

LATVIJAS UNIVERSITĀTE

DIPLOMDARBS

RĪGA 2009

UNIVERSITY OF LATVIA
FACULTY OF MODERN LANGUAGES

DEPARTMENT OF CONTRASTIVE LINGUISTICS,
TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETING

**NO LAUGHING MATTER: PROBLEMS AND
STRATEGIES FOR INTERPRETING HUMOUR
FROM ENGLISH TO LATVIAN AND LATVIAN
TO ENGLISH**

**TAS NAV SMIEKLĪGI: PROBLĒMAS UN
STRATĒGIJAS HUMORA TULKOŠANĀ NO
ANĢĻU UZ LATVIEŠU UN NO LATVIEŠU UZ
ANĢĻU VALODU**

DIPLOMA PAPER

Author: **Philip Birzulis**

Adviser: Professor Dr.habil.Philol. Andrejs Veisbergs

RIGA 2009

ANOTĀCIJA

Humors bez šaubām ir sarežģīts jautājums, tomēr katram tulkam jārēķinās, ka agrāk vai vēlāk nāksies saskarties ar humora tulkošanu. Šajā diplomdarbā tiks analizēti dažādi joki, un tiks sniegti ieteikumi, kā jokus veiksmīgi iztulkot.

Pirmajā nodaļā sniegts īss pārskats par pētāmo jautājumu un darbā izmantoto teorētisko literatūru. Otrajā nodaļā sniegti praktiski joku piemēri angļu un latviešu valodā no divām plašām jomām – politikas un profesionālajās komēdijās, kā arī izklāstīti praktiski ieteikumi, kā šos jokus vislabāk tulkot abās minētajās valodās. 2.1.1. apakšnodaļā analizēti britu, austrāliešu un amerikāņu politiķu humoristiski izteikumi. 2.1.2. apakšnodaļā līdzīga analīze veikta par humoristiskiem izteikumiem no latviešu politiķu vidus. 2.2.1. apakšnodaļā apskatīti divu britu komiķu – Dilana Morana un Bila Beilija joki, savukārt 2.2.2. apakšnodaļa sniegs ieskatu latviešu radio komiķu Freda un Ufo humorā, kā arī tiks analizēts Jaunā Rīgas teātra lugas „Latviešu mīlestība” humors.

Trešajā nodaļā sniegts izanalizētā materiāla kopsavilkums, un izdarīti secinājumi saistībā ar humora tulkošanu no latviešu valodas uz angļu valodu un otrādi.

ABSTRACT

Humour is a notoriously difficult issue, but it is one that every interpreter will face sooner or later. The aim of this paper is to analyse different types of jokes and suggest strategies for interpreting them.

Chapter one provides an introduction to the subject and an overview of some relevant theoretical literature. Chapter two looks at different examples of jokes in English and Latvian in two broad areas – politics and professional comedy – and provides practical advice on interpreting them into the other language. Chapter 2.1.1 analyses humorous public statements made by British, Australian and U.S. politicians. Chapter 2.1.2 considers jokes made by Latvian political figures. Chapter 2.2.1 examines two stand-up comedians from the British Isles, Dylan Moran and Bill Bailey. Chapter 2.2.2 looks at the Latvian radio duo Fredis and Ufo and the New Riga Theatre comic play *Latviešu mīlestība* (Latvian Love.)

Finally, chapter three summarises the material and draws some broader conclusions about interpreting humour between Latvian and English.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction and overview of theoretical issues for interpreting humour	6
2. Practical examples of the issues involved for interpreting humour from English to Latvian and Latvian to English	10
Politics	12
English to Latvian: jokes told by and about English-speaking politicians	13
Latvian to English: jokes told by and about Latvian politicians	17
Professional Comedy	22
English to Latvian: Stand-up comedians	23
Dylan Moran and Bill Bailey	
Latvian to English: Radio duo Fredis & Ufo and the play <i>Latviešu mīlestība</i>	28
3. Conclusions	35
4. References	37
5. Appendix 1 – Bill Bailey’s “Chaucer Pubbe Gag”	41
6. Appendix 2 - Bill Bailey’s “Donkeys and Cocaine”	43

1. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THEORETICAL ISSUES FOR INTERPRETING HUMOUR

“Humour is the first of the gifts to perish in a foreign tongue,” wrote Virginia Woolf (Rosendahl, 2009.) Perhaps taking note of this wisdom, faced with a difficult piece of humour an interpreter at the European Parliament allegedly said: “The speaker has told a joke – please laugh” (Case, 2006).

This anecdote may be apocryphal, but it highlights the difficulties of interpreting someone who is being funny. Nevertheless, it is the interpreter’s duty to attempt to try and do so. Furthermore, it cannot be said that jokes *never* translate between languages. The comedies of Aristophanes, Shakespeare and Moliere still bring laughs many centuries after they were penned. Latvians and many other nations have taken Jerome K. Jerome, Jaroslav Hasek and other humorous foreign authors to heart. Charlie Chaplin and Mr. Bean are universally appreciated.

There are obviously differences in the skills required to translate a book and interpret a live performance of a play or film (or a political speech.) Superficially, it may at first appear that the medium is the only appreciable difference between interpreting and translating i.e. one is performed orally and the other uses written texts (RIC International, 2009). However, they are disciplines with divergent demands on their practitioners. The translator has a deep understanding of the source language and culture and uses a variety of tools such as dictionaries to render the text clearly and precisely into the target language. Professional translators rarely perform translations into any language other than their native tongue, and their main strength is their writing skills in the target language. Interpreters, on the other hand, must be able to interpret into both languages immediately without access to reference materials. They must have excellent listening skills and be able to simultaneously memorize the speaker’s words and process them into the target language. In other words, they must have “the intellectual capacity to instantly transform idioms, colloquialisms and other culturally-specific references into analogous statements the target audience will understand” (RIC, *ibid*).

Essentially, however, both translating and interpreting are about the ability to paraphrase i.e. listening to a speaker in one language then paraphrasing their understanding of the meaning into the target language (RIC, *ibid*). Giles Watson argues that successfully translating a humorous text involves juggling two possibly conflicting parameters. On the one hand, the translation should be funny since “... a humorous book in translation that fails to make the reader chuckle, or at least smile, is also unlikely to sell (Watson, 2002:5).” At the same time, the translation must be faithful and make the reader laugh for the same reasons as the original. In other words, the translator is faced with the familiar choice of translating the letter or the spirit of the original.

A similar idea is expressed by Debra S. Raphaelson-West, a Russian-English translator based at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. She argues that translators and interpreters must choose between dynamic equivalence and translation with the goal of education. With difficult types of texts such as poetry or humour, it is possible to take the second option and sacrifice the form in exchange for achieving some cross-cultural understanding. In other words, the form is changed but the content of the message is preserved. However, this ignores the fact that readers or listeners are affected by rhetorical devices as well as content, and that, “although the surface form of a message may change, the extent of this change is a language-

specific question and it is not necessary in all cases to preserve the content of the message” (Raphaelson-West, 1979:130).

Raphaelson-West offers a concise methodology for translating jokes. First of all, she recommends dividing them into three categories:

1. Linguistic, such as puns,
2. Cultural, such as ethnic jokes,
3. Universal, such as the unexpected.

Humour rooted in the structure of a particular language is the most difficult to interpret. For example, the phrase “linguistic jokes are ‘punny as hell’” is a play on the rhyme of “funny” and “punny” in English, which produces a humorous convergence of meanings. It would be almost impossible to find a similar correlation between the meanings and sounds of the relevant words in another language. However, the interpreter may search for an alternative pun in the target language to maintain dynamic if not literal equivalence with the joke, or can sacrifice the linguistic element of the humour to simply convey the meaning and hope that some other element of the text produces humour.

Such strategies are analysed in more detail by Andrejs Veisbergs (Veisbergs, 1997: 162-171). He proposes eight basic techniques for translating wordplays based on idioms, most of which will be drawn on for interpreting practical examples in this paper:

1. Equivalent idiom transformation;
2. Loan translation
3. Extension
4. Analogue idiom translation
5. Substitution
6. Compensation
7. Omission
8. Metalingual comment.

The paper will apply these techniques not only to word play, but also to context. Extension, for example, is a good way of educating the audience about a concept familiar to the source culture but unknown to outsiders.

Returning to Raphaelson-West’ categorisation, she describes cultural jokes as, “jokes which may mean the same thing semantically, but in terms of pragmatics and culture, there is something sorely missing which makes the joke untranslatable.” (Raphaelson-West, *ibid.*: 132). In other words, some part or the entire joke contains elements which are unknown or perceived differently in the culture of the source language. She gives an American joke as an example:

“What is the favourite wine/whine of the American Jewish Princess?”
“Ma, can I go to Florida?”

This joke has a linguistic element due to the pun on the words “wine” and “whine.” But the crux of humour rests upon stereotypes about spoiled, rich Jewish girls and Florida being the preferred holiday destination of many Americans. An outsider would find all this baffling. However, in contemporary Latvia, it might be possible to adapt the above joke to target rich “New Russians”. Irish jokes in England,

Ukrainian jokes in Russia and Estonian jokes in Latvia are very similar in content, with the only difference being which ethnic group is the object of neighbourly contempt. Sometimes stereotypes about a group can partially overlap, giving the interpreter something to work with even if different audiences perceive the target culture in a subtly different way.

Universal jokes are ones in which the central elements are broadly shared by many different cultures. This is the easiest form of humour to interpret. For example, Raphaelson-West speculates that most cultures would find a child making an unexpected or unusual statement funny. Other jokes may be partly universal, in that they are mutually comprehensible to the cultures of the source and target languages, even if some unrelated third group wouldn't find them amusing. For example, chapter 2.1.1 will look at an Irish comedian's sketch about hangovers. This would be easily grasped by a Latvian audience because the Latvian and Irish cultures share similar attitudes towards alcohol. The fact that this particular joke might not be appreciated by peoples with taboos on drinking is irrelevant to successful interpretation in this case.

There are of course other forms of humour, such as parody and satire, and the various categories often overlap. However, the methodology used in this paper is roughly based on the approach outlined above. A range of jokes in Latvian and English will be selected from two broad spheres – politics and professional comedy. We will then examine strategies that an interpreter could use to get as close as possible to the letter and the spirit of the original joke.

The author admits to a large degree of subjectivity in the selection of jokes to be analysed. There is an immense volume and variety of humour in both English and Latvian, and any choice will be based on what the analyser considers important or funny. However, other criteria besides mere personal preference were considered. To begin with, there is plenty of humour that does not lend itself to interpreting from English into Latvian or vice versa. This can be due to the fact that the jokes are entirely linguistically based, with no approximations possible, or because the context is entirely local or dated. In other words, the paper avoids jokes that would be pointless to interpret.

Chapter 2.1 looks at a number of jokes made by English-speaking and Latvian politicians and political commentators. These are mostly taken from internet collations of quotes and humorous anecdotes. To give a broader picture, the English-speaking material includes examples from American, British and Australian political figures.

In chapter 2.2.1, stand-up comedians Dylan Moran and Bill Bailey were chosen because they are contemporary comedians from two different English-speaking countries with diverse styles. Specific comedy sketches by these performers were selected for analysis because they illustrate various challenges for the interpreter, such as jokes based on stereotypes or humorous poetry.

Latvia does not have a tradition of stand-up comedy, but local radio and theatre are rich in humour. Therefore, the radio duo Fredis and Ufo and the *New Riga Theatre* play *Latviešu mīlestība* (Latvian Love) were chosen for chapter 2.2.2 as popular examples of comedy in their respective fields. Both of these sources present jokes that are deeply embedded in Latvian society but which have the potential to be more widely appreciated through interpretation.

As indicated earlier, there are fundamental differences in the skills of translating and interpreting. There is also a paradox in the fact that although this paper is devoted to interpreting, it is by its nature a written document. Furthermore, for

practical reasons, many of the jokes cited in this paper come from written sources even if they were originally spoken texts. This removes issues of the speaker's accent, verbal tics and other conditions that are sanitised in a written text. In other words, both the origins of the material and how it is presented here are somewhat removed from the realities of interpreting. To compensate, the author has tried to imagine the particular humorous text in an interpreting situation and offers practical advice to the potential interpreter on how to deal with it. Additionally, some of the jokes were read to a group of University of Latvia interpreting students, and the feedback from this simultaneous interpreting experience has been incorporated into the analysis.

Ultimately, getting both humour and meaning across through interpreting is largely dependent on the receptiveness of the culture of the target language. As Max Herzberg and Leon Mones have written:

(...) jokes are translatable if and only if the respective cultures are interested and available. To be ready for the appreciation and enjoyment of humour, one must be ready to play. (...) Humour is an enjoyable juggling with social taboos, with this or that forbidden action or custom. It is playing with illusions until truth is illuminated as never before. The real question is: Who wants to see the truth? (Herzberg, Mones, 1945:11).

In the chapters that follow, we will examine the readiness of the English-speaking and Latvian cultures to play with one another.

2. PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF THE ISSUES INVOLVED FOR INTERPRETING HUMOUR FROM ENGLISH TO LATVIAN AND LATVIAN TO ENGLISH

In practice, it would seem obvious that there is a large degree of subjectivity in the appreciation of humour between individuals in the same cultural group, let alone where there is a language barrier. However, there have been attempts to scientifically determine what makes people around the world laugh.

In 2001, a research team headed by Professor Richard Wiseman of the University of Hertfordshire set out to find the world's funniest joke (Wiseman, 2001). People from around the world were invited to submit jokes to the study's website, and over 40,000 were received in the course of one year. Visitors to the website could then rate each one according to how amusing they found it. Based on this simple methodology, the following was declared to be the winner:

Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other guy whips out his phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps, "My friend is dead! What can I do?" The operator says "Calm down. I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence, then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says "OK, now what?"

The people rating the jokes were also invited to list their gender, age and nationality, allowing conclusions to be drawn about differences in the sense of humour of various groups. Apparently, people in the UK, the Republic of Ireland, Australia and New Zealand prefer jokes involving world play. For example:

Patient: "Doctor, I've got a strawberry stuck up my bum."
Doctor: "I've got some cream for that."

Americans and Canadians have more of a liking for jokes where a sense of superiority is demonstrated:

Texan: "Where are you from?"
Harvard grad: "I come from a place where we do not end our sentences with prepositions."
Texan: "Okay – where are you from, jackass?"

For their part, continental Europeans expressed a liking for jokes with a surreal element. The researchers also concluded that they are fonder of joking about death, illness and marriage than the British. For example:

A patient says: "Doctor, last night I made a Freudian slip, I was having dinner with my mother-in-law and wanted to say: "Could you please pass the butter."
But instead I said: "You silly cow, you have completely ruined my life."

Interestingly, this apparently didn't apply to Germans, who out of all of the groups expressed appreciation for the widest range of jokes. Based on this the researchers concluded that Germans have the world's best sense of humour, contradicting a common stereotype outlined further below.

However, despite the study's ambitious goals, it is deeply flawed. Firstly, all of the jokes were submitted in English, removing language as a crucial source of cultural differences. Is it surprising that native English speakers got the most amusement from wordplay in their own language? Secondly, two research assistants, both of whom happened to be British women, vetted all of the entries to remove any that they deemed to be offensive. Giving two individuals from one cultural group the power to exclude jokes based on their own assumptions about propriety is tantamount to censorship. Thirdly, online polls are notoriously vulnerable to multiple voting and other manipulations. Finally, as with any mass product, the most popular does not automatically mean the best, and the so-called "funniest joke in the world" may have won because it was the most acceptable to a large number of people. In a manner of speaking, it is humour as if designed by a committee, and the results are rather banal.

In reality, the problems of interpreting humour are more subtle and complex. These are illustrated in an account by British comedian Stewart Lee of an attempt to bring a popular British stage comedy to Germany (Lee, 2006). In 2004, Lee accompanied Richard Thomas, the composer of *Jerry Springer the Opera*, to Hannover, where they teamed up with German comedy writer Hermann Brauer to develop a German version of the production. The collaboration quickly ran into problems. The show in question is an opera about a night in a stand-up comedy club. It was soon discovered that while Germans have a rich cabaret tradition, the British concept of stand-up comedy is quite alien to them. It was difficult to persuade the stage designers to create the minimalist setting typical of stand up instead of gaudy cabaret decorations.

Linguistic issues also produced difficulties. Lee estimates that about half of humour in English involves concealing the subjects of sentences until the last moment, a strategy he terms "pull back and reveal." For example, a comic statement such as "I was sitting there, minding my own business, naked, smeared with salad dressing and lowing like an ox ... and then I got off the bus" is funny to English speakers because the word "bus" was withheld from the audience. However, the less flexible sentence structure of German makes this impossible. German compound words give the language a high degree of precision but deny it the rich comic possibilities that arise from the multitude of English words with double or even triple meanings:

The flexibility of the English language allows us to imagine that we are an inherently witty nation, when in fact we just have a vocabulary and a grammar that allow for endlessly amusing confusions of meaning (Lee, *ibid.*).

There are also different attitudes to obscenity:

(..) for the smutty British comic writers, it seemed difficult to find a middle-ground between scientifically precise language describing sexual and bodily functions, and outright obscenity. There seemed to be no nuanced, nudge-nudge no-man's land, where English comic sensibilities and German logic could meet on Christmas Day and kick around a few dirty jokes in a cheeky, Carry On-style way. A German theatre director explained that this was because the Germans did not find the human body smutty or funny, due to all attending mixed saunas from an early age (Lee, *ibid.*).

Lee writes of the common British perception that Germans have no sense of humour. He concludes that this is a false assumption, but that German humour can hard to appreciate without knowledge of its cultural and linguistic framework. In his opinion, German jokes are blunt statements that are funny only because of their context. For example:

On my first night in Hannover I had gone out drinking with some young German actors. “You will notice there are no old buildings in Hannover,” one of them said. “That is because you bombed them all.” At the time I found this shocking and embarrassing. Now it seems like the funniest thing you could possibly say to a nervous English visitor (Lee, *ibid.*).

In other words, although there are daunting challenges, it is possible for people with different languages to appreciate each other’s humour. With some help from interpreters, Latvian and English are no exceptions.

2.1. Politics

It is often argued that politics and show business are intertwining due to the media promoting style over substance in public affairs. Indeed, in some cases politics and comedy have literally merged into one.

The Catherine Tate Show is a British TV comedy in which the eponymous actress plays an obnoxious, pushy schoolgirl named Lauren Cooper. Back in 2007, while still prime minister of the United Kingdom, Tony Blair appeared on the programme to raise money for the charity *Comic Relief*. The sketch begins with Lauren arriving at 10 Downing Street for work experience. Greeted by a civil servant, Lauren is late, talks in a loud, shrieking voice and repeatedly asks annoying questions; stopping at every portrait of a former British leader, she enquires, “Is that a prime minister?” Finally, they reach the doors of Mr. Blair’s office, where the civil servant gives Lauren a tray of tea and biscuits and tells her to give it to Mr. Blair, but not to linger, as he is very busy. Instead, Lauren goes in and disrupts the prime minister on an important phone call. When she reels off an extended monologue about a recent shopping trip, Mr. Blair snaps back:

Lauren – am I bothered? I ain’t bothered. Look at my face – is my face bothered? Does my face look bothered though? Face – bothered? Top shelf, centre park, trainers, small feet, rich tea, bandages – I ain’t bothered! I don’t care, ‘cause I ain’t bothered – out! (Tate, 2007).

Lauren, an archetypal example of a British lower class “chav,” uses a lot of slang. The humour here comes from the fact that Mr. Blair deploys the same sort of language against her, including her trademark phrase “I ain’t bothered,” meaning “I don’t care.” Mr. Blair’s monologue and Lauren’s ranting that preceded it would appear to present daunting linguistic and cultural challenges for an interpreter into Latvian. However, there are some strategies that could be employed in the event that, say, the sketch was shown at a British Embassy or British Council function in Riga.

First of all, it would be important at the beginning to ensure that the audience is aware of the location of the drama. The scene opens with a shot of a grand door with the numeral “10” visible on it, which to any British viewer would indicate that this is the prime minister’s residence. The simultaneous interpreter could simply say

“Britu premjera rezidence,” which would be an example of metalingual comment (Veisbergs, *ibid.*: 171.)

Secondly, a literal translation of the dialogue is not required. What is important is giving the audience an approximation of the meaning, and to convey the fact that Mr. Blair is using slang; a Latvian audience would also see the humorous incongruity of a prime minister speaking like a teenager. Utilising the analogue idiom translation strategy proposed by Veisbergs (Veisbergs, *ibid.*: 166), a possible version could be as follows:

Lorena – man ir galīgi pie vienas vietas. Man ir pie kājas. Paskaties man ģīmī - vai man nav vienalga? Par plauktiņiem, parciņiem, kedām, kājiņām, tējiņu, saitītēm – man ir vienalga! Tagad vācies!

This appearance probably didn't do Mr. Blair's popularity any harm at the end of his career. However, in real life politics and humour are often a more volatile mixture. Humour is subversive by its nature. Therefore, when politicians use it for supposedly benign purposes, there is a high risk that someone will be offended. Politicians are actually on the safest ground when they use humour aggressively as a tool for attacking opponents.

Of course, out of the public's gaze, politicians make light hearted remarks like any other human beings, which are only revealed to the world later through memoirs or history books. A recent book called *The Last Witness* by Rochus Misch, a telephonist in the Berlin bunker during the Nazi regime's final days, reveals that even Adolf Hitler had a sense of humour. Mr. Misch recalls the Fuhrer making the following joke at the expense of the pompous, self-aggrandising Hermann Goering:

Mrs Goering found her husband waving a baton over his underwear in the bedroom and asked him what he was doing. He replied: “I am promoting my underpants to OVERpants. (Alleyne, 2008).

This is a rare occasion where a pun would work well in German, English and Latvian (“apakšbikses” and “virsbikses.”) In other words, it can be subjected to equivalent idiom transformation (Veisbergs, *ibid.*:164). However, the main point is that the jibe was made in private, and it would have been highly unlikely for Hitler to have repeated it in the presence of Goring or any but the most trusted insiders. This paper will focus on humour in the public sphere, and in the following sections we will look at jokes by English-speaking and Latvian politicians.

2.1.1 English to Latvian: jokes told by and about English-speaking politicians

For the sake of convenience, the paper will analyse political humour starting with examples that are relatively easy to interpret, and then moving on to more challenging ones.

A good place to begin is with George W. Bush. The butt of countless anecdotes about his alleged lack of intelligence and proficiency with the English language, the former US President was also not averse to telling jokes of his own in public. For example, at the end of the July 2008 G8 summit in Japan, Mr. Bush surprised onlookers by declaring “Goodbye from the world's biggest polluter!” while

grinning widely and punching the air (Winnett, 2008). Onlookers expressed surprise that he would joke about a sensitive subject, especially considering that the G8 meeting had included discussions on cutting carbon emissions. But regardless of the wisdom of making the statement, it presents no barriers to interpreting into Latvian either linguistically or contextually. Latvians who follow world affairs would be aware that the US is often criticised for its lax environmental policies.

Another example of Mr. Bush making a joke that he might have been better to have refrained from was at a dinner for journalists in March 2004 (Online 1). The president screened a series of slides of him looking for something in the Oval Office. He commented in response to one picture: "Those weapons of mass destruction have got to be here somewhere." In another, he was seen scouring the corner of the room, and stated: "No, no weapons over there." A third picture showed him leaning over, to which he quipped: "Maybe under here?"

The president was harshly criticised for treating the mistaken pretext of the momentous decision to go to war in Iraq so lightly. But again, the gag presents no problems for interpreting into Latvian.

In fairness, Mr. Bush is not the only world leader to make regrettable jokes. In March 2009, President Barack Obama appeared in a television interview with American humorist Jay Leno. Asked about his sporting skills, Mr. Obama said in a self-deprecating fashion: "I have been practicing bowling. I bowled a 129. That's like Special Olympics!" (Online 2) The remark was slammed for showing disrespect to handicapped people, and Mr. Obama was quick to apologise. However, as in the previous examples with Mr. Bush, there should be no problems with interpretation into Latvian. Bowling is a popular activity in Latvia, so a large proportion of the audience would comprehend the meaning of the score he mentioned. If the interpreter wanted to play it safe, he or she could present "I bowled a 129" as "Man nesen bija labs rezultāts" with no significant loss of meaning. Likewise, although most people will be aware of the Special Olympics – "Speciālā olimpiāde", this part could also be rendered as "Bet vispārīgi, es metu bumbu kā invalīds" or something similar.

Interpreting becomes more difficult when the context is less universal. Arizona Senator and 2008 presidential candidate John McCain is noted for his biting wit. In 1998, Mr. McCain made the following joke at a Republican Party fundraising event: "Why is Chelsea Clinton so ugly? Because her father is Janet Reno." (Corn, 1998)

This was in some ways a remarkable insult, given that in just 12 words Mr. McCain managed to offend:

- US President Bill Clinton, by insinuating that he was not his daughter's real father;
- The president's daughter Chelsea, by repeating a common belief that she is ugly;
- Janet Reno, the Attorney General in the Clinton Administration, also described as an ugly woman and rumoured to be a lesbian;
- First Lady Hillary Clinton, by insinuating that she had a lesbian relationship with Ms. Reno.

Many US media outlets considered the joke so tasteless that at the time they refused to reprint it. It would probably have disappeared altogether had Mr. McCain not become his party's candidate for president in 2008, causing all sorts of skeletons to be pulled from the closet. In the context of covering the last presidential election, Latvian TV and radio journalists may have wanted to inform their audience of the joke as an illustration of the rough and tumble nature of American politics. But it

presents a number of challenges. By 2008, many Latvians would have forgotten who Janet Reno was, let alone what she looked like. However, in that year Hillary Clinton was in the spotlight as a Democratic presidential contender, so the main point of recounting the joke would have revolved around her. The best solution would probably be to generalise about the subject: “Makeins teica, ka bijušā Prezidenta Klintonā meita Čelsija ir neglīta, jo viņas īstais tēvs ir lesbiete.”

This would still serve to convey the implied insult to the Clintons while leaving out Ms. Reno. Some members of the Latvian audience would probably wonder how a lesbian could become someone’s father, but this absurdity is built into the original English version, so you either do or do not get it in either language.

The following example of a public jibe against President Bush could present similar contextual problems. In 2004, while hosting the Academy Awards ceremony comedian Billy Crystal remarked: “It’s been four years since I’ve been here. The Academy and the Oscars have been very gracious to me, they let me come and go the past few years. It’s kind of like being in the Texas National Guard.” The joke here is that President Bush dodged the Vietnam War by joining the Texas National Guard, but his service in this unit was marked by numerous unexplained absences. In other words, Mr. Bush is alleged to have taken the easy way out of the war of his youth, and to have compounded his cowardice by being a poor reserve soldier. The question here is, would a simultaneous interpreter of this particular Oscar ceremony have been able to convey the pointed nature of Crystal’s remark in a succinct way that a Latvian audience, not necessarily deeply informed about the controversies of US politics, could understand? The best way around this might be to employ extension (Veisbergs, *ibid.*:165): “Ir pagājuši četri gadi kopš pēdējo reizi pildīju šos pienākumus bet Oskaru rīkotāji ļoti laipni man ļauj nākt un iet kā pats vēlos. Līdzīgi kā Prezidents Bušs, kurš jaunībā pildīja militāro dienestu tikai tad, kad viņš pats vēlējās.” This is not perfect, but the main point of insulting Bush is conveyed.

Paul Keating, Prime Minister of Australia from 1991 to 1996, was a master of devastating political insults, often delivered in Parliament (Keating, *The Paul Keating Insults Archive*). Some of his statements present no difficulties for the interpreter. For example, a remark about “the brain damaged leader of the opposition” could be rendered into Latvian with slight adaptation as “prātu iztvaikojušais opozīcijas līderis.” More colourfully, his description of an opposition MP as “a lizard on a rock, alive but looking dead” could be interpreted as “...kā uz akmens guļoša ķirzaka, kas it kā ir dzīva bet izskatās mirusi.”

Keating once described Malcolm Fraser, an Australian prime minister of the 1970’s, as “an Easter Island statue with an arse full of razor blades.” (Keating, *ibid.*) Many Australian commentators have noted a visual similarity between Mr. Fraser and the monolithic stones on Easter Island, and his dour demeanour suggests someone in constant pain. Most educated Latvians would have an image of the statues in question, so even if they had no idea who Mr. Fraser is, the metaphor would actually help form an impression of him. A simple interpretation would be: “Bijušais premjers atgādina Lieldienu salas pieminekli kam žiletēs ir iespraustas dibenā.” Finding the exact register of the word “arse” in Latvian is not important.

It is somewhat more complicated when Keating plays with common English figures of speech. For example, he described another opposition MP as “a shiver waiting for a spine.” (Keating, *ibid.*) This is a clever way of manipulating a common expression that a person might use to describe being afraid - “a shiver ran down my spine” - to imply that the target of the insult is a coward. Since a similar expression exists in Latvian to describe fear - “man drebuļi skrien par kauliem”- an almost literal

translation might work: “kā drebulis kas meklē kādus kaulus par kuriem noskriet.” Using omission (Veisbergs, *ibid.*:169), the imagery and venom projected in the original expression could be conveyed as: “kā glēvulis kam trīces skrien pa kauliem.”

Keating’s description of yet another opponent as “all tip and no iceberg,” (Keating, *ibid.*) is a similar dissembling of a common saying. The phrase “the tip of the iceberg” implies that only a small part of something much larger can be seen; suggesting that there is no iceberg under the person’s tip implies that they are shallow and insubstantial. A literal translation into Latvian might work: “Viņš ir kā aisberga redzamā daļa, bet paša aisberga nav.” Another strategy could be to employ substitution (Veisbergs, *ibid.*:167) by using the saying “Nevērtē vīru pēc cepures” – “don’t judge a man by his hat.” This can then be changed into “Cepure ir, bet vīra nav” (“The hat is there but the man is nowhere to be seen.”) This is successful on a number of levels. It is as concise as the original. The denigrating nature of the original insult is retained and perhaps even amplified by casting doubt on whether he is a real man. And there is even consistency between the vertical nature of the imagery in both examples i.e. the tip of an iceberg or a hat and the larger objects beneath them.

Keating frequently used Australian idioms in his speeches, which are difficult to interpret. For example, he once said that: “the Opposition crowd couldn’t raffle a chook in a pub.” (Keating, *ibid.*) In Australian English, “chook” is slang for a chicken. Lotteries called “chook raffles” with the prize of a frozen chicken are commonly held in pubs to raise money for charities. By implication, the opposition politicians are incompetent because they are unable to do such a simple thing. Assuming that the interpreter had the cultural knowledge to understand what the speaker was talking about, how could he or she convey the meaning of the statement to an audience unfamiliar with this unusual custom? As in the previous example, one way around the problem could be to substitute a different Latvian phrase which conveys the essential if not literal meaning. In this case this could be: “Par opozīciju vienīgais, ko var teikt, ir ka sliktam dejotājam pat grīdas dēļi traucē.” (“The only thing that can be said about the opposition is that even the floorboards are an impediment to a bad dancer.”)

There is also scope for cultural incomprehension in a statement made many years ago by former US presidential candidate Bob Dole while he was a senator. In the early 1980’s he was present at a White House function attended by three former US presidents: Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. Mr. Dole was heard to remark: “There they are. See no evil, hear no evil and... evil.”

An old Japanese story about the Three Wise Monkeys is very popular in the English-speaking world. It revolves around three monkeys who retain their virtue by respectively refusing to see, hear or speak evil things. Dole used this formula to highlight the weaknesses rather than the strengths of the respective politicians:

- Mr. Carter is a devout Christian who allegedly allowed his naïve views cloud his decision making i.e. he couldn’t see evil in the world.
- Mr. Ford was ridiculed for pardoning Mr. Nixon of crimes he had committed as president, hence hearing no evil.
- For Mr. Nixon’s part, due to his involvement in the Watergate scandal, many Americans consider him to be simply - evil. (Muston, 2009).

To sum up all of this American political history in one pithy, witty observation was a brilliant achievement by Mr. Dole. But conveying it into Latvian is not so easy. Firstly, a search of the Latvian version of Google and an informal survey of several well-educated Latvians indicates that the story of the Three Wise Monkeys is not currently well known in Latvian culture. (Coincidentally, however, in April 2009 a

foreign film called *Three Monkeys* was screened in Riga, in which the old tale is used as a metaphor for a dysfunctional family. It is possible therefore, that it could enter the Latvian consciousness through this medium.) Secondly, the events satirised in the joke happened long ago and involved two politicians who have since died and a third who only served a single presidential term and is a fairly minor figure.

What could an interpreter do if, say, the US Ambassador to Latvia decided to use Mr. Dole's jibe as an anecdote to liven up a speech? Hopefully, the ambassador might provide some background to the story, giving the interpreter some context to work with. Then, it might be worth looking for an analogous but not literally equivalent Latvian phrase i.e. utilising Veisberg's compensation and extension techniques (Veisbergs, *ibid.*: 165-169). A traditional Latvian storytelling format involves a farmer and his three sons. The standard version is that the eldest boys were clever while the youngest was an idiot, but there are variations. The interpreter could play with this as follows: "Misters Dols salīdzināja bijušos ASV prezidentus Karteru, Fordu un Niksonu ar trim neizdevušiem saimnieka dēliem – viens akls, otrs kurls, bet trešais – ļauns." ("Mr. Dole said that the former US Presidents Carter, Ford and Nixon were like a farmer's three useless sons: one blind, the second deaf, and the third evil.") In this way, something of both the content and the form of the original would be retained in the interpretation.

Wordplay is a particular feature of British political life. As a ruthlessly determined and controversial prime minister, Margaret Thatcher attracted a great deal of bitter, occasionally witty criticism. For example, the writer Clement Freud called her "Attila the Hen." (Muston, *ibid.*) Here, a reference to Attila the Hun, a bloodthirsty, reviled historic figure, is given a feminine and slightly ridiculous twist by turning "Hun" into "Hen." A literal interpretation into Latvian will not work, but something of the scathing nature of the insult could be retained by simply using "Dāma Attila" ("Lady Attila.") In other words, this means using omission (Veisbergs, *ibid.*:169).

British Conservative politician Norman St. John-Stevas once referred to Mrs. Thatcher as "the Immaculate Misconception." (Muston, *ibid.*) This is a play on the Catholic doctrine about the Virgin birth which is given a nasty edge by turning "Conception" into "Misconception." One way of retaining both the form and flavour of this broadside could be: "Politīķis apgalvoja, ka Tečeres kundze noteikti nebija šķīsti ieņemta." ("The politician said that Mrs. Thatcher was definitely not immaculately conceived.") The play on words is omitted, but the meaning and bile are preserved.

Another Conservative politician, Johnathan Aitken, accused Mrs. Thatcher of misunderstanding world affairs, quipping that: "She probably thinks that Sinai is the plural of sinus." (Muston, *ibid.*) Surprisingly, this pun also works in Latvian, because both critical words - "Sinai" as a place in the Middle East and "sinus" as a medical term – are international and have the same root in both languages. Thus the quote could be interpreted as: "Tečeres kundze tik slikti orientējās globālajos jautājumus, ka viņa noteikti domā ka vārds "Sīnāja" ir atvasināts no vārda "sinuss.""

2.1.2 English to Latvian: jokes told by and about English-speaking politicians

In the Soviet era, telling jokes was more than just a pastime. In sharp contrast to the humourless nature of official politics, and despite harsh penalties, political anecdotes

were shared as a form of spiritual resistance to the regime. The following one is simple to interpret:

Ļeņins pierādīja, ka valsti var vadīt visa tauta. Staļins pierādīja, ka valsti var vadīt viens cilvēks. Hruščovs – ka valsti var vadīt jebkurš cilvēks. Brežņevs pierādīja, ka valsti vispār var nevadīt. (Melne, 2006).

Lenin proved that the country can be run by the people. Stalin proved that the country can be run by one man. Khrushchev proved that anybody can run the country. Brezhnev proved that it's possible not to run the country at all.

Many Soviet era jokes, probably including the above example, were told throughout the USSR and entered Latvian through Russian, the Soviet *lingua franca*. However, there were also specifically Latvian gags. For example, to give another example which presents no interpreting challenges, it was said that the KGB headquarters in Riga had the best view in the city. Why? Because from there you could see Siberia.

Today, the conditions under which political humour can be expressed are radically different. The International Press Institute has stated that “Latvia has one of the best media freedom records in the world,” (International Press Institute, 2006) and politics is discussed openly rather than in whispered tones around the kitchen table. Some claim that, ironically, the absence of censorship has removed the impetus for telling political jokes. Those expressing this view point to a paucity of jokes about major contemporary political figures in Latvia. However, this is not borne out by the evidence, as a broad selection of recent political humour can be found in both new and old media.

Naturally, the format of many jokes has changed since Soviet times. For example, the literary magazine *Rīgas Laiks* regularly publishes quotes by contributors in which they try to sum up the national mentality of Latvians in one sentence. (Online 3). Many of these are clever in a self-deprecating way, and they often lampoon politics. Although this is from a written source, someone in Latvian public life may use them in a speech, at which point an interpreter would have to put them into English.

Some of the quotes are universal enough that they can be interpreted almost literally: “Vidējais latvietis ir kā Zatlera frizūra: pelēks un taisns, toties uz visām pusēm” (Online 3). In English this could be: “The average Latvian is like President Zatlers’ hair – grey and straight but at the same time all over the place.”

Others require a bit of extension (Veisbergs, *ibid.*:165): “Vidējais latvietis ir kā Ozoliņa komentārs: neapmierināts.” (Online 3). “The average Latvian is like an op-ed piece by *Diena* commentator Aivars Ozoliņš – grumpy.” An intelligent listener would take the initiative of visualising a combative journalist and would get the joke even if they have never read anything by the writer in question.

Some, however, wouldn’t make much sense without knowing a bit more about the subject. For example: “Vidējais latvietis ir kā Repšes aeroplāns: paštaisīts, vienvietīgs un bīstams.” (Online 3). Former prime minister and current minister of finance Einārs Repše builds aeroplanes as a hobby. There have been several accidents involving these homemade craft in the past few years. It therefore makes sense to extend the interpretation a bit to include some of this background: “The average Latvian is like one of the dodgy aeroplanes that Finance Minister Repše builds as a hobby – self-made, dangerous and with room for just one person.”

The following example would require more complex extension: “Vidējais latvietis ir kā Lemberga slimība: pašam jau sevis žēl, bet izārstēt arī negribas.” (Online 3). Facing corruption charges, Ventspils Mayor Aivars Lembergs has pleaded ill health to be released from detention. A possible interpretation into English could be: “The average Latvian is like the illness used by Ventspils Mayor Lembergs to lift the detention imposed on him for corruption charges – self-pitying but not wanting to get better.”

Humour is also employed in more direct political statements in Latvia. For example, a poster held up at a protest outside Parliament in September 2008 read: “Algas atkausēt, ministrus iesaldēt.” (Online 4). If, for example, a visiting foreign journalist wanted to know what it meant, it could be interpreted as: “Don’t freeze wages – freeze ministers instead.”

At around the same time, PR specialist Mārcis Bendiks made the following scathing remark about politicians: “Politikā iet vai nu nelieši vai zagļi, bet atsevišķos gadījumos tas viens otru neizslēdz.” (Online 4). This is easy to interpret: “Politics attracts either scoundrels or thieves, with the occasional combination of the two.” At the end of 2008, motoring journalist Ojārs Vētra commented on the expensive cars driven by some civil servants: “Vai nav pēdējais laiks mūsu ierēdņus pārsēdināt automobiļos, kuru izmēri ir adekvāti viņu veikuma vērtībai? Varbūt sastrēgumi ielās mazinātos.” (Online 4). This could be interpreted as: “Isn’t it about time that we gave our bureaucrats cars that reflect the true value of their achievements? This might help to reduce traffic jams as well.”

In August 2008, Attorney Uldis Cakars used an amusing analogy to criticise the functioning of Latvia’s court system: “Vieni māk izcili spēlēt vijoli, otri – klavieres, trešie – bungas, ceturtie labi dzied, bet visi kopā vienā orķestrī nevaram spēlēt.” (Online 4). A satisfactory interpretation could be: “One group are violin virtuosos, a second group plays the piano well, a third are good at drums, a fourth are good singers, but they don’t know how to play together as an orchestra.”

With regard to humour from politicians themselves, colourful language and cutting remarks about opponents are quite common. For example, in January 2009, Aigars Štokenbergs, Chairman of the opposition party *Society for a Different Politics*, had the following to say about then Prime Minister Godmanis and Minister for Transport Ainārs Šlesers: “Kad skatos uz premjeru, tad vienmēr paturu prātā, ka viņš ar Šleseru abi ir dvīņi ar ūdens lāšu līdzību, lai gan ne no vienas olšūnas.” (Online 4). This was a quip about the cosy relationship between politicians from different parties in the governing coalition. It is not difficult to interpret: “When I look at the prime minister, I bear in mind that he and Šlesers are virtually identical twins, even if they come from different egg cells.”

A few years earlier, Mr. Štokenbergs made the following remark while he was Minister for Regional and Local Government Affairs: “Esiet mierīgi, valstī nevalda ne Soross, ne Eross.” (Online 4). This was a period when some political forces were decrying the alleged influence in Latvia of international financier George Soros, while at the same time conservative politicians were condemning Riga’s gay pride parade and the supposed immoral effect of homosexuality on society. Mr. Štokenbergs’ statement was a concise, punchy retort to both of these conspiracy theories and could probably be interpreted almost literally without too much background: “Relax – neither Soros nor Eros are running the country.”

There has been much discussion in Latvia recently about whether the political system has lost touch with ordinary citizens. However, former Minister of Health Gundars Bērziņš appears to think that it doesn’t matter, stating in an interview last

December: “Politīķi nav nekādas brūtes, kurām jāizpatīk pirms kāzām.” (Online 4). This could be interpreted as: “Politicians aren’t like brides who have to be pampered before the wedding.”

During negotiations on the formation of a new government in early 2009, People’s Party Chairman Mareks Segliņš had this to say: “Manuprāt, jaunam cilvēkam nevajadzētu tā izturēties pret Godmani - piedāvāt stādīt kartupeļus un ganīt zirgus.” (Online 4). The statement was made in regard to an offer by the new candidate for prime minister, Valdis Dombrovskis (the “young person”), to give the outgoing prime minister Ivars Godmanis the job of minister for agriculture, which some considered to be not much of a prize. By adding a few clarifying details to the interpretation, the listener could both appreciate the humour and understand what the issue is: “I don’t think it’s fair for Prime Minister Elect Dombrovskis to offer outgoing PM Godmanis the agriculture ministry, where he would have to plant potatoes and tend horses.”

Roberts Zīle, Chairman of the For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK Party, made the following remark in March 2009: “Ar astoņkājiem, šķiet, ir līdzīgi kā ar zivīm — tie sāk pūt no galvas.” (Online 4). There was widespread media coverage at that time of how former Minister for Transport Einārs Šlesers had found lucrative jobs for cronies in state enterprises controlled by his ministry. Comparisons were made to a political octopus with tentacles everywhere. Mr. Zīle’s comments were about what would happen to this empire after Mr. Šlesers had announced his resignation. If the background was understandable from the context of the speech, the interpretation would be simple: “Like fish, octopi start to rot from the head.”

The main difficulty in interpreting the aforementioned humour is context, as it cannot be assumed that an intelligent listener would know enough about Latvian politics to be get the jokes. With regard to linguistic difficulties, puns and wordplay are much less frequently used in Latvian than in English. However, politicians and commentators occasionally make reference to very specific cultural concepts. For example, MP Kārlis Šadurskis made the following remark about the 2009 draft budget:

Klusinātā džeza ritmā grūžam naudu stikla kalnā, kur melnie kraukļi varēs sargāt Saulcerīti stikla zārkā, Latvijas zinātni un intelekta ekonomiku, kas, pat īsti nedzimusi, jau krīzes badā ir aizgājusi aizsaulē. (Sadurksis, 2008).

The imagery used here is somewhat confusing; for example, it is unclear where the reference to the “restrained jazz rhythms” fits in. Furthermore, the written text gives no indication of the speaker’s tone – it is possible to imagine these words being spoken in an angry, sad or comically ironic tone. However, let us assume that the latter is the case. Essentially, the speaker is making an allusion to *Zelta zirgs* (The Golden Horse), a play by the great Latvian dramatist and poet Rainis. This work revolves around the beautiful Princess Saulcerīte (literally “the hopeful sun”), who is imprisoned in a glass coffin guarded by black ravens. She is rescued by a farmer’s son – the third son, in line with the traditional storytelling form -who is supposedly stupid, but more importantly has a pure heart.

The politician is comparing Latvian scientific and intellectual life to this tale, warning that funding cuts will kill these spheres rather than delivering a happy ending. Rather than trying to directly convey symbols that would be unfamiliar to non-Latvians, substitution could be employed (Vesibergs, *ibid.*:167). The fairytale of

Sleeping Beauty is well-known around the world, and contains some similar elements. It could be used to build an interpretation as follows:

While we're wasting money elsewhere, due to the crisis the Latvian scientific and intellectual economy is dying before it has been truly born, like Sleeping Beauty who was never awakened by the Prince.

2.2. Professional comedy

One of the paradoxes of humour is that the same joke which brings joy to one group of people can cause great offence to another. This can just as easily be the case for cultures living within the same country or town as for people divided by language.

Such a gulf can even exist between people with normal hearing and the deaf. Barbara Neal Varma, an American sign-language interpreter, has described the numerous challenges of interpreting for two young deaf men at a performance by a comedian named Rudy Thomas (Varma, 2007). Her difficulties began when Mr. Thomas played a guitar and sang songs during the show. Ms. Varma says that for some deaf people with memories of sound, music can recall pleasant sensations, but for others it is an “unfathomable ritual enjoyed by The Hearing” and a deep insult. Fortunately, these particular men did not perceive it negatively, but Varma had to sign frantically to indicate that a song was being sung – something not automatically apparent to them – and to spell out the context of the love song being performed.

There were further complications when Thomas began to deliver a parody of the relevant love song, well-known to hearing audiences. The comedian turned the gentle tale of a broken relationship into a harrowing account of harassment:

“You picked a fine time to stalk me, Lucille,
Four hundred phone calls and a drive by attempt on my life!
I’d paid for a good time – more for a bad time –
This time you put me in the fucking hospital!”

This final phrase caused particular difficulty. Varma writes that she faced a choice between what register of the obscenity to use – it turns out that, as in standard English, there is a sliding scale from “make love” to “fuck” in sign language. Furthermore, there was no time to process the usage of the word in this context as a gritty adjective. She chose to use the obscene and literal form of the word, which at least produced a laugh:

I looked out again to see my clients laughing and pointing up at me with delight. I knew their glee was tied to the bawdy lyrics more than any comedy comprehension. Good girl signing dirty. A big night out for them.

The interpreter’s skills were tested further when the comedian produced a red ball like a clown’s nose and proceeded to perform a ventriloquist double-act with it. She employed techniques such as shifting from left to right to indicate which party was speaking, and decreased the size of her signs to indicate that the ball was talking in a “smaller,” child-like voice. She was further forced to deal with a verbal pun about “picking on someone” and nose picking in a graphic manner. She settled for the fact that the young men got a laugh at her expense even if they didn’t fully understand the content of the joke.

Varma’s concludes that her clients enjoyed the evening, if not for exactly the same reasons as the hearing members of the audience. In other words, her interpretation achieved some dynamic equivalence - the young men got a laugh, and we can presume that they understood at least some of the content.

It would be difficult to expect more from an interpreter dealing with culturally sensitive issues, word play, parody and register in a fast-moving situation. And different degrees of the mixed results Ms. Varma achieved are what interpreters of verbal languages are also striving for.

2.2.1 English to Latvian: Stand-up comedians Dylan Moran and Bill Bailey

In this section, we will look at two contemporary comedians from the British Isles. The first is Dylan Moran. Born in Ireland and currently living in Edinburgh, Mr. Moran has starred in a number of popular comedy television shows and is a regular at comedy festivals. His “observational humour” presents wry, occasionally bitter commentary on human relationships, politics and social mores.

Some of his stand up routines should not present any particular challenges for interpreting into Latvian:

When you're young you can do whatever you like. You can go out and drink battery acid then wake up and have a fight. And your hangovers aren't so bad, they're quite direct, they come in like bailiffs and say: “You were very, very stupid last night, get up! Get into the kitchen” (makes a kicking gesture). But when you get a little bit older, it's really evil. Because you wake up and think you're fine. “It's a beautiful day! Birds are swaying, trees are singing! I might go for a walk later on – go to the seaside maybe.” You start to believe your own bullshit. You think it must have been that sandwich you had on Wednesday. But it only lasts until you get to the kitchen door and then all the goblins start going: “hahahahaha!” But you see, you measure what a good time you had by how much it fucks you up. You go out tonight, get ripped, get shit faced. When you talk to somebody tomorrow, they'll say to you: “How was last night?” And you say: “it was fantastic! I can't see! No sensation on the left side of my body! You should have come - you would have at least lost an ear!” (Moran, Hangovers)

Drinking is a major part of the lifestyle of both Ireland and Latvia, and therefore jokes about hangovers are easily appreciated in both places. There are no puns and plenty of visual humour to aid the interpreting process. Mr. Moran not infrequently uses coarse language. It is common practice in Latvian interpreting to use a milder register for English swear words, and rendering the word “bullshit” here as “muldēšana” and “shit faced” as “galīgi pilā” would not alter the meaning.

In the following sketch, Mr. Moran opines on the different mentalities of men and women in the modern world:

I don't want to make any great generalisations about women. That would be vulgar. But all I will say is that they have no feelings. Because you'll find that men are actually far more romantic. Men are the people you will hear saying: “I've found somebody. She's amazing. If I don't get to be with this person, I'm fucked. I can't carry on, she's totally transformed my life. I have a job and a flat, but that means nothing. I have to be with her, because if I don't I'm going to wind up in some bedsit, I'll be an alcoholic and I'll have itchy trousers. I can't walk the streets anymore.”

That is how women feel about shoes. (Moran, Women Have no Feelings.)

The following is a possible Latvian interpretation:

Es nevēlos izteikties kategoriski par sievietēm. Tas, protams, būtu vulgāri. Bet teikšu atklāti: sievietēm nav jūtas. Vīrieši ir daudz lielāki romantiķi. No vīriešiem bieži dzird šādus vārdus: „Esmu atradis savu īsto. Viņa ir apburoša. Ja viņa nebūs mana, man būs gals. Man ir labs darbs, dzīvoklis, bet tam visam nav nozīmes, jo ja es nevaru būt kopā ar viņu, es kļūšu par dzērāju un būšu spiests dzīvot komunālajā dzīvoklī. Es pat vairs nespēju normāli iet pa ielu.” Toties sievietes mēdz šādā veidā izteikties par - apaviem.

The humour is derived from the juxtaposition of contradictory stereotypes about women i.e. their romantic, emotional qualities are sometimes supposedly overshadowed by a streak of materialism. However accurate the stereotype might be, it would probably be recognised and get a laugh in Latvia, as evidenced by a similar joke from a popular Latvian humour website:

- Dārgā, kāda ir tava karstākā vēlēšanās?
- Es vēlos, lai tu mani noskūpstītu trijās vietās...
- Oho! Kādas tās būtu?
- Parīze, Roma un Bahamu salas... (Online 5).

- My darling, what is your greatest desire?*
- *I'd like you to kiss me in three places...*
- Wow! And which would they be?*
- *Paris, Rome and the Bahamas...*

The following sketch is more challenging:

There is this image of the weak, sensual, pleasure loving French. Not going to war because they're all still in bed at two in the afternoon, with the sheets coiled around their knees, lying there and scratching themselves. Smoking a Gauloises inside a Gitane, before one of them sloughs off the sheets to pad around the kitchen naked. No, naked from the waist down, to emphasise their *nakidity*. Picking up yesterday's croissant crumbs with their sweaty feet. Slashing yesterday's paintings.

In a French accent: "What was I thinking? This is fucking rubbish! I hate my paintings and I hate yours too!" *In another character's voice:* "You **hate** my paintings?" "No, I **'ate** them - why do we have to talk fucking English? Your work is so derivative, because you copy mine, and mine is shit to begin with! I'm so bored in here." "Stop slashing things and get something for breakfast, I'm starving." "We have nothing, we're poor. Let's make love again instead of eating." "I am so sore from the things you do to me! Even my toenails hurt, leave me alone!" "Come on, you know you want it!" (Moran, French).

The first difficulty is a linguistic one. It is impossible to render into Latvian the fact that Mr. Moran is speaking English with a French accent, let alone the clever wordplay where the characters discuss what "language" they are really speaking. This is achieved through the pronunciation of the letter "h", a key difference between English and French phonetics. With marginal exceptions, such as Rūdolfs Blaumanis'

play *Skroderdienas Silmačos* (The Tailors come to Silmači) (in which the Jewish characters speak a Latvian-German Creole) or jokes aimed at diaspora Latvians, there is little tradition in Latvia of mocking the way foreigners speak Latvian. This could be due to the fact that the structure of Latvian means that grammatical errors result in pure incomprehension rather than jovial “otherness.” Another obvious explanation is that far fewer foreigners learn Latvian than English. In any case, this element would probably have to be eliminated in interpretation, except perhaps for a remark by the interpreter that the comedian is speaking in a French accent i.e. a metalingual comment (Veisbergs, *ibid.*: 171).

The second difficulty is with different perceptions of a particular foreign culture. Do Latvians and the Anglo-Irish see the French in the same way? English-speakers’ stereotypes paint the French as poor soldiers (an impression gained from their performance in World War II) and rather lazy but pleasure loving people. Latvians do not have the common history to readily appreciate the first part of the stereotype. However, Latvians probably do see the France as quite a hedonistic race, as the following Latvian joke attests:

Jautājums francūzietei:

-Vai jūs seksta laikā sarunājaties ar vīru?

-Protams, ja tuvumā ir telefons. (Online 5)

A French woman is asked, “Do you talk to your husband during sex?” She answers, “Of course, if there’s a telephone near by.”

It should be remembered that such stereotypes are not necessarily advocated by the comedian; rather, he is playing off perceptions held by the dominant culture of the particular audience. The above gag about the French would probably work in Latvian, interpreted fairly directly but with the aforementioned linguistic elements edited out. By contrast, in a different sketch, Mr. Moran lampoons Eastern Europeans and their countries with unpronounceable names. In this case, the mysterious “other” that an Anglo-Irish audience would find amusing would be rather too close to home for Latvians! However, it is worth remembering that for Eastern Europeans, there are other parts of the world which seem unfamiliar in a similar manner. There is an old Latvian joke in which the teacher asks her class to name three countries in Latin America. Little Jānis answers: “Paraguay, Uruguay and Bolderāja (a suburb of Riga).” (Online 5). It is all a matter of perspective.

The second comedian we will look at is Bill Bailey from England. Although Mr. Bailey and Mr. Moran have worked together on a number of comedy projects, their backgrounds and styles are very different. Mr. Bailey has been described as a “post modern” comedian due to his meandering storytelling and avoidance of traditional punch lines. Whereas Mr. Moran left school at 16, Mr. Bailey is a classically trained musician who finds comic material in science, philosophy and even theology. An example of the latter is a gag in which a discussion takes place between a customer and the staff of a car rental agency over the meaning of the phrase “acts of God” in a rental contract. As in many other Bailey sketches, deeply serious material is rendered funny by being placed in a mundane situation.

Although it is often said that music can be understood all, this does not necessarily apply to comedy. One of Bailey’s trademarks is making fun of musical styles and genres, with the “punch line” often being particular sounds or chords that

are instantly recognisable to those familiar with the culture. It is doubtful, however, whether many Latvians would “get” his parodies of traditional Cockney music or television theme songs, at least without extensive explanation of the cultural context.

We will therefore stick to his purely linguistic output. The “Chaucer Pubbe Gag” transcribed in Appendix 1 (Bailey, Chaucer Pubbe Gag) is a parody by Mr. Bailey of English medieval writer Geoffrey Chaucer. The archaic language and poetic form used in this sketch would make it very difficult to perform a simultaneous translation. Struggling to keep up, perhaps the best that could be expected from the interpreter would be a loose summary of the plot of the joke, along the following lines:

Tiek skaitīts dzejolis Džefrija Čosera stilā. Trīs vīri iegāja krogā laimīgā stundā un daudz dzēra. Tie arī daudz ēda pīrāgus, olas, šķiņķi, paipalas, pīli un zosi. Iereibuši, tie pievērsa uzmanību pāris meitenēm, un sākās izvirtības. Bet vīri sāka vemt, un tad tos izmet no kroga. Tie devās mājās, bet ēzelis ar ko tie brauca, aizriebuma pret vēmekļa pazīmēm, tos iemet mēslu pilnā grāvī. Tie priecājas, ka „vakars tiešām izdevies!”

Rendered in such a concise and dry manner, the sketch doesn't seem at all funny. Analysing the English version, it seems that much of the humour comes from the juxtaposition of an ancient verse form often associated with religious themes (Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* describe a pilgrimage) with a very profane, modern situation. A consecutive interpreter would not have the time to versify the text into Latvian, but could perhaps achieve some of the comic effect by utilising a similar contrast between high and low art forms in Latvian. The following could be one possible version:

Šis ir dzejolis angļu viduslaiku barda Džefrija Čosera stilā:

Reiz trīs vīri iegāja krodziņā
Un ļoti priecājās
Jo bija tā stunda ko sauc par „Laimīgo”

Tie malkoja vīnu
Un jautri smējās
Un drīz vien iereiba
Jo bija lieli svētki – dzērieni par puscenu!
Bet pēc vīna un medalus baudīšanas
Cilvēkam ir arī jāēd
Un tie baudīja pīrāgus, olas, šķiņķi, paipalas, pīli un zosi,
Tikai viens stāvēja bāls,
Jo tas bija veģetārietis.

Bet rijība noved pie citiem netikumiem
Un puisi sāka novērot
Trīs skaistas daiļavas.
Tie piegāja klāt un tām vaicāja:
„Klau, zaķi, negribat ieraut?”
Un sākās lielas izvirtības.

Bet alus ar paipalām slikti sadzīvo

Un vīru vēderos radās apmulsums
Sāka tie vemt,
Bet smaka bija velnišķīga.

Vīrus no krodziņa ārā dzina
Un mājup tie devās ēzeļa mugurā
Bet ēzelim arī šī smaka nebija tīkama
Un tas iemeta tos mēslu pilnā grāvī.
Bet vīri vienā balsī sauca:
„Tiešām superīgs vakars!”

With the removal of the reference to Dick Emery (a bawdy 1970's English comedian), the subject may be universal enough to get a laugh in Latvia.

In the sketch “Donkeys and Cocaine” set out in Appendix 2, Mr. Bailey turns his attention to religious themes (Bailey, Donkeys and Cocaine). This is simpler to interpret than the previous example. It is in prose form, there are no linguistic jokes, and the absurd situations described are further reinforced by the comedian's evocative gestures and facial expressions. The biggest barriers to successful interpretation are cultural. Firstly, religious people would probably find the sketch deeply offensive. Secondly, some of the references to English seaside pleasures (such as toffee apples), the Cockney accent of the Three Wise Men and the fact that the bucket salesman is from Ipswich may be lost. Thirdly, the sketch presupposes some knowledge about drugs, especially the fact that cocaine makes people (and by extension donkeys) hyperactive and sociable. Younger Latvians who have seen lots of Hollywood movies would probably get this aspect of the joke, even if they have never taken cocaine themselves.

The text is garnished with many frivolous details that could probably be omitted. A consecutive interpretation would be possible, but simultaneous interpretation would produce the best results thanks to the interaction of the text with Bailey's expressive body language. A possible Latvian version could be as follows:

Reiz kādos Zvejnieku svētkos es izklaidējos jājot ēzeļa mugurā. Bet man palika garlaicīgi, tādēļ ieņācu devu kokaīna no ēzeļa muguras, un iesmērēju kokaīnu pašam ēzelim smaganās. Tas uzreiz uzbudinājās, tam ausis un aste pacēlās gaisā. Un tas sāka kaifot, un nesās pa pludmali tādā ātrumā, ka smiltis veidojās dziļas sliedes.

Un man ienāca prātā doma: ja Bībeles laikos būtu bijis pieejams kokaīns, vai nebūtu izmainījusies visas Kristietības simbolika? Iedomājieties Jāzepu un Mariju, lēnām mērojot ceļu uz Betlēmi ar ēzeli. Viņi ierodas pilsētā, bet tiem paziņo, ka neesot neviens brīvs viesnīcas numurs, jo ir taču Ziemassvētki. Tiem nav citas izejas, bet iet nakšņot kūtī.

Bet iedomājaties, ja Jāzēpa un Marijas ēzelim tiktu iedots kokaīns. Tad tas ātri skrietu uz Betlēmi, paņemot pa ceļam stopētājus, kuri priecājās par iespēju nokļūt pilsētā ar labu naktsdzīvi. Ēzelis dodas tādā ātrumā, ka zvaigzne debesīs kas rāda ceļu uz Betlēmi tam palūdz iet lēnāk. Tie iejoņo Betlēmē, ieiet kādā viesnīcā kur ir daudzi brīvi numuri, un izvēlas divvietīgu istabu ar silīti. Drīz ierodas trīs gudrie, kas uztraucās par smalko apģērbu kas tiem mugurā, un dārgām dāvanām kas tiem ir līdzi, jo viesnīca atrodas sliktā rajonā. Tie vaicā kur var atrast Jēzu – kūtī laikam? Nē, tiem paziņo, viņš atrodas 223. numurā, otrajā stāvā, pa gaiteni, garām

guļošam ēzelim ar asiņojošo degunu. Trīs gudrie uzskrien pa kāpnēm, bet netīšām pieklauvē pie nepareizām – 224. numura durvīm. Atver 65 gadus vecs spaiņu pārdevējs no Anglijas, kas Betlēmē apmeklē spaiņu izstādi. Tas sāk lielīt savus spaiņus, bet pārtrauc savu runu kad viņš apjēdz, ka trīs gudrie nav izstādes dalībnieki. Viņš pavaicā vai tie neesot muzikanti, uz ko tie atbild, ka tie ir trīs gudrie. Spaiņu pārdevējs atbild, ka esot pašpārliecināti sevi tā dēvēt, un ja tie tiešām esot tik gudri lai tie nosaucot sešus dažādus lapkokus. Tie atbild, ka viņiem neesot laika ākstīties, bet tas tiem uzliek atbildēt, kas ir Ēģiptes galvas pilsēta. Tie viņam iesit un dodas uz blakus, pareizo numuru. Un te mēs redzam, kā mainās visa Kristietības simbolika. Te nav ne silīte, ne gani, bet bikšu gludināmais dēlis, mini bārs un jaundzimušais Jēzus parastā bērna gultiņā. Lūk kas būtu, ja ēzeļiem tiktu dots kokaīns.

2.2.2 Latvian to English: Radio duo Fredis & Ufo and the play *Latviešu mīlestība*

Latvian humour has a long history, as the nation's enormous collection of folk songs (*Dainas*) shows. There is a whole subgenre of the *Dainas* devoted to sex. The following are some explicit examples:

Dod, māmiņa, kam dodama,
Nedod mani zvejniekam:
Zvejniekam zvīņu pauti,
Asakota pipelīte.

Dod, mamiņ, kam dodama,
Nedod mani skroderam:
Skroders mani sabadīs
Ar aso pipelīti.

Dod, mamiņa, kam dodama,
Nedod manis kalējam:
Kalejam dzelzu pauti,
Tēraudiņa pipelīte. (Online 6).

*Mother, whoever you give me to,
Don't give me to the fisherman:
The fisherman has scaly balls,
And a prick full of fish bones.*

*Mother, whoever you give me to,
Don't give me to the tailor:
The tailor will gouge me,
With his sharp prick.*

*Mother, whoever you give me to,
Don't give me to the blacksmith:
The blacksmith has iron balls,
And a steel prick.*

As with the humorous English verses examined earlier, the poetry of the original is sacrificed in the translation. However, the bawdy subject matter comes across clearly and would be easily understood through an interpreter.

As mentioned previously, the Soviet era produced a rich array of humorous anecdotes. There is plenty of humour around today in Latvia, but not always in the same form as in English speaking countries. For example, the country has little tradition of stand-up comedy. However, there is a considerable array of funny radio programmes, and Latvia has a rich theatre culture. Therefore, in this section, we will look at examples from contemporary radio and theatre and consider how they could be rendered into English

One of the longest running radio comedy shows in Latvia is *BB Brokastis* (BB Breakfast) on Riga's *Radio SWH*. For over a decade, the duo of Fredis (real name Andris Freidenfelds) and Ufo (Kaspars Upacieris) have been giving their listeners a cheerful start to the day with a format of music, interviews and jokes. One of the main features of their comedy act is *Melnā humora tops* (Top Black Humour) where the audience is invited to submit funny ideas based around a set topic (Online 7). Here are some offerings on the theme of "Sajaukti un pārlaboti sporta veidi" (Mixed up and improved sports):

Kērlings Parīze-Dakāra
Paris to Dakar curling

Grieķu-romiešu dambrete
Greco-Roman checkers

Svarcelšana uz batuta.
Weightlifting on a trampoline

Daiļhokejs.
Figure ice hockey

Sinhronā svarcelšana.
Synchronized weight lifting

Barjerlēcšana ar izpletņi.
Hurdles with a parachute

Zemledus ūdenspolo
Under the ice water polo

These are all simple enough to interpret. There is no word play, with the universal subject matter achieving humorous results through absurd combinations of familiar concepts.

Fredis and Ufo often make jokes about Latvia's chaotic political scene. Here are some examples of humorous entries on the subject of "New names for political parties:" (Online 7)

Puspartija
Half a Party

Pie Siles Netikušo Partija.
The Party of those who didn't make it to the Trough

Trešā Trolejbusa Galapunkata Pārcelšanas Partija.
Let's Move the Terminus of Trolleybus No. 3 Party

These are relatively easy to interpret. However, some of the offerings on the same subject are more challenging:

Partija - Jaunās 15 minūtes

One of the main liberal parties in Latvia is called *Jaunas laiks* – New Era. If the listener knows this fact, the joke could be interpreted as, “the New 15 Minutes Party.”

Sociālā atbalsta partija "Visu Šleseram".

Ainārs Šlesers is a former minister of transport and currently a candidate to become the mayor of Riga. He is notorious for putting cronies in charge of state-owned enterprises under his control and for dubious business deals. If the listener has some awareness of Latvian politics, the interpretation is simple: “The Social Support Party “Everything for Ainārs Šlesers.””

Kreiso kandžas tecinātāju apvienība "Dzimtenīte" uz Eiroparlamentu izvirza par huļīgānismu sūtkās atsēdējušos lāga zēnu - Alfrēdu.

Getting this joke requires some knowledge of recent Latvian history. The “Alfreds” mentioned here is Alfrēds Rubiks, the last head of the Latvian Soviet Communist Party. He was jailed for several years in the 1990’s for opposing Latvia’s independence, and unlike most other Soviet-era leaders, he has never changed his ideological views. He is a candidate in 2009 for the European Parliament. Another nuance that would be lost in interpretation relates to “kreisā kandža.” This literally means “bad moonshine,” but since the word “kreisi” also means “left” in Latvian, it is a double entendre about Rubiks’ political alignment. A simplified interpretation preserving most of the meaning of the original could be as follows:

The bad moonshine distillers’ union “Our Little Homeland” candidate for the European Parliament is communist jailbird and good ole’ boy Alfrēds Rubiks.

Another subject in this series is “Leņina varoņdarbi un paralēlā dzīve” (Lenin’s heroic deeds and his parallel life.) (Online 7). Much of the humour is derived from the contrast between the mythologizing of Lenin in communist propaganda and the much more cynical view of him and the Soviet regime held by most Latvians. The jokes presented here is an illustration of this tension based on people’s memories of the communist era. As such, this is an area where differing histories could lead to a gulf in understanding between a Latvian speaker and an English-speaking audience. However, perhaps perceptive outsiders could get the jokes if they were provided with a bit of context.

One of the jokes revolves around the fact that the Bolsheviks came to power promising bread for the workers and land for the peasants. However, new inequalities

quickly emerged under the new order. The following joke about this is quite straightforward to interpret:

Ļeņins nolēma zemi - zemniekiem, rūpnīcas - strādniekiem, alu un desas - politbiroja darbiniekiem.

Lenin decreed: for the peasants - land! For the workers - factories! For the members of the politburo – beer and sausages!

The following joke is based on Lenin hiding his malicious nature behind apparent generosity, and is also quite simple to interpret:

Ļeņins izgudrojis arī Ļeņina kokteili. Saka, ja Molotovam ir, tad man ar vajag! Tā sastāvā ir kaķa urīns, sērs, nedaudz petrolejas un viss tiek pasniegts nedraugam pie bāra letes, sakot - Es uzsaucu!

Lenin invented the Lenin Cocktail. He thought, if Molotov has one, then I can too! It was made of cat's urine, sulphur and a little kerosene, and he presented it to a foe at the bar saying: "It's on me!"

The next example includes some simple wordplay:

Ļeņins izmērīja visiem saviem revolucionāriem gailīšus un sadalīja visus "lieliniekos" un "maziniekos" pats sevi viņš slepeni un nevienam nerādot, ieskaitīja pie lieliniekiem...

The English names of the pre-Revolutionary communist factions “Bolsheviks” and “Mensheviks” are derived from the respective Russian terms for “Majority” and “Minority.” In Latvian the terms are translated directly, with the added bonus that “Lielnieki” and “Mazinieki” are derived from the roots “liels” (big) and “mazs” (small.) This is important for understanding this joke, which is essentially about penis size. It could be rendered as follows:

Lenin measured the willies of all his revolutionaries and divided them into “Bolsheviks” and “Mensheviks” – the big guys and the little guys. He managed not to show anyone his own equipment and included himself amongst the big guys...

The following equally tasteless joke would require a little more understanding of Soviet history:

Ļeņins sarkanos stūrīšus izdomāja brīdī, kad kādā stūrītī bija pamīlējies ar Kolontaju, kura toreiz bija vēl nevainīga.

“Red corners” were traditionally the places in Russian houses where icons were put. Under Soviet rule, the practice was continued in a distorted fashion, with the religious pictures replaced by Lenin portraits. The word for “red” in Russian is a homonym for “beautiful,” and it obviously gained additional ideological currency under communism, but for the purposes of the joke here all that matters is the colour. Alexandra Kolontaja was an aristocratic woman turned revolutionary. In 1924, she

became the world's first female diplomat when she was appointed as the Soviet ambassador to Sweden. This crude joke is based on her supposedly intimate relationship with Lenin:

Lenin invented the “red corners” where his portrait was kept in Soviet homes after making love in a corner with the revolutionary Alexandra Kolontaja, who lost her virginity in the act.

As mentioned previously, theatre is a cornerstone of Latvian culture, and some of the funniest recent comedies have been staged by the international award winning *Jaunais Rīgas teātris* (New Riga Theatre). One of the best of these is the very popular *Latviešu mīlestība* (Latvian Love), a four-hour 30-minute epic about romantic relationships.

The play is directed by Alvis Hermanis, but has no formal author. Instead, the writing is a collective effort based on the actors' fantasies and real life incidents. Some of the performances in Riga have been interpreted into English, and during a production tour in Russia the same was done with Russian. However, rather than pure simultaneous interpreting, the interpreters read from prepared scripts, as the production team considers this necessary to ensure quality. The author of this paper has seen the play in Latvian but has not read or heard the English script. The interpretations presented below are his own work based on a copy of the Latvian text he received from *Jaunais Rīgas teātris*.

The play begins with the actors reading out lonely hearts' advertisements placed in Latvian newspapers. Some are poignant while others are funny. The humour in the following example resides in a prisoner insisting that his potential partner is not behind bars and is free of bad habits generally:

Esmu jūsu princis baltā zirgā. Atbildēšu tikai princesēm ar foto. Man 23, 187, 85, šobrīd atrodos nebrīvē, bet tas nav šķērslis mīlestībai. No ieslodzījuma vietām netraucēt, tāpat dzērājām, pīpētājām. Gaidu!!! (*Latviešu mīlestība*, New Riga Theatre: 2)

I am your prince on a white horse. I will only answer letters from princesses with photos. I'm 23, 187, 85, currently imprisoned, but that is no barrier to love. No letters from prison welcome, smokers and drinkers also need not apply. Waiting for you!!!

The humour in the following example is also based on the contradiction between clearly stated materialistic goals and the apparent search for love:

Privātmājas īpašniece vēlas iepazīties ar tautieti no ārzemēm vai privātuzņēmēju laulībai uz mīlestības pamata. (*Latviešu mīlestība*, New Riga Theatre: 1)

Female owner of a private house would like to meet a compatriot living overseas or a private businessman for marriage based on love.

The passage below is humorous simply for the bizarre nature of its contents:

Večuks (48, 176, 68) cer sastapt saprotošo dāmu, kurai atradīsies neliels starta kapitāls dažu firmu izveidošanai (plītis, krāsnis, kamīni, starpvalstu pārvadījumi). Māku sienu pļaut, govi slaukt. Iejūgt kā zirgu, tā trektoru. Uz kura sāna vajag uzlikšu jebkuru fūru, ar vienalga kādu bruto svaru. Pēc pirkstu traumas spēlēju pārsvarā uz pogu akordionu, klavierēm, sintezatora. Ir savs Audi 1000. Ļoti ceru uz nepīpējošu dāmu. (*Latviešu mīlestība*, New Riga Theatre: 2)

An old man (48, 176, 68) hopes to meet an understanding lady with a small amount of start-up capital to establish a number of companies (stoves, ovens, fireplaces, international forwarding.) I can make hay and milk a cow. Harness a horse, and a tractor, too. I can put a lorry of whatever gross weight on whichever side you need. Following a finger injury I mostly play the accordion, piano, synthesiser. I own an Audi 100. Hoping very much to meet a non-smoking lady.

The main body of the play then follows. It consists of unrelated two-actor sketches covering various romantic situations. There are few word plays in the text, and the main subject matter - love - is universal. At the same time, the dialogue is peppered with elements that might not be understandable to people who have not lived in Latvia.

For example, one of the first sketches involves Alberts and Dzirdra, two retired people who have met through a classified advertisement. Alberts mentions that he was robbed in the market some time ago:

A: (...) Un ka es iekāpu tramvajā, ņēru pie kabatas – maka nav.
D.: Pārzīvojāt?
A.: Skaidrs, ka pārdzīvoju – man tur iekšā nauda, visi dokumenti, represētā apliecība...
D.: Represēts esat? Man pēdējais vīrs arī bija represētais. Laba pensija.
(*Latviešu mīlestība*, New Riga Theatre: 8).

A “*represētā apliecība*” is a document indicating that the holder was the victim of political persecution during the Soviet era and is therefore entitled to certain social benefits today. There is irony in Dzidra saying that her ex husband was politically persecuted and therefore received a good pension. In this case, it would be useful to employ extension (Veisbergs, 1997: 165) to make the subject of the conversation clear to the audience. Thus the interpretation could be as follows:

A: (...) And when I got in the tram, I checked my pocket – and my wallet was gone.
D.: Were you upset?
A: Of course! I lost my money, all my documents, my certificate stating that I was politically persecuted by the Soviets...
D.: So you were politically persecuted? My ex husband was politically persecuted. He got a good pension because of it after independence.

Rather than extension, other fragments of dialogue could be enhanced through omission. For example, in discussing plans for a visit to Alberts’ apartment, Dzidra asks what she should bring, to which he answers:

(...) Nu zivis nevediet, tās es varu dabūt svaigas, feinas. Butes vai plekstes vai lestes – kā kurš sauc – mēs viņas pa atejas vākiem saucām. Šitik lielas – tā ka aste pāri pannnai. (*Latviešu mīlestība*, New Riga Theatre: 10).

Alberts lives in the fishing port of Salacgrīva, so he tells Dzidra that there is no point in her bringing fish. He says that fresh flounder (“butes”) are available locally, and then uses two synonyms (“plekstes” and “lestes”) to illustrate what other people call them. It so happens that there are also synonyms for “flounder” in English, such as “plaice” and “fluke,” and if the interpreter has a good knowledge of the subject, they could try and incorporate this into the interpretation. However, this is probably not necessary. It is likely that an audience in Riga wouldn’t be aware of all of the Latvian synonyms, which are probably inserted as a device to highlight Alberts’ regional identity.

Rather than these synonyms, it is probably more important to convey a vivid slang term for the fish also revealed by Alberts:

(...) Don’t bring any fish, I can get lovely fresh ones. Flounder – we call them toilet seats. This big – the tail hangs over the pan.

Another sketch takes place in a hospital. In an effort to impress a female patient, an unnamed male patient reels off his life story. He mentions that he is from Sabile, a small town in Latvia’s westernmost region, Kuzeme. In line with the dialect spoken by people from this area, the man chops the endings off words and uses a pronoun (“viņš”) similar to the standard Latvian masculine form (“viņš”) to refer to women. For example, he describes a recent visit to see his mother:

(...) Vēl pirms divām nedēļām bij aizbrauc pie viņš, domāj, palīdzēš viņai, tur, palikš pa nakti, bet nē – jau tai pašā vakarā aizbrauc mājās ar stopiem – nevar izturēt – vis laik lecamies, vis laik tikai lecamies (...)(*Latviešu mīlestība*, New Riga Theatre: 18).

There are some parallels here with the difficulty Dylan Moran sketch discussed previously. It is not possible to convey these regional peculiarities into English, and leaving them out would probably not detract much from the story. However, by using analogue idiom transformation (Veisbergs, *ibid.*:166) and adding a bit of English slang, the interpreter could convey the idea that the speaker is a country bumpkin:

(...) I went to see the old lady few weeks ago, help ‘er out a bit and stay the night, but that same evenin’ I hitched a ride home – couldn’t handle it – cussin’ and fightin’ all the time (...)

This sketch consists almost entirely of a monologue by the man. However, the only line spoken by the woman dashing, all the man’s romantic hopes, is the best one. It presents no barrier to interpretation:

Man vakar bija aborts. (*Latviešu mīlestība*, New Riga Theatre: 20).

I had an abortion yesterday.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The author hopes that this paper has disproved Virginia Wolf's pessimistic assertion about humour quoted in the introduction. Jokes can indeed be made to cross linguistic boundaries, as long as the interpreter follows a few basic rules.

Firstly, an assessment must be made of what type of joke has been made by the speaker. If it is based wordplay, it is unlikely that a direct translation will work, while for other forms of humour a decision has to be made on whether the context is understandable to the culture of the source language.

Secondly, one of the strategies suggested in the paper should be applied. If a pun is made or a concept foreign to the target culture is put forward, adding a few words of explanation (extension) would be sensible. If the speaker uses a figure of speech, the interpreter may have to find an equivalent but not literal interpretation (analogue idiom transformation or substitution.) If some part of the joke is impossible to render, it may be necessary to leave out some word play for the sake of overall clarity (omission).

Thirdly, the interpreter may have to be satisfied with providing an approximate interpretation. In contrast to serious texts dealing with concrete facts, humour is a highly subjective phenomenon, with the same joke capable of amusing or enraging an audience depending on mood, context and a host of other factors. An outcome such as that achieved by sign language interpreter Barbara Neal Varma, where her clients had a good laugh if not for the "right" reasons, might be acceptable in many cases.

Interpreters face different challenges depending on the setting of the humour. With rare exceptions (such as the example of George Bush and his slideshow about weapons of mass destruction), political speeches generally use few props and are entirely based on language. This can put extra pressure on the interpreter, since getting the joke across depends entirely on words. However, with regard to political jokes, it is usually possible to ascertain the speaker's tone and motive and to find equivalent phrases to match them i.e. it is evident whether the relevant political is using humour to attack an opponent or induce conviviality amongst potential voters.

Furthermore, most political jokes are one-off events, isolated statements with a limited interrelationship with the remainder of the text. In contrast, humorous plays or comedy routines are elaborate webs of plot and dialogue where the interpreter must work within a broader context. Furthermore, there is added pressure to ensure amusement, since unlike for a political speech this would be the primary motivation for the audience being there. In other words, whatever assistance the interpreter may gain for conveying humour from scenery, costumes and expressive body language may be annulled by higher expectations from the audience and the more challenging structure of the performance.

Looking at these elements in combination, it would seem that radio comedy is the most difficult genre to interpret out of all those considered in this paper. The nature of the medium is entirely verbal, and although radio comedians do make one-off jokes, the same expectations apply as for "visible" comedy performances.

Underpinning all of the processes described in this paper is the interaction between the cultures of the target and source languages. Differences and similarities between the linguistic structures and cultural frameworks of the respective groups of people are critical for creating the possibility of a joke to be shared between them, no matter how skilled the interpreter.

In this regard, it would seem that there is quite a lot of common ground between the Latvian and English speaking cultures. With regard to wordplay, English undoubtedly has more scope for double entendres and puns, but this does not mean that Latvian is entirely devoid of such devices. Both languages have a rich stock of figures of speech, opening the way for interpreters to be creative in dealing with wordplay.

There are also quite a few cultural commonalities. The consumption of alcohol, a popular subject for comedians, is shared by both groups, as are certain attitudes towards gender, ethnicity and sexuality. In fact, appreciation for many jokes touching on these areas may be a bond shared more closely between related peer groups in different countries than between members of the same society. In other words, Bill Bailey's comedy routine about donkeys and cocaine would be more readily appreciated by young Latvian students (even through an interpreter) than by religious people in Bailey's native England.

Naturally, there are also areas where the two cultures do not meet. One clear example of this is jokes relating to the Soviet era. For much of the 20th century, the political, social and economic experiences of the two groups were so different that jokes specifically rooted in that period can take a lot of explaining to get across.

However, it seems that this gap will narrow over time. A generation has already reached maturity in Latvia which has no personal experience of communism. The United Kingdom, Ireland and Latvia share a political future in the European Union, and personal contacts and shared television, music and other vehicles of cultural exchange mean that youths in Riga have more things in common with their peers in Manchester or Dublin than they do with their parents.

Admittedly, almost all of this exchange is in one direction, with the English language countries transmitting culture rather than receiving it from small nations such as Latvia. But the general movement towards deeper intercultural understanding will probably mean more shared humour in future. Consequently, Latvian-English interpreters will have an easier time translating jokes.

4. REFERENCES

Written Sources

Alleyne, R. (June 24, 2008) Adolf Hitler told bad jokes about Nazi friends. *The Telegraph*. Available from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/2185507/Adolf-Hitler-told-bad-jokes-about-Nazi-friends.html> [Accessed April 12, 2009.]

Case, C. (September 12, 2006) In European Parliament, debate – in 21 languages – can be pricey. *The Christian Science Monitor*. Available from <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0912/p05s01-woeu.html> [Accessed March 2, 2009].

Corn, D. (June 25, 1998) A joke too bad to print? *Salon*. Available from <http://www.salon.com/news/1998/06/25newsb.html> [Accessed April 12, 2009.]

Herzberg, M. & Mones, L. (1945) *Humor of America*, New York, D.Appleton-Century Company Incorporated.

Hiatt, B. (March 1, 2004) Crystal clear. *Entertainment Weekly*. Available from <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,596362,00.html> [Accessed April 12, 2009.]

Latviešu mīlestība. Unpublished manuscript, courtesy of the New Riga Theatre.

Lee, S. (May 23, 2006) Lost in translation. *The Guardian*. Available from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/may/23/germany.features11> [Accessed March 3, 2009].

Melne, K. (April 8, 2006) Par čukčām, Štirlicu un smiekliem. *Rīgas aprīņa avīze*. Available at <http://www.aprinkis.lv/arhivs/403982/?archiveDateSelected=08.04.2006> [Accessed May 4, 2009.]

Raphaelson-West, D. (1989) On the Feasibility and Strategies of Translating Humour. *Meta: Translators' Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 128-141.

Rosendahl, B. (2009) Lost in Translation. *Jerusalem Post*. Available from <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull&cid=1238562932248> [Accessed April 3, 2009.]

Weisbergs, A. (1997) The Contextual Use of Idioms, Wordplay and Translation. In D. Delabastita (ed.), *Traductio: Essays on Punning and Translation*. (pp.155-176) Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing

Watson, G. (2002) Translating Humour. *Tradurre*, 3 (2): 5-9.

Winnett, R. (July 10, 2008) President George Bush: 'Goodbye from the world's biggest polluter'. *The Telegraph*. Available from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/2277298/President-George-Bush-Goodbye-from-the-worlds-biggest-polluter.html> [Accessed April 12, 2009.]

Internet Sources

Bailey, B. Chaucer Pubbe Gag. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qod7nSGKag0>. [Accessed on April 11, 2009.]

Bailey, B. Donkeys and Cocaine. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLyPSAKlzg4&feature=related>. [Accessed April 11, 2009.]

International Press Institute (2006), World Press Freedom Review. Available at http://www.freemedia.at/cms/ipi/freedom_detail.html?country=/KW0001/KW0003/KW0068/ [Accessed April 20, 2009.]

Keating, P. Paul Keating Insults Archive. Available from <http://www.webcity.com.au/keating/> [Accessed April 12, 2009.]

Moran, D. French. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZWZZRZDcSQ&feature=related>. [Accessed on April 15, 2009.]

Moran, D. Hangovers. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87Rh-eg6YOM>. [Accessed on April 15, 2009.]

Moran, D. Women Have no Feelings. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUH34iqK7cl&feature=related>. [Accessed on April 15, 2009.]

Muston, K. (2009) To Whit: The Art of the Political Insult. www.dailykos.com. Available from <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2009/1/20/83318/4569/71/686406> [Accessed April 12, 2009.]

RIC International. Interpreting versus Translation. Available from <http://www.ricintl.com/interpreting-vs-translation-services.html>. [Accessed April 15, 2009.]

Sadurskis, K. Available at http://www.diena.lv/lat/laikraksts/tiesa_runa/citati-2008-10-10-1 [Accessed April 20, 2009.]

Tate, C. Classic Comic Relief: Catherine Tate meets Tony Blair. Available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfkjvagVsRI> [Accessed May 4, 2009.]

Varma, B. (2007). Intepreting Comedy Available at <http://www.smithmag.net/memoirville/2007/08/19/interpreting-comedy-by-barbara-neal-varma/>. [Accessed March 15, 2009.]

Wiseman, R. The British Association for the Advancement of Science Study on the World's Funniest Joke. Available from <http://www.laughlab.co.uk/1> [Accessed May 3, 2009]

Online 1. Available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3570845.stm> [Accessed May 4, 2009.]

Online 2. Available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_IONqeHo7k [Accessed May 4, 2009.]

Online 3, Available at <http://tikainesakinevienam.lv/category/latvietis/page/7/> [Accessed April 20, 2009.]

Online 4. Available at <http://www.politika.lv> [Accessed April 20, 2009.]

Online 5. Available at <http://www.tanks.lv/tnx/anekdots.php>. [Accessed on May 4, 2009.]

Online 6. Available at http://www.drarturs.lv/lv/raksti/latviesu_tautas_dainas/. [Accessed May 2, 2009.]

Online 7. Available at http://www.radioswh.lv/swh/melnais.php?id=417&view=daudz_new&saak=&file=2009-04-24. [Accessed May 2, 2009.]

Appendix 1 - Bill Bailey's "Chaucer Pubbe Gag"

Three fellows wenten into a pubbe
And gleefully their hands did rub
In expectation of revelry
For it was the hour that is happy.

Great bottles of wine did they quaff
And had a really good laugh
Till drunkenness held full dominion
For it was two for the price of one.

Yet after wine and mead and sack
Man must have a massive snack
Great pasties from Cornwall
Scottish eggs round like a ball.
Great hams, quail, duck and geese
They sucked the bones and drank the grease
One fellow stood all pale and wan
For he was a vegetarian.

Yet man knoweth that gluttony
Stoketh the fire of lechery
On three young wenches round and sly
The fellows cast a wanton eye.

And did approach with drunken wink
"Hello darlin', do you fancy a drink?"
Soon they caught them on their knee
It was like some grisly puppetry
Such was the lewdness and debauchery
It was like a sketch by Dick Emery
(Except that Dick Emery is not yet born
So such comparison cannot be drawn).

Then the fellows began to pale
For quail is not the friend of ale
And in their bellies much confusion
From their throats vile extrusion
Stinking foul corruption
Came spewing forth from fetid lips
The fetid stench did fill the pub
It was the very arse of Beelzebub.

Thrown they were from whore and trumpet
In the street, no coin no strumpet
Homeward bound they must quickly go
To that end a donkey stole
Their hands all with vomit greased
The donkey – he was not pleased

And threw them into a ditch of shite
They all agreed – “What a brilliant night!”

Appendix 2 - Bill Bailey's "Donkeys and Cocaine"

I was on a donkey ride and I did a line of cocaine off the donkey's back. Because donkey rides are a bit dull: pod, plod, plod, up the pier, a toffee apple and then it's all over. But with a bit of cocaine, I started thinking: "Now we're cooking! Now we're cooking! Come on you little donkey bastard!" The donkey was getting a bit upset, so I thought I'd better give it a fighting chance. So I rubbed a bit of cocaine in the donkey's gums, and he perked right up. His ears went "bing!" His tail went "bing!" And he went: "Where are we going? Up the pier? Toffee apple? Brilliant!" Up and down the beach, carving a trench in the beach. And all these kids are asking, "Hey Mister, can we have a go?" And I go, "No, piss off."

(This is followed by the comedian going off on a tangent unrelated to the main story, which continues as follows):

And a thought struck me: imagine if donkeys had got a hold of cocaine in the early days. Christianity, or at least the iconography of Christianity, would be totally different. Imagine the scene of Joseph and Mary plodding to Bethlehem on a donkey. It would take ages, and when they finally get there: "Any rooms?" "No, totally booked out. It's Christmas, you know." "Oh well, we'll have to go in the stable then." But imagine if you gave the donkey a bit of cocaine. He's galloping to Bethlehem now! Picking up hitchhikers: "Where are you going mate? Bethlehem? Go on, get on." And Mary, Joseph and the hitchhiker are galloping along: "Bethlehem, brilliant, they've got good clubs there!" Shooting like a rocket across the desert, and the star is going: "What are you doing? Slow down!" They steam into Bethlehem, get off the donkey and go into a hotel. "Any rooms?" "Yea, plenty of rooms, help yourself. What do you want? A double with a manger?" So they check in, and the next minute the Three Wise Men turn up, acting all Cockney. They're a bit self conscious in their turbans, and they go: "I told you we should have dressed down, everyone's looking. Put that myrrh away, it's rough around here. Hello darling, the three wise men here. We're looking for Jesus in the stable, is he?" "No – room 223. Second floor, down the corridor, past the donkey with a nose bleed." The donkey is slumped in the corner with a sheep in a headlock, punching him and going: "You're family!" The three wise men run up the stairs, but they get the wrong room – 224. They burst in and go: "Hello! We've got all the myrrh and everything..." And there's a 65 ear old bucket salesman from Ipswich who is there for a bucket conference. And he says: "Hello gentlemen! The Ipswich super bucket represents a major breakthrough in mobile fluid conveyance... hold on a minute – you're not here for the bucket conference?" "No, we're the Three Wise Men." "What, you're the band?" "No, we're actually Three Wise Men." "That's a bit cocky calling yourselves that, isn't it? Right, I'll test you: name six deciduous tress!" "Look, we're in a bit of a hurry mate..." "OK, easy one: name the capital of Egypt, you must know that!" So they just punch him and go next door, and this is where the iconography of Christianity is irrevocably changed. They burst in and there's no manger, no shepherds, there's a trouser press, a mini bar, and baby Jesus in a cot. If donkey's had cocaine.