely on the front page and/or in the heading, cf. Wilde 1952; Wilde 1964; Wilde 1967). Another significant point raised by Lunari concerns the status of a title in the target culture: the latter seems to have opted for *L’importanza di chiamarsi Ernesto*, because the play is traditionally referred to as such in Italian and known in this form by many Italians who have seen it on stage or screen.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Lunari's reference to a "little pun" ('un piccolo gioco') does certainly merit our attention: to the best of my knowledge, he is the only translator ever to have considered the non-translation of *Ernest* as a 'gain' rather than the lesser of two 'evils': in fact, Lunari maintains that, by doing so, he has been able to "flatter the comedy in its fundamental aspect of nonsense" ('lusingando la commedia nel suo fondamentale aspetto di nonsense'). 'Nonsense' it is indeed, when Algernon, who has just been informed by Ernest that the latter's real name is Jack, tells his friend:

ALGERNON Io ti ho sempre presentato a tutti come Ernest ... Tu sei la persona dall'aspetto *più rispettabilmente e onestamente Ernest* che io abbia mai visto in vita mia. (1990: 41)

In the original, Algernon's reply is, besides nonsensical, 'perfectly phrased':

ALGERNON I have introduced you to everyone as Ernest... You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most *earnest-looking* person I ever saw in my life. (Act I)

That Jack reproaches Algernon for "never talk[ing] anything but nonsense" (Act I), does not invalidate Lunari's position; when reading the latter's introduction (1990: 5–23), on the other hand, it becomes evident that Lunari is quite aware of the fact that Algernon and his elder brother Ernest (i.e. Jack) excel in a formally elaborate type of nonsense: as the translator writes, "l'aforisma stesso ... è quintessenziale, puro accostamento di parole e di concetti, che non ha altro scopo che *l'eleganza della propria formulazione*. Il dubbio di un "significato" è dissolto da Algernon stesso ... L'importanza è questa: formulare *in modo impeccabile* — al di fuori di ogni criterio di verità e di consistenza" (ibid.: 14–15). When stating this, Lunari has one specific passage in mind, namely when Algernon announces:

ALGERNON All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his. (Act I)

When Jack asks him whether he believes this to be clever, Algy replies:

ALGERNON It's *perfectly* phrased and *quite* as true as *any* observation in civilized life should be. (Act I).

Oddly enough, however, in Lunari's text the focus is on *what* Algernon has said rather than on *how* he has said it:

ALGERNON È *molto ben detto!* Ed *assolutamente* vero, come dovrebbe esserlo *ogni* osservazione nel mondo civile. (1990: 57)

Perhaps by manipulating this particular passage, the translator has tried to qualify Algernon's unidiomatic remark, earlier on, about his friend's name: as it were, the young dandy contents himself with producing a 'very well phrased' rather than a 'perfectly phrased' aphorism. The discrepancy between Lunari's *source-oriented* introductory chapter and his stylistically questionable rendering ("rispettabilmente ed onestamente Ernest") is a direct consequence of his attempt at reproducing micro-textual *adequacy* within the confines of *acceptability* (i.e. the refusal to re-name *Ernest* as well as the choice of the target title). Lunari's desire to capture something of the original wit conveyed through punning is evident when considering how he renders the very last passage. In the original, the humorous effect of Lady Bracknell's admonition and Jack's counter relies on the opposition *trivial-earnest*, realized on the phonetic level (which justifies Jack's "on the contrary"), while on the level of content the latter merely alludes to his regained Christian name. For him it is indeed essential to be called *Ernest* in order to be liked by Gwendolen as well as to give proof of his upper class lineage. Lunari (1990: 115) translates the passage as follows:

LADY BRACKNELL Nipote mio, mi sembra che tu stia dando segni eccessivi di leggerezza.

JACK Al contrario, zia Augusta, mi sono reso conto ora, per la prima volta in vita mia, dell'essenziale Importanza di Essere un Serio Ernesto.<sup>16</sup>

The recourse to an attribute enabled Luigi Lunari to reproduce the source text dichotomy (leggero-serio): Jack's "un serio Ernesto" looks as if modelled on Algernon's (his brother's!) previous "un serio bunburista" (1990: 92), intended by the latter as someone who is serious about *bunburying*, i.e. changing identity to escape the boredom of life. Uttered by Jack, who, in his brother's words, is "one of the most advanced Bunburyists" (Act I), Lunari's rendering of the final passage could be interpreted as evidence that Jack, faced with imminent marriage, has come to realize the vital importance of taking on Algernon's creed, namely that "a man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it" (Act I). In fact, when faced with the possibility of being Miss Prism's illegitimate son, Jack reassures the spinster that he is determined to forgive her:

JACK Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? (Act III)

On the other hand, it is not plausible why Ernest should talk about himself as *Ernesto* on a single occasion (except one evokes the concept of 'nonsense', of course). Evidently, Lunari's *Ernest* cannot be serious about wishing to be



“un serio Ernesto”, i.e. he is simply being ironic, or else he indeed is as (deplorably) *earnest* as his namesake in *A woman of no importance*.

#### 4.2.2 Cultural homogeneity and onomastic wordplay

In Evi Malagoli's *L'importanza di essere Earnest* (Wilde 1964), Jack Worthing keeps his 'false' English name. Malagoli comments on the latter in a note at the bottom of the title page:

(1) L'aggettivo *earnest*, da cui prende il titolo la commedia, significa: serio, e la pronuncia di esso è eguale alla pronuncia del nome proprio Ernest (Ernesto). L'Autore gioca, nel corso della commedia, su questa identità di pronuncia delle due parole, trascorrendo dall'un significato all'altro. (1964: 325)

It is not possible to infer on the basis of Malagoli's purely *source-oriented* remarks whether she ever seriously considered any other name than *Ernest* for her text, i.e. either an Italian speaking name or the nativized form *Ernesto*. Her decision to leave *Ernest* unaltered cannot have been motivated in the first place by the same policy underlying d'Amico's and Lunari's translations, namely that, if ever possible, all of the play's characters should preserve their nationality. Otherwise how is one to account for the fact that Malagoli nativized Doctor Chasuble's Christian name as *Federico* in Act III (however no other)? A more likely explanation is that Malagoli wished to retain the original wordplay on *Ernest*, which, in turn, required the employment of the English adjective; notably, by doing so, she has been able to safeguard Algernon's pun on his friend's name: when informed by Jack that his real name is another in the countryside, Algernon objects:

ALGERNON Mai conosciuto nessuno in vita mia che sembri più *earnest* di te. (Wilde 1964: 325)

The translator comments on her rendering in a footnote:

Qui l'Autore usa l'aggettivo *earnest* (serio), e, come si è avvertito nella nota iniziale, gioca sull'identità di pronuncia col nome proprio del protagonista. (ibid.)

At the same time Malagoli's repeated usage of the English adjective *earnest* in an otherwise Italian text could be part of her scheme to mark the text *overtly* as a translation: substantial evidence of this provides Malagoli's zero-translation strategy in handling nouns of address (*Mr. Worthing*, *Miss Fairfax*) and, more significantly, some realia with exact counterparts in Italian:



ALGERNON Fammi il piacere di lasciar stare i *sandwiches* al cetriolo. (322)

LADY BRACKNELL È il mio ultimo ricevimento, e ci vuole qualcosa che stimoli la conversazione, specialmente ora alla fine della *season*. (332)

That the pun relies on English also emphasizes the idea of ‘pure sound’ as advocated on various occasions by the characters of the play. Jack’s final remark: “capisco ora per la prima volta in vita mia la vitale importanza di essere Earnest” (401) is left without a comment, that is the reader is expected to interpret the signifier *Earnest* as potentially appellative *and* onymic on the level of the signified.

#### 4.2.3 *Translators favouring onomastic wordplay*

Ugo Bottalla (Wilde 1952), Orsola Nemi (Wilde 1967) and Guido Almansi (Wilde 1993) have steered a different course by substituting Italian meaningful names (*Franco, Severo, Fedele*) for *Ernest*. The extent of cultural domestication varies in the three texts, depending on the overall policy pursued by the respective translator in the domain of names and titles of address: thus, while Almansi has copied the source culture titles and given names (*Mr Thomas Cardew, Miss Gwendolen Fairfax, Frederick Chasuble, Lady Bracknell*, etc.), Nemi has naturalized most titles and forenames: la *signorina Prism*, il *signor Worthing, Gwendalina, Cecilia, Tommaso Cardew, Federico Chasuble, Letizia Prism*; she has also re-named John as *Giovanni* (the latter, however, is only used by Algernon-Severo when addressing his ‘brother’, Jack-Severo, in Act II, while Cecilia calls him *zio Jack* and refers to him as *il signor John Worthing*). Bottalla, who has retained the English titles of civility, although by no means consistently (e.g. *il signor Worthing/Mr. Franco, la signorina Cardew/Miss Cardew*), equally Italianizes all forenames listed above (even Gerald Fairfax has become *Gerardo*) and, moreover, sticks to the name *Giovanni* for John Worthing throughout the play; notably he has also replaced the short form *Jack* with an Italian analogue, *Nino*, which is used by Giovanni himself as well as by Algernon and Cecilia (the latter calling him *zio Nino*).

In some way, the titles chosen by Bottalla, Nemi and Almansi, *L’importanza di essere Franco/Severo/Fedele*, surpass the original: in fact, the Italian Christian names and their respective adjectives are not merely homophonous (earnest–Ernest) but also homographous, thus blurring the distinction between signifier and signified altogether. By exchanging functional target names for the source name, the three translators have been able to render the passage in which Algernon puns on Jack’s first name in a way congenial to a dandy’s skill in handling language:

ALGERNON Ti ho presentato a tutti per Franco... A guardarti par proprio che tu sia Franco. Non ho mai conosciuto in vita mia uno più Franco di te. (Wilde 1952: 13)

ALGERNON Ti ho presentato a tutti come Severo... Hai tutta l'aria di essere Severo. Sei la persona dell'aspetto più severo che abbia mai veduto in vita mia. (Wilde 1967: 622)

ALGERNON Ti ho presentato a tutti come Fedele... Hai l'aspetto di uno che si chiama Fedele. Sei il più fedele ritratto di un Fedele che abbia mai visto in vita mia. (Wilde 1993: 86)

To the best of my knowledge, no other translator prior to and after Orsola Nemi seems to have considered the given name *Severo* as a viable substitute, which comes as a surprise considering that *severità* is indeed a central aspect of Victorian *earnestness*.<sup>17</sup> In Italian someone who adheres to norms and principles, especially in questions of education and upbringing, is said to be *severo*: Lady Bracknell, who in accordance with the Victorian ideal of austerity wants to be in full command over her daughter's destiny, and Jack Worthing in his function as guardian, are two specimens bound to pass as *severo*. Furthermore, *severità* also depicts a life-style (*una vita severa, le virtù severe*) — the renunciation of worldly pleasures — as well as artistic/intellectual seriousness (*un'inclinazione intellettuale severa*), the treating of serious arguments (cf. Lady Bracknell's musical choices and Jack's mania for German grammar). In Nemi's version Severo tells Algernon that the latter cannot possibly understand what it means to be placed into the position of a guardian: “non sei abbastanza *severo*” (1967: 623), thereby creating an unprecedented pun, while in the original Jack declares: “you are hardly *serious* enough” (Act I).<sup>18</sup> Later, on deciding to ‘kill’ his brother, Severo will again act as a punster (ibid.: 632): “Il mio povero fratello *Severo* trapassa *severamente* a Parigi, in conseguenza di un *grave* raffreddore”, whereas the original has “my poor brother *Ernest* is carried off *suddenly* in Paris, by a *severe* chill”. One key aspect of Victorian *earnestness* that the adjective *severo* does not cover (while *probo*, *onesto* and *franco* do) is ‘truthfulness’, which occupies a rather important position among the virtues parodied within the play (cf. below). On the other hand, as d'Amico argues in both of his prefaces, rendering the pun on *earnest*–*Ernest* as *franco*–*Franco*, as Bottalla did (Wilde 1952), is nevertheless unsatisfactory, since “nel concetto di ‘franchezza’ si perde la seriosità ... della *earnestness*” (Wilde 1985: 34).<sup>19</sup>

Like d'Amico and Lunari before, Guido Almansi has equally searched for an appropriate target name substitute; unlike them, however, Almansi did

come to terms with the fact that there is no 'perfect' equivalent of *earnest* available in Italian. In his introduction he notes:

*L'importanza di essere Fedele* (abbiamo adottato il nome e aggettivo "Fedele/fedele" dopo aver considerato tutte le altre possibilità: Franco, Onesto, Sincero, "Earnest" come in inglese, così via). (1993: xviii)

The fact that Almansi considered employing the source text given name along with Italian 'virtue' names may have been motivated by concerns of a cultural type (cf. d'Amico and Lunari) or by a desire to produce a text similar to the one by Malagoli; however, he eventually decided to reproduce the onomastic wordplay with target linguistic material. Why he opted for *Fedele* rather than, say, *Onesto* or *Franco* cannot be inferred on the basis of his rather scant explanations, but it is certainly true that the former name is responsible for generating humorous/ironic undertones within certain contexts of the play: thus, Cecily's confession, "c'è qualcosa in questo nome che ispira una *fiducia* assoluta" (Wilde 1993: 123), that is an 'absolute confidence', is justified, considering that Italian *fedele* also has the latter meaning. While in the original Gwendolen tells Cecily about Ernest's "strong upright nature" and that he is "the very soul of *truth* and honour", in Almansi's text she declares: "*Fedele* è di natura sincera e forte. In lui c'è lo spirito della *fedeltà* e dell'onore" (1993: 126). That both Jack and Algernon want to get christened a second time under the name of *Fedele* is ironic, since the latter is also a term used in a religious context for a 'Church member', which implies that someone who is *un fedele* has already been baptized (and in fact Jack turns out to have been christened *Fedele*). Another ironic element inherent in the name *Fedele* (meaning 'faithful') emerges when Gwendolen and Cecily are confronted with the possibility that Fedele has proposed to more than one girl.<sup>20</sup> When Jack, at the end of the play, declares: "mi rendo conto come sia vitale l'importanza di *chiamarsi* Fedele" (1993: 152), he actually declares that what counts is to be called *Faithful* rather than to be *faithful*. By opting for the verb *chiamarsi* instead of *essere* (cf. the title of Wilde 1990), Almansi has thus deliberately avoided the final wordplay. On the other hand, the juxtaposition of the play's title (*L'importanza di essere Fedele*) and Jack's conclusion (*L'importanza di chiamarsi Fedele*) reminds us that the signifier *Fedele* can be preceded by both *essere* and *chiamarsi* on the paradigmatic level. In a similar way English *Earnest* can be both *nomen proprium* and *nomen comunis*. Bottalla and Nemi, in turn, retain the ambiguous ending in full accordance with the original:

JACK Al contrario, zia Augusta, mi rendo conto per la prima volta della capitale importanza d'esser Franco. (1952: 63)

JACK Al contrario, zia Augusta, mi rendo conto ora per la prima volta dell'importanza di essere Severo. (1967: 666)

In Ugo Bottalla's non-annotated translation, humour and irony depend primarily on the aspect of *sincerity*; on numerous occasions, in fact, Wilde's characters insist on speaking "candidly" or "with perfect candour", while on others the same characters think it inappropriate to tell the truth. This, in turn, allows Bottalla to play with the concept of *franchezza*, even though he does so rather sparingly: Cecilia, for instance, on being flattered by Algernon-Franco, replies to him:

CECILIA Trovo che la vostra *franchezza* vi fa grande onore, *Franco*. (Wilde 1952: 39)

Franco Worthing, in his turn, accuses Algernon of being of a false nature:

FRANCO Mi rincresce molto, Lady Bracknell, di dovervi parlare con *franchezza* di vostro nipote ... Ho motivo di crederlo un bugiardo. (56)

In an earlier passage Giovanni-Franco refuses to gratify Algernon's curiosity as to the whereabouts of his country residence:

FRANCO Questo non ti riguarda, caro. Tu non ci sarai mai invitato. Ma posso dirti *francamente* che non si trova nello Shropshire. (14)

Giovanni's attempt at convincing Guendalina of *Nino's* superiority to *Franco*, when it comes to their respective status as names, would have been another occasion to introduce a pun, however Bottalla decided not to do so:

FRANCO Mia cara, per essere *sincero* ti dirò che, personalmente, non ci tengo a chiamarmi *Franco*. Non trovo che il nome mi stia bene. (19)

#### 4.2.4 *Cultural heterogeneity without onomastic wordplay*

Irene N. Giambastiani, the very first person to have translated *The importance* into Italian (Wilde 1922: 7) under the title of *L'importanza di far sul serio*, mixes source and target personal names and titles of civility to a degree comparable with that of later translators such as Ugo Bottalla (Wilde 1952) and Orsola Nemi (Wilde 1967): most significantly, Giambastiani nativizes *Ernest*, while *Ernesto's* 'country names' remain *John* and *Jack* respectively. A similar hybrid pattern emerges in the case of address terms: thus in Act I, *Guendalina* and *Jack* address one another as follows:

GUENDALINA Io sono sempre elegante, non è vero, *sig.* Worthing?

JACK È perfetta, *Miss* Fairfax. (Wilde 1922: 37)

Giambastiani's decision to Italianize *Ernest* is singular in our corpus, explainable perhaps in historical terms: in fact, as Manini's analysis of his data confirms (1996: 171–172), until the end of the first half of the 20th century Italian translators tended to exchange English forenames for their target counterparts, not only of fictional characters but also of the authors themselves, while given names for which no Italian equivalent was available would be left unchanged.<sup>21</sup> Giambastiani's course of action is nevertheless surprising, in so far as by settling on *Ernesto* (rather than on an Italian 'quality' name) she is unheedful of either policy that later Italian translators of *The importance* have deemed worth pursuing, namely safeguarding the name repertory as a reflex of the source cultural dimension or reproducing the linguistic humour conveyed through punning, respectively. It would be wrong, however, to classify Giambastiani's text, on the basis of her name and title renderings, as more 'domesticating' than the other Italian translations examined in my corpus: as it turns out, Giambastiani has left a considerable number of realia in their original shape, probably relying on the fact that most of the English and Italian lexemes in question are cognates and therefore understandable to a non English-speaking Italian readership; thus she has included the Italian equivalents only on rare occasions:

LADY BRACKNELL Il suo infelice padre, sono lieta di dirlo, crede che sia all'*University Extension Scheme* ad una lettura più lunga del solito sull' "Influenza di una rendita permanente sul pensiero". (111)

JACK Ho conservato gelosamente le *Court Guides* di quel tempo. Può esaminarle, Lady Bracknell. (114)

JACK Oh, un cento trentamila sterline in *Funds*. Non c'è altro! Arrivederla, Lady Bracknell. Ho tanto piacere di averla veduta. (115)

JACK Il suo nome deve essere sull'*Army Lists* di quel tempo, zia Augusta, non ti pare?

LADY BRACKNELL Il generale era un uomo tutto pace fuori della vita domestica; nondimeno il suo nome deve essere sulle *guide militari*. (130)

In view of her translation strategy, Giambastiani decides to omit Algernon's equivocal remark in Act I ("most earnest-looking person"), like Ricardo Baeza (Wilde 1960), who equally employed the Spanish form *Ernesto*, but unlike Masolino d'Amico (Wilde 1979 and 1985) and Luigi Lunari (Wilde 1990), who were to face an analogous dilemma (cf. 4.2.1.). However, Giambastiani does not conceal the existence of the humorous passage in Wilde's text from her readers: rather, she adds a footnote explaining how the wordplay works in English and why the pun ceases to be one in her translation, namely due to *earnest* being 'merely' an adjective and not a proper name:

(1) Nel testo inglese c'è questa frase: "You are the most earnest looking person I ever saw in my life"; e va bene perchè Algernon giuoca sull'equivoco prodotto da "earnest" e "Ernest" che si pronunziano egualmente, e da "looking" che vuol dire anche sembrare, aver l'aria ecc.; cosicchè chi ascolta può credere che questa frase sia un rafforzamento della precedente, ma in italiano va tradotta: "tu sei la persona che ha l'aria di far sul serio più di quante ne ho mai vedute in vita mia..." e non accorda nè con quanto precede nè con quanto segue. (Wilde 1922: 25)

Notably, Giambastiani does not end the play by having Jack realize "l'importanza vitale di essere/chiamarsi Ernesto", but opts for the non-onomastic interpretation of the phrase "to be earnest" ('far sul serio'), thereby creating an effect similar to the ones underlying d'Amico's renderings (Wilde 1979 and 1985), in which Jack's conclusion is either interpreted as purely ironic or accepted as a true statement:

LADY BRACKNELL Nipote mio, mi sembri piuttosto volgare!

JACK Al contrario, zia Augusta, per la prima volta in vita mia constato l'importanza vitale di *far sul serio*. (Wilde 1922: 133)

Just as d'Amico's readership wonders about Jack's "onestà", Giambastiani's readers must inevitably ask themselves whether in fact Ernesto 'fa sul serio', i.e. 'is being serious', when saying that he has become aware ("constatare") of how important it is to be so, and respectively whether he intends to put the maxim of 'far sul serio' fully into practice now that he is going to be a married man.

## 5. Conclusion

The data at my disposal for the present study have confirmed the existence of four different translation strategies adopted by Italian translators of Oscar Wilde's *The importance*. The first one consists in leaving the character names in their original orthography, including that of *Ernest*, and by doing so, discarding the possibility of reproducing Wilde's homophonous play with target linguistic material. Masolino d'Amico's and Luigi Lunari's texts are specimens of such translations marked by the policy of preserving the source cultural identity of the play. Masolino d'Amico's second translation, however, shows that there is, within the confines of the *acceptable translation*, potential available for partly recovering the play on *Ernest-earnest*, e.g. by substituting assonance (*Ernest[o]-onesto*) for homophony. On the other hand, one cannot help noticing awkward renderings in the translations mentioned above — I am thinking for instance of the passage in d'Amico's translation (Wilde 1985), in

which Algernon maintains: “sei la persona *più tipo Ernest* che abbia mai visto in vita mia” (45); these renderings are due to the very attitude of regarding given names as ‘sacred’ and therefore unalterable.

The second type identified within the text corpus differs from the first in one respect only, namely as regards the loss of onomastic wordplay. Evi Malagoli, in fact, has opted for importing the English adjective *earnest* into her text, thus basically inviting us to read the passage in which Algernon puns on his friend’s name with the eyes of an Anglophone reader: “mai conosciuto nessuno in vita mia che sembri più *earnest* di te” (Wilde 1964: 325). Malagoli’s strategy allows her to safeguard both the Englishness of *all* character names and the onomastic wordplay, which the translators both before and after her do not seem to have considered as a viable course to take.

The third group comprises the wordplay-based translations produced by Ugo Bottalla, Orsola Nemi and Guido Almansi, in which functionally analogous Italian ‘quality’ names have been substituted for *Ernest*. It deserves to be noted that all three translators have enriched their texts with additional naming puns, lacking in the source text: such patterns of behaviour may indeed be part of a compensation strategy, as the translators must have realized that almost all the dialogue in the original is somehow related to the polyvalent notion of *earnestness* (cf. Sections 3.1 and 3.2). Andrey Bantas, a Romanian translator of *The importance* as well as a critic, has argued in favour of the latter kind of translation (1993: 50–51), as target-language ‘quality’ names fulfil the same function as the source-text name *Ernest*, at least when it comes to the few explicit naming puns.

Irene Giambastiani’s translation is representative of the fourth type that has surfaced in the analysis of the corpus: in her text Giambastiani Italianizes the main character’s name as *Ernesto*, thereby making the rendering of the naming pun a topic of minor importance, besides not heeding concerns of onomastic ‘purity’, two aspects dear to either group of translators of Wilde.

It is noteworthy that the ‘purist’ translators (e.g. d’Amico, Lunari), who insist on retaining *Ernest* and all the other first names in their English form, have not been particularly keen on equally preserving the *Englishness* inherent in the titles of civility (i.e. *Mister* and *Miss*). On the other hand, the translators not minding ‘onomastic admixture’ (e.g. Giambastiani, Bottalla, Nemi) tend to import at least some of the English titles as signals of the source culture. Such incoherent behaviour is likely to stem from a translator’s desire to “bring the text to the audience” as well as “the audience to the text” (Tymoczko 1999: 236), without having to settle on one precise strategy, i.e. a domesticating vs. a foreignizing one.



It has been noticed that *intertextuality* and the systemic nature of translated literature are issues occurring in the notes and forewords to *The importance*, i.e. the existence of previous translations of the play is acknowledged and earlier translations are implicitly — sometimes also explicitly — criticized, especially when it comes to name substitutes for *Ernest*. This shows that different translators put the stress differently, just as it reminds us that different translators make very different demands on themselves: this is particularly striking if one bears in mind that Masolino d'Amico refrained from re-naming *Ernest* because the source-language pair *earnest–Ernest* offered no semantically 'satisfying' equivalents in Italian, whereas his colleagues did not hesitate to do so by re-writing *Ernest* as *Franco*, *Severo* and *Fedele*, respectively; nota bene, this was done in full awareness of the fact that the recourse to the latter three 'quality' names represented an impoverishment on both the denotative and connotative levels. One is tempted at this point to quote Jean-Michel Déprats, a French translator of *The importance* (Wilde 1996), who, in an endnote, justifies his decision to substitute a French 'quality' name for English *Ernest* as follows:

Il fallait naturellement, en français, trouver un équivalent, et Constant, par chance, a cette vertu d'être à la fois un prénom et une qualité. (Wilde 1996: 1871)

The present study elucidates once more that the notion of the 'optimum' target text is highly subjective: in fact, there is no consensus among the translators about whether an *adequate translation* should respect the 'nationality factor' (*Ernest* as a typically 19th century English first name) or rather the textual semantics (the polyfunctional appellative dimension inherent in that name). A similar picture transpires with regard to the question of whether or not puns are translatable.

## Notes

\* I would like to thank W.F.H. Nicolaisen (University of Aberdeen) for having roused my interest in translational issues of literary onomastics and André Lapierre (University of Ottawa) for his precious support and advice during the past six years. I also wish to thank Enzo Caffarelli (*Rivista Italiana di Onomastica*) and the cantonal library of Zug (Switzerland).

1. So far there have been very few extensive studies on the (history of the) translations of *The importance of being earnest*, among them those by Wilde's German translator Rainer Kohlmayer (1993 and 1996); the latter does not, however, tackle the question of naming and naming puns in any substantial way. In essays focused on name translation in general, critics have limited themselves to scattered, more or less superficial remarks regarding the aspect of



names in translations/translating Wilde's play (Bantas 1993: 50–51, 1994: 85; Manini 1996: 169; Newmark 1999: 26; Ballard 2001: 175). A more focused analysis offers Pablé (2002: 134–136, 2004: 503–505; 509).

2. However, one should not forget that the *adequate translation* ultimately originates in the target culture/language: it is, as Crisafulli (2001: 25) says, “crucially linked to the target cultural conditions”, and is therefore a product of both source and target norms.

3. For a more detailed analysis of the concept of *earnestness* in Victorian England, see, among many other authors, Houghton (1957: 218–262).

4. All italics within the quotes taken from Wilde's play are mine, unless stated otherwise. The edition from which original passages have been quoted in this essay is Wilde (1980).

5. I limit myself to mentioning two scholarly articles dealing with the onomastic dimension of *The importance*, i.e. Spinner (1976) and Zuccato (1989).

6. It is evident that there must exist several other Italian translations of the play (and possibly other titles), published either within a collection of Wilde's comedies or in a volume containing 19th century plays by different authors. It was not possible for me to retrieve these texts through a keyword search in the various electronic databases.

7. The translations made by two renowned and prolific Italian translators of Wilde, Masolino d'Amico (1985) and Luigi Lunari (1990), have been published several times by different publishing houses since their first appearance on the market, and are therefore the ones most frequently encountered in Italian bookstores.

8. D'Amico's train of thought is indeed difficult to follow in this passage: when replacing a source text name which was typical of the time in which the text was written (as *Ernest* was at the end of the 19th century) with a target text name in a modern translation, it is not clear why the translator should avoid giving the character an equally old-fashioned name in the target language (e.g. *Onesto*, *Probo*) and rather opt for a commonly used target name (e.g. *Franco*).

9. See also the notion of *coherence* as used by Schultze (1991: 93).

10. In my opinion, it is questionable whether the *Englishness* of a play is really first and most of all dependent on the given names that the characters bear, rather than on the toponymic references (place-names, street- and district-names) and on realia, which d'Amico himself mentions (the five-o'clock tea, the Victorian social hierarchies, etc.). Notably the latter is less strict as far as handling the English forms/titles of civility is concerned: while *Lady* Bracknell and *Miss* Prism keep theirs throughout the play, *Mister* and *Miss* are consistently nativized: thus *il signor* Worthing, *la signorina* Cardew, etc. Güttinger (1963: 84) argues in a similar way (cf. also Pablé 2003). Schultze (1991: 94), quite rightly, points out that a translator's “final choice among the different modes of rendering names and titles [of address is] closely connected with his or her understanding of cultural transfer and cultural identity”.

11. Manini (1996: 169) adduces d'Amico's translation of *The importance* (Wilde 1979) as evidence of the generally prevailing norm in Italy not to alter source British names in drama translations: “What is ultimately at stake is not only the nature of the source text,

but also the translators' understanding of what constitutes their legitimate competence and responsibility". Clearly, Manini would have had to revise his statement if he had also considered other 'modern' Italian translations of Wilde (see Section 4.2.3).

12. One of the Spanish translators of *The importance*, Ricardo Baeza (Wilde 1960: 100/131), who nativized *Ernest* as *Ernesto* (cf. Wilde 1922), decided, somewhat boldly, that neither Gwendolen nor Cecily should be able to explain why it is exactly that they adore the name of *Ernesto*: while in the original Gwendolen confesses that "There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence" (Act I), in the Spanish text she merely declares: "No sé qué tiene este nombre, que me fascina".

13. In d'Amico's translations Aunt Augusta is, retrospectively, right when accusing Ernest of "triviality" in the final scene, since indeed the latter is simply being ironic in his concluding remark ("Al contrario, zia Augusta, mi rendo conto per la prima volta in vita mia della vitale Importanza di Essere Probo/Onesto" [1979/1985: 612/143]), for what he should actually have come to realize is that it is important to *seem* — not to *be* — 'probo' or 'onesto'. In principle, d'Amico could have exploited the visual and phonic affinity between *Ernesto* and *onesto* (as a substitute for the homophonous pair *Ernest-earnest*) efficiently in his second translation (Wilde 1985) and thus portray Ernest as a man worthy of marrying Gwendolen; at the very end of the play, in fact, Ernest could have concluded by saying: "mi rendo conto per la prima volta in vita mia della vitale importanza di sembrare onesto e chiamarsi Ernesto". A similar, although not equally subtle, solution was in fact adopted by the Spanish translator (Wilde 1960: 161), whose Ernesto declares at the end: "por primera vez en mi vida he comprendido la importancia de ser formal ... y de llamarse Ernesto"; some of the meanings inherent in Spanish *formal* are very much compatible with Jack Worthing's *earnest* character, namely 'serious-minded', 'responsible', 'reliable', 'correct'. More significantly, however, in Baeza's text Ernesto has grasped the importance of being *formally* refined, besides being called by the name of *Ernesto*.

14. Lunari (1990: 18) cites as evidence a feature film by Anthony Asquith (1952). The latest big screen adaptation by Oliver Parker (2002) was equally entitled *L'importanza di chiamarsi Ernesto*.

15. Notably Lunari chooses to imitate the original final statement by equally employing capital letters. However, while Wilde's capitalized version of Ernest's conclusion ("the vital Importance of Being Earnest") reminds the reader of the very title, the capital letters in Lunari's translation ("dell'essenziale Importanza di Essere un Serio Ernesto") are not formally identical with the Italian title of the play, and therefore miss the point besides constituting an aesthetic-normative breach. Moreover, Lunari contradicts himself on this occasion since, as he states in his annotation, capital letters in Italian are only reserved for proper names. The same may be said for Masolino d'Amico's renderings, i.e. with the capitalized spellings occurring only at the end of the play (as an imitation of the original), but not within the two titles: "Al contrario, zia Augusta, mi rendo conto per la prima volta in vita mia della vitale Importanza di Essere Probo/Onesto" (1979/1985: 612/143).

16. Nemi herself has not left any metatextual or metalinguistic explanations; however, her translation is preceded by an excerpt taken from an essay by Eric Bentley (1956) and one by Wilde's contemporary Bernard Shaw. Notably in Bentley's text, the terms *earnest* and

*serious* have been rendered by Nemi in one passage as *austero* and *severo* respectively, and in another as *serio*. *Earnestness* she translates as *austerità*. This seems to indicate that Nemi intended to emphasize such concepts as *seriousness* and *severity* with a view to the reading of the play, rather than *sincerity* and *outspokenness*, which are equally inherent in the term *earnest*.

17. In the latest German translation of *The importance* (Wilde 1999), Rainer Kohlmayer could have translated the adjective *serious* literally, thereby punning on the German name *Ernst*, as Nemi did with *Severo*: “du bist nicht ernst genug”; however, Kohlmayer chose not to increase the number of puns with respect to the original and thus rendered Jack’s reply as: “Mein lieber Algy, ich weiss nicht, ob du meine wirklichen Motive verstehen kannst; du bist wohl etwas *zu oberflächlich* dafür” (11–12).

18. Following d’Amico’s line of reasoning, *probo* and *onesto* are thus clearly preferable to *franco* from a semantic point of view. The fact that the former adjectives can also function as nowadays old-fashioned first names, just like *Severo* (La Stella 1993: 328), may also speak in their favour, as opposed to *Franco*, which does not sound antiquated at all.

19. The very possibility that Jack and Algernon may have been deceiving them fascinates Gwendolen and Cecily deep down. After all, the two girls expect their husbands to be named *Fedele* without being *fedele*, which is exactly why Mrs. Allonby is so terribly disappointed with her husband Ernest, who could indeed be aptly re-named *Fedele* in an Italian translation.

20. In fact, none of the translators examined for this study have changed the name *Algernon* (of Anglo-Norman origin), or its short form (*Algy*) respectively. However, I have come across a staged version of *The importance*, directed by Mirko Segalina (1998), in which Algernon is re-named as *Agenore*, of Greek origin.

## References

### Primary sources

- Wilde, Oscar. 1922. *L’importanza di far sul serio*, tr. Irene N. Giambastiani. Ferrara: Taddei.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1952. “L’importanza d’esser Franco”, tr. Ugo Bottalla. Aldo Camerino, ed. *Oscar Wilde. Tutte le opere II: Teatro e poesia*. Roma: Edizioni Casini, 1952. 6–63.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1960. “La importancia de llamarse Ernesto”, tr. Ricardo Baeza. *El Albanico de Lady Winermere. La importancia de llamarse Ernesto*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1960. 87–145. [Collección Austral 65.]
- Wilde, Oscar. 1964. “L’importanza di essere «Earnest»”, tr. Evi Malagoli. Evi Malagoli, ed. *Oscar Wilde. Teatro*. Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1964. 317–401.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1967. “L’importanza di essere Severo”, tr. Orsola Nemi. Vito Pandolfi, ed. *Teatro borghese dell’Ottocento*. Milano: Casa Editrice Vallardi, 1967. 610–666.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1979. “L’importanza di essere probo”, tr. Masolino d’Amico. Masolino d’Amico, ed. *Oscar Wilde. Opere*. Milano.

- Wilde, Oscar. 1980. *The importance of being earnest: A trivial comedy for serious people*. Russell Jackson, ed. London: Ernest Benn Limited.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1985. *L'importanza di essere onesto*, tr. Masolino D'Amico. Milano: Oscar Classici Mondadori.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1990. *L'importanza di chiamarsi Ernesto*, tr. Luigi Lunari. Milano: BUR.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1993. "L'importanza di essere Fedele", tr. Guido Almansi. *Il ventaglio di Lady Windermere. L'importanza di essere Fedele. Salomé*. Garzanti, 1993. 75–152.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1996. "L'importance d'être constant", tr. Jean-Michel Déprats. Jean Gattégno, ed. *Oeuvres*. Paris: Gallimard, 1996. 1345–1527.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1999. *Bunbury*, tr. Rainer Kohlmayer. Stuttgart: Reclam.

### Secondary sources

- Ballard, Michel. 2001. *Le nom propre en traduction*. Paris: Édition Ophrys.
- Bantas, Andrei and Constantin Manea. 1990. "Proper names and nicknames: Challenges for translators and lexicographers". *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique* 25:3. 183–196.
- Bantas, Andrei. 1993. "Proper and geographical names, bynames and other challenges to translators". *Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata* 2. 41–52.
- Bantas, Andrei. 1994. "Names, nicknames, and titles in translation". *Perspectives: Studies in translatology* 2:1. 79–87.
- Crisafulli, Edoardo. "The adequate translation as a methodological tool". *Target* 13:1. 1–28.
- Delabastita, Dirk. 1994. "Focus on the pun: Wordplay as a special problem in Translation Studies". *Target* 6:2. 223–243.
- Dunkling, Leslie and William Gosling. 1983. *The facts on file dictionary of first names*. New York/Bicester: Facts on File Publications.
- Güttinger, Fritz. 1963. *Zielsprache: Theorie und Technik der Übersetzung*. Zürich: Manesse.
- Hermans, Theo. 1985, ed. *The manipulation of literature: Studies in literary translation*. London and Sydney: Croom Helm.
- Hermans, Theo. 1985a. "Translation Studies and a new paradigm". Introduction to Hermans 1985: 7–15.
- Houghton, Walter E. 1957. "Earnestness". *The Victorian frame of mind 1830–1870*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957. 218–262.
- Kaplan, Justin and Anne Bernays. 1997. *The language of names*. New York: Touchstone.
- Kohlmayer, Rainer. 1993. "Sprachkomik bei Wilde und seinen deutschen Übersetzern". Fritz Paul, Wolfgang Ranke und Brigitte Schultze, eds. *Europäische Komödie im übersetzerischen Transfer*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1993. 345–384. [Forum Modernes Theater 11.]
- Kohlmayer, Rainer. 1996. *Oscar Wilde in Deutschland und Österreich: Untersuchungen zur Rezeption der Komödien und zur Theorie der Bühnenübersetzungen*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.
- La Stella, Enzo. 1993. *Santi e fanti: Dizionario dei nomi di persona*. Bologna: Zanichelli.
- Levý, Jiří. 1969. *Die literarische Übersetzung: Theorie einer Kunstgattung*. Frankfurt/Bonn: Athenäum.
- Manini, Luca. 1996. "Meaningful literary names: Their forms and functions, and their translation". *The translator* 2:2. 161–178.

- Newmark, Peter. 1981. "The translation of proper names and institutional and cultural terms". Peter Newmark. *Approaches to translation*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1981. 70–80.
- Newmark, Peter. 1988. "The translation of proper names". Peter Newmark. *A textbook of translation*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1988. 214–215.
- Newmark, Peter. 1999. "Translating the allegorical dimension of literature". *Lebende Sprachen* 44:1. 24–26.
- Pablé, Adrian. 2002. "Appunti sulla traduzione italiana dei nomi propri 'esortativi' in testi letterari". *Rivista Italiana di Onomastica* 8:1. 131–136.
- Pablé, Adrian. 2003. "The goodman and his *faith*: Signals of local colour in Nathaniel Hawthorne's historical fiction with reference to *cultural translation*". *Babel* 49:2. 97–130.
- Pablé, Adrian. 2004. "Fictional names and onomastic translation". E. Brylla and Mats Wahlberg, eds. *Proceedings of the 21st international congress of onomastic sciences*. Uppsala: Sprak- och folkminneinstitutet, 2004. 502–510.
- Raby, Peter. 1995. "The persons of the play: Some reflections on Wilde's choice of names in *The importance of being Earnest*". *Nineteenth century theatre* 23:1–2. 67–75.
- Schultze, Brigitte. 1991. "Problems of cultural transfer and cultural identity: Personal names and titles in drama translation". Harald Kittel and Armin Paul Frank, eds. *Interculturality and the historical study of literary translations*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1991. 91–110.
- Spinninger, Dennis J. 1976. "Profiles and principles: The sense of the absurd in *The importance of being Earnest*". *Papers on language and literature* 12. 49–72.
- Toury, Gideon. 1985. "A rationale for descriptive translation studies". *Hermans* 1985: 16–41.
- Toury, Gideon. 1995. *Descriptive Translation Studies and beyond*. Amsterdam-Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Tymoczko, Maria. 1999. *Translation in a postcolonial context: Early Irish literature in English translation*. Manchester: St. Jerome.
- Zuccato, Edoardo. 1989. "Identità privata, sociale e nominale; sull'uso dei nomi propri negli scritti di Oscar Wilde". *Culture: Annali dell'Istituto di Lingue della Facoltà di Scienze Politiche dell'Università degli Studi di Milano*, 1989. 49–59.

## Résumé

La présente étude descriptive examine les différentes stratégies de traduction adoptées par les traducteurs italiens de *L'importance d'être constant* (1895) de Oscar Wilde. L'attention porte sur le calembour impliquant la réalisation orale du nom propre *Ernest* dont l'homophonie avec *earnest* est exploitée dans le titre de la pièce. Les traducteurs italiens de *The Importance* ont donc dû faire face au choix épineux entre préserver le calembour en remplaçant le nom transparent *Ernest* par un équivalent dans la langue cible, ou sauvegarder la réalité onomastico-culturelle, c.a.d. laissant le prénom victorien *Ernest* tel qu'on le trouve dans le texte-source. Il s'avère que cette dernière politique est généralement compensée par le discours métatextuel/métalinguistique à l'intérieur des préfaces, gloses, ou, plus significativement, par des ajouts intratextuels. De leur côté, les traducteurs italiens qui ont opté pour la substitution d'*Ernest* par un équivalent italien, ont, du fait de leur choix, pu enrichir leur

version de *The Importance* de calembours inattendus, illustrant ainsi la dimension “créative” dans la production des traductions littéraires. En plus des deux politiques de base énumérées ci-dessus, les traducteurs ont aussi opté pour l’introduction du nom nativisé *Ernesto*, montrant ainsi peu d’intérêt pour la “pureté culturelle” d’une part ou le calembour d’autre part. De nouveau, il s’avère que les traducteurs se créent des exigences bien différentes et nourrissent des idées bien différentes sur ce qui constituerait la stratégie “optimale” concernant le calembour et la représentation de la réalité culturelle de texte source.

*Author’s address*

Adrian Pablé  
Institut de langue et littérature anglaises  
Université de Neuchâtel  
CH-2007 NEUCHÂTEL  
Switzerland  
e-mail: [adrian.pable@unine.ch](mailto:adrian.pable@unine.ch)