

## Selected Problems with the Translation of Woody Allen's Essay *The UFO Menace*

Martin Kubuš

### Introduction

In the Central European context, Woody Allen is generally known, maybe even renowned as a filmmaker – a director, a screenwriter and, obviously, an actor. However, many a fan of Allen's is aware of his other artistic activities, such as writing and playing music. Woody Allen has played the clarinet in a jazz band for many years (in 2008, having a concert in Prague, for example) and, for his film enthusiasts, his fondness of jazz is more than evident from the use of jazz music in the soundtracks of a number of his classics such as *Manhattan*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, *Radio Days* and many others.

This paper, as its title suggests, does not deal with Allen's filmmaking, nor his jazz playing, but is focused on his writing, particularly on one of his essays which shares a characteristic feature with a great majority of his films – i.e. humour. Our objective is to take an in-depth look at the source of some unique and, for translators, problematic passages found in the essay entitled *The UFO Menace*.

Before doing so, it would be appropriate to briefly introduce the essay. It was first published in 1977 in *The New Yorker* and was later included in Allen's collection *The Complete Prose*. In this essay, the author in his unique and usual mocking, yet friendly fashion thinks it is necessary to stop ignoring UFOs and spare a kind-hearted thought, flavoured with slight irony, for his countrymen who claim to have seen the extraterrestrial means of transport:

UFOs are back in the news, and it is high time we took a serious look at this phenomenon. (Actually, the time is ten past eight, so not only are we a few minutes late but I'm hungry.) (Allen 1997:325)

Fortunately, the UFOs as obscure phenomena are more or less marginal topics, the essay itself was conceived a couple of decades previously, nevertheless, there is some truth to Allen's witty remarks above, since even last year, in 2008, some startling testimonies appeared in the media coming straight from the British Army which had reportedly confirmed numerous close encounters.

Possible target readers of this paper could be, firstly, enthusiasts of Woody Allen's post-modern literature (Part 1), and secondly, anybody interested or somehow involved in the subject of translation studies (Part 2).

### **Part 1: Allen's alleged witnesses of flying saucers**

This section is focused on the close encounters reported, on one hand, at the time when the essay was written (last century) and, on the other, in the past. Woody Allen refers to numerous obscure sources, mentioning fictional characters of his own imagination as well as historical personalities from the fields of philosophy (Parmenides) and literature (Goethe). He introduces the phenomenon stating that it is not necessarily anything new to mankind. Allen speculates that certain accounts described in more or less historical documents might have posed evidence that man has been aware of various kinds of flying objects for centuries. He manipulates facts and provides us with false (but humorous) theories and conclusions:

Scholars now tell us that the sighting of unidentified flying objects dates as far back as Biblical times. For instance, there is a passage in the Book of Leviticus that reads, "And a great and silver ball appeared over the Assyrian Armies, and in all of Babylonia there was wailing and gnashing of teeth, till the Prophets bade the multitudes get a grip on themselves and shape up" (ibid.).

The extract above is a par excellence example of the manipulation we are talking about. A learned reader, who would not have to be an expert in Biblical matters, would notice the collocation, *wailing and gnashing of teeth*, which is typically Biblical in style as is the phrase *Assyrian Armies*. These are credible and completely fit such a text. On the other hand, the phrasal verb *to shape up* and the phrase *to get a grip on themselves* are colloquial – their use in such a text would be inappropriate. They are marked and their function is obvious – i.e. to amuse the reader with a Biblical parody. We are not here to discuss religion, or Allen's opinions on it and the Bible, it is not our aim now, but we have to affirm that upon reading or mere skimming the *Book of Leviticus*, we will not find the passage we just quoted. *The Book of Leviticus* consists primarily of strict commands and laws concerning various offerings the Israelites brought to the Lord in the times of the Old Testament.

Let us continue with the second piece of "historical evidence". This extract that we deal with now is very witty and, as we will come to see, very confusing:

And, again, were those "orange objects" similar to what is described in a recently discovered twelfth-century Saxon-church manuscript: "A lauch lauched he; wer richt laith to weet a cork-heild schonne; whilst a red balle lang owre swam aboone. I thank you, ladies and gentlemen" (ibid.)

Notwithstanding the evident formal complexity of the lines, which at first sight makes us believe in their possible authenticity, a reader with a good knowledge

of English as well as its older forms catches Allen red-handed. His literary crime is in the distortion of the history of the English language while stealing lines from an existing poem. He then mixes them with his own words, an imitation of an alleged older form of English from the 12<sup>th</sup> century which tells us about the orange flying objects. If it had not been for the amusing effect of the parody on readers, caused also by the last sentence of our extract which, again, does not fit in, Woody Allen would not have got away with it. The passage in question, however, does not, in fact, come from *a recently discovered twelfth-century Saxon-church manuscript*.

After conducting some literary research we discover that Allen took the almost incomprehensible lines from a ballad entitled *Sir Patrick Spens*. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* reads:

Bishop Thomas Percy (1729–1811) was among the first to take a literary interest in ballads, stimulated by his chance discovery of a 17<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript in which a number of them had been copied down among a great welter of Middle English verse. (Abrams et al. 1968:335)

We also read that “Although any stage of a given culture may produce ballads, they are most characteristic of primitive societies such as that of the American frontier in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries or that of the English-Scottish border region in the later Middle Ages” (ibid.)

There may be multiple versions of the same ballads:

When one speaks of *Sir Patrick Spens* one is actually speaking of a number of poems that tell the same story in slightly or widely different words. If a single original form by a single author lies behind this diversity, it is too far back in the mist of time to be recovered. (ibid.)

Now we can compare the extract found in the *Anthology* (below) and the second version used by Allen (see the extract quoted above) who cites a different source.

O our Scots nobles were richt laith,  
To weet their cork-heeled shoon,  
But lang owre a' the play were played  
Their hats they swam aboon.

(Ibid., 344)

As we have already mentioned, he added *whilst a red balle lang owre swam aboone* to give information about a red ball swimming above, a potential UFO. The evident differences in spelling are sufficiently explained in the *Anthology*:

The version chosen for this anthology are those which the editor considers the most effective as poetry. Spelling has been modernized;

the majority of the northernisms in the originals have been retained. (Ibid., 337)

To sum up this section, we do not know the precise year in which the ballad was conceived, but we can rely on the *Anthology* which provides us with a possible historical period which is, however, (as could be expected) at odds with Woody Allen's statement:

The presumably much older ballad Sir Patrick Spens may be based on a historical incident that took lace at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. (Ibid., 337)

So far we have analysed accounts which were, according to Allen, found in existing written documents and then for the sake of our research we analysed the sources which inspired Woody Allen while he was writing his side-splitting essay. And now we turn to the last UFO story which was reported, as Allen states:

...by two Louisiana factory workers: "Roy and I was catfishing in the bog. I enjoy the bog, as does Roy. We was not drinking, although we had brought with us a gallon of methyl chloride, which we both favor with either a twist of lemon or a small onion. (Allen 1997:330)

The tone of the excerpt above corresponds with the whole essay – Woody Allen reveals his friendly, yet rather contemptuous attitude towards all the witnesses of the mysterious and unexplained occurrences. At the very beginning he betrays his stance with the following tongue-in-cheek remark:

Up until now, the entire subject of flying saucers has been mostly associated with kooks or oddballs. (Ibid., 325)

The passage about the workers from Louisiana is very relevant for us since, as Allen's fans are well aware of, the author who spent the vast majority of his life in the New York City, has always been an artist-bohemian living in a metropolis of worldwide importance, the city that never sleeps, often making fun of people coming from different and smaller American cities and towns. His Louisiana characters are thus just more non-New Yorkers, mock-worthy stereotypes.

As for the content of the excerpt, Allen suggests the two men might have been under the influence of chloromethane, also called methyl chloride which is a "colourless gas with a pleasant ethereal odour" (Sharp 1990:93).

Although other semantic aspects of this account are interesting and satirical too, let us focus very briefly on the formal aspects of the passage. The reason for this step is explained in the Part 2.

We have already quoted the first sentence reported by one of the workers and, before concluding the first part of this paper, we quote Allen once more:

At first Roy mistook it for a whooping crane and took a shot at it, but I said, 'Roy, that ain't no crane, 'cause it's got no beak.' (Allen 1997:331)

In the first extract above we detect an incorrect use of the verb *to be / was* instead of *were* which indicates the speaker's social status and thus is an inevitable part of his social dialect. The same applies to the phrase found in the same extract – "as does Roy" instead of "so does Roy". Another social dialect phrase is "that ain't no crane" which is marked by the sequence of two negatives. The last specific language unit which we deal with now is the informal and spoken form *ain't*. In the handbook *Longman English Grammar* we can find the following assertion (Alexander 1988:189):

The non-standard form *ain't*, in place of *am not*, *is not* and *are not*... is frequently heard in all persons and is avoided by educated speakers (except perhaps in joking).

The assertion in the handbook is precise and sufficiently supports our ideas – Woody Allen thus indicates the workers' lack of education and, of course, as we have already mentioned, he did so in order to joke.

Now, we have found ourselves at the end of the first part. Therefore, let us proceed to the second part, which focuses on translation problems.

## **Part 2: Translation problems**

We have selected several problems and analysed them and in this part we suggest suitable approaches which should be taken in order to translate them – to transfer them from the source language into the target language while maintaining the function of the text.

The aim of the text has already been stated – the author's objective was to amuse his readers through humorous stories and witty references to historical (sometimes quasi-historical) documents and accounts retold by the characters. At the same time, Allen reveals his own attitude towards the whole UFO issue as is evident from the next-to-last extract from the essay we have cited up to now. If we want to get an equivalent translation, the aim or the function of the text must be preserved.

Let us start with the first problem – the instance which was supposed to be taken from the Bible. If the author of the original text quotes from an existing book for which a translation already exists in the target culture, a translator should not automatically translate the part again, but should instead use the already existing version. Since we have already proved that Allen's lines were not authentic, not actually taken from *the Book of Leviticus*, we do not have to search for them in the target language version. In such a case we can be creative and, since the author used colloquialisms, we should use the colloquial equivalents in the target language. The only things which we should be really

careful about are the collocations typical of the Bible which we mentioned at the very beginning of the Part 1. Despite the fact that Woody Allen created his own Biblical passage using his own words, some typically Biblical phrases were reflected in his parody. The Bible, of course, has been translated into a great number of languages worldwide and we ought to find the equivalent collocations, the existing translations, in the target language translation of the book. This, however, does not pose a formidable task (e.g. in Slovak the phrase *wailing and gnashing of teeth* is translated as *plač a škripanie zubami*).

Now we may proceed with the second problem. This passage written in northern-English dialect, contrary to the previous one, is more problematic to translate. Let us mention the basic facts concerning the extract:

- The language of the passage is archaic, for, as we mentioned in the first part, it partly originates from a medieval poem, and is partly made up by Allen, who tried to maintain the archaic features (the meaning of the archaisms and north-English dialectal words remain unknown to us, since we are not English native speakers. This problem is, fortunately, solved also thanks to the *Anthology* editors who foresaw it and for the sake of comfortable reading provided the readers with the modern English equivalents as well).
- If we divide the excerpt from the manuscript into three lines, we detect assonance at the end of the second and the third lines, which should also be preserved in the translation.

Bearing these facts in mind, we have to ensure the intelligibility of the translated text. The translation should be equivalently archaic but only to an extent which is easily understandable to the target text readers – the target text must be communicative. The concept of communicative translation was defined as follows:

Communicative translation attempts to render the exact contextual meaning of the original in such a way that both content and language are readily acceptable and comprehensible to the readership. (Newmark 1988:47)

The desired function of the text, arising from Allen's intention to amuse his readers, must not be thwarted by its formal complexity, even if the archaic translation equivalents should be much more recent than the archaisms in the original.

According to the Slovak school of translation, the creative method which was elaborated in detail by Ján Ferenčík in the early 1980s, regional dialects in the source language text should not be translated into any other existing regional dialects found in the target language culture since it could result in excessive

naturalisation (Ferenčík 1982). In other words, it would not be natural for an English character to use, for example, a dialect spoken in western parts of Slovakia. Translators should create a special tailor-made dialect suitable for the characters which would aptly express the deviation from the standard language their speech is marked by.

The problem with the incorrect and substandard use of negative forms of the verb *to be* in the last extract we discuss in this paper can be solved on a microstylistic level. It is necessary to find suitable morphological means which would express a more or less lower social position of the users. In contrast to the previous case, the Slovak translation school now, while translating a social dialect, allows us to use linguistic means specific for an existing target culture social dialect. To be more specific, a Slovak translator may translate the clause *Roy, that ain't no crane* with *Roy, čak to neni žeriav*. The translated version is informal enough – the particle *čak* (or *šak* instead of *však*) is substandard. It is not specific to any particular region while being generally used in informal communication. The same applies to the verb *neni* (instead of *nie je*) which now poses an appropriate equivalent for *ain't* from the original.

Before concluding this part as well as the paper itself, we should mention one more example from the original: “Roy and I was catfishing in the bog. I enjoy the bog, as does Roy...” The grammatical deviations have already been discussed but we may now add that word order and a deliberate use of incorrect inflections are suitable vehicles for transferring informality and expressing social dialects in many a so-called inflectional language. Slovak is one of a great number of inflectional languages and herein we see a possible translation of the passage from the essay which is based on using incorrect suffixes (e.g. *v močiare* instead of *v močiari*, *chytali sumcov* instead of *chytali sumce*), etc.:

Ja s Royom sme v močiare chytali sumcov. Mne sa páči v močiare, Royovi takisto. Sme nepili, ale zali sme si so sebou zo štyri litre chlórmetánu, čo máme obaja rady buď s citrónom, alebo malou cibuľou.

## Summary

The author of this paper entitled *Selected problems with the translation of Woody Allen's essay The UFO Menace* focuses on three specific passages in which Woody Allen satirises people who have reportedly sighted UFOs. He briefly analyses them literarily as well as linguistically and in the second part he proposes translation approaches. Being Slovak, he refers to the Slovak translation school and, when necessary, he introduces various Slovak equivalents of the discussed extracts.

---

**Works Cited**

- Abrams, M. H. et al. (eds.). 1968. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Revised Edition. Vol. I. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.
- Alexander, L. G. 1988. *Longman English Grammar*. Harlow: Longman.
- Allen, W. 1997. *Complete Prose*, London: Picador.
- Burgess, A. 1974. *English literature*. Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Ferenčík, J. 1982. *Kontexty prekladu*. Bratislava: Slovenský spisovateľ.
- Newmark, P. 1988. *A Textbook of Translation*. Hemel Hempsted: Prentice Hall.
- Sharp, D. W. A. (ed.). 1990. *The Penguin Dictionary of Chemistry*. Second Edition. London: Penguin Books.

**Works Consulted**

- McCarthy, M. and F. O'Dell. 2005. *English Collocations in Use: How Words Work Together for Fluent and Natural English*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Rundell, Michael and Gwyneth Fox (eds.). 2002. *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*. Oxford: Macmillan.
- Štekauer, P. 1993. *Essentials of English Linguistics*. Prešov: Slovacontact Plus s. r. o.
- The Holy Bible*. 1984. Colorado Springs: International Bible Society.