

## Translating Breaches of Intersubjective Constraints on Interaction: the Case of Swearing in Roddy Doyle's Novel *The Commitments*

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### Résumé de l'article

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# Translating Breaches of Intersubjective Constraints on Interaction: the Case of Swearing in Roddy Doyle's Novel *The Commitments*

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## RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article examine la traduction des transgressions des maximes de Grice (et d'autres contraintes interactionnelles) dans les situations où la même maxime/contrainte révèle des forces normatives différentes dans deux cultures distinctes. Nous avançons ainsi que le transfert direct de la transgression de ces contraintes entraîne une modification du degré d'attention sollicitée et de l'implicature du texte cible. Cette proposition sera illustrée par l'analyse de la traduction norvégienne du roman irlandais *The Commitments* où le traducteur, involontairement peut-être, ne tient pas compte du fait que la contrainte associée à la production de jurons est plus forte en norvégien qu'en anglais irlandais. Bon nombre de transgressions étant plus ou moins directement transférées, cette traduction, de toute évidence, donne matière à des changements. En effet, tout au moins pour la majorité des lecteurs de la traduction, l'attention peut être sollicitée plus intensément et l'implicature (sociale) est très probablement altérée.

## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the translation of breaches of Gricean maxims (and other constraints on interaction) in situations where the "same" maxim/constraint displays different normative strengths within two cultures. It is argued that if a breach of such constraints is transferred directly, the result will be a different degree of attention-getting effect and a possible change in the implicature in the target text. This point is illustrated by the analysis of the Norwegian translation of the Irish novel *The Commitments*. Here the translator perhaps unwittingly ignores the fact that the "swearing constraint" is stronger in Norwegian than in Irish English. Many of the breaches are transferred more or less directly, which means that the translation contains a number of potential shifts: the potential attention-getting effect is far stronger, and the (social) implicature is most likely skewed, at least for a generalized segment of the audience.

## MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

Grice, maxims, viol / transgression des maxims, implicature sociale, jurons  
Grice, maxims, flouting of maxims, social implicature, swearing

One possible way of describing the process of creating a written text is as an activity fluctuating between *observing* extra-textual, textual, and linguistic constraints governing the given text type and communicative situation, and *breaching* the selfsame constraints, either unintentionally, or if intentionally, in measures prescribed by the given text type and communicative situation. The notion of "intentionally breaching constraints (on interaction)" is intended to include but also to expand on language philosopher H. P. Grice's (1989: 30) notion of *flouting*, which he defines as the deliberate contravention of a *conversational maxim* with the intention of generating an *implicature*.

Both observances and breaches (but particularly the latter) present challenges to the translator, mainly because the constraints in question are culturally specific. This cultural specificity comes in different forms. For instance, some constraints can be said to be in force in culture A but not in culture B. This may be problematic when the constraint in question is breached – flouted – in a source text (ST), since there may be no obvious way of re-creating the breach and its potential effect in the target text (TT). The locus of interest here, however, is slightly different, namely where the given constraint arguably exists both in the source culture (SC) and the target culture (TC), but where the constraints display slight differences in their workings within the two cultures. More specifically, the main focus of this article is cases where the “same” constraint is, arguably, normatively weaker in the SC than in the TC because this means that a breach of the given constraint in the ST will have a weaker *potential attentional-interpretational (a-i) effect* (i.e., potential degree of hearer/reader attention and interpretational activity), than a re-constructed breach of the same constraint in the TT. This point is illustrated by looking at selected examples from the Norwegian translation of the Irish writer Roddy Doyle’s novel *The Commitments* (1988).<sup>1</sup> The numerous instances of swearing in the ST are considered instances of breach of a “swearing constraint,” which, it is argued, exists both in Irish and in Norwegian culture but is weaker in the former than in the latter. This ought, perhaps, to have entailed a toning down of the swearing in the Norwegian translation, at least if equivalent effect is aimed for, but the opposite seems to be the case. The translator translates all of the swearing and then some (thus blatantly violating the Norwegian swearing constraint), as well as translating some conventionalized swearing by non-conventionalized swearing. Here, it is demonstrated how this results in a potentially stronger a-i effect in the TT than in the ST, and a blurring of the breach-produced *social* (Mao 1996) or *expressive* (Altieri 1981) *implicature*.

To begin with, however, relevant aspects of Grice’s theory of the Cooperative Principle (CP) (Grice 1989: 22-40) are presented and their use in the analysis of literature and literary translation is defended, before a re-interpretation of the Gricean notion of maxims as intersubjective constraints on interaction is presented, together with an outline of the various ways in which such constraints may be culturally specific.

### **1. Maxims as intersubjective constraints on interaction and their cultural variability**

Paul Grice’s CP states that speakers generally tend to observe the following *conversational maxims*:

- *Quantity*: Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange), and Do not make your contribution more informative than is required;
- *Quality*: Try to make your contribution one that is true (Supermaxim); Do not say what you believe to be false, and Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence;
- *Relation*: Be relevant;
- *Manner*: Be perspicuous (Supermaxim); Avoid obscurity of expression, Avoid ambiguity, Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity), and Be orderly.

Although speakers will tend to observe these maxims, they will also, upon occasion, choose *not* to observe them. The act of deliberately choosing not to observe one or more of the maxims for the purpose of communicating something Grice called *flouting*, and the product of this act he called *implicature*.<sup>2</sup> This theory has recently been expanded to include a consideration of the more comprehensive potential effects of breaches and flouts, including that of causing a *heightened degree of attention* to what is going on, and that of causing *increased interpretational activity* (here termed a-i effects), generating, among other things, implicatures (Greenall, in press).

The original CP has often been seen as specifically geared towards oral exchanges (see, for example, Malmkjær 1998: 25, 31), despite the fact that several of Grice's most famous examples have been of written exchanges (see Grice 1989: 33). Malmkjær points to the possibility that implicatures might be somewhat more difficult to work out in situations where the participants do not have face-to-face access to each other, but goes on to conclude that this is not an insurmountable obstacle to the model's application to written texts. The question is, however: is it therefore also applicable to written *literary* texts? It could be said that literature, in (prototypically) producing a world fully or partially separate from the "real" world, is governed by a separate set of constraints and separate ways of manipulating these constraints. Although the former is probably true to an extent (there is, for example, little doubt that a set of narrative constraints with maxim-like properties will exist within literature), it has also been argued that since we use the same model of linguistic-communicative competence when producing both fictional and "real" utterances, the difference between the two products, at least those to do with the manipulation of the linguistic output, is not a principled one. The model that we use, Tannen and Lakoff claim, consists of

the knowledge a speaker has at his/her disposal to determine what s/he can expect to hear in a discourse, and what s/he is reasonably expected to contribute, in terms of the implicitly internalized assumptions made in her/his speech community about such matters. (Tannen and Lakoff 1994: 139)

This obviously encompasses the CP. And what it means is that if we can assume that something akin to the CP is in operation in "real" discourse, we can also assume that it is in operation in producing and interpreting a literary text, despite the existence of additional genre-specific constraints.

One difference that *could* be assumed to exist between the functioning of the CP in non-fictional and fictional discourse is that in the case of the latter, the maxims plus other, genre-specific constraints will operate on two different levels: 1) between the characters in the text (attended to by the reader), and 2) between the author and/or narrator and reader. Obviously, there are clear parallels to the former situation also in the world of non-fictional discourse: written non-fiction often reports dialogue, and in oral interaction we often overhear others' conversations. This does not mean, of course, that it is not important to distinguish between the two levels in the analysis, and the focus here will be on the latter level, on the exchange between the author and/or narrator and the reader. And this brings up an additional consideration, namely the verisimilitudinal status of the author/narrator, since this may be seen to have some bearing on whether or not the CP can be said to be in operation in the author/narrator-reader relation. Within literary speech act theory, there are

two opposing views, represented by those of the seminal contributors John Searle (1975) and Mary Louise Pratt (1977). According to one of their commentators, Michael Hancher, "Searle leaves open the old-fashioned possibility that the author may on occasion be telling the story himself, whereas Pratt makes the more usual assumption that the narrator will always be a fiction" (Hancher 1977: 1094). Here, a third way is opted for: ordinary speakers, authors of non-fiction or of fiction are always simultaneously both themselves *and* a fiction. The way ordinary speakers and authors act out their identities is not in principle different; sometimes we align ourselves closely with what we perceive to be our inner core, other times we act out identities constructed on the basis of this perceived inner core plus other, borrowed identities, in acts of imitating, playacting, parodying. The important thing is that whether we align ourselves closely with our perceived inner core or not in the act of producing a piece of discourse, we always draw on the model of linguistic-communicative competence described above, meaning that we use the CP, in principle, in the same way. Whether or not a speaker, or a non-fiction or fiction author, is perceived as being him or herself or something closer to a fiction by *the reader*, is, obviously, something which will affect the latter's interpretational process (in providing different kinds of context for interpretation), but no perceivable situation of this kind will affect the principled workings of the CP.

One thing that remains to be considered is the CP's applicability to literary *translation*. Malmkjær's (1998) position in this matter is that the main obstacle in this respect is that the theory of meaning that Grice's CP rests on is untenable, in itself, and in the context of translation. According to Grice, the understanding of utterances depends on the hearer/reader's understanding of the speaker/writer's intentions which in turn depends on his or her understanding of the speaker/writer's utterances (which is, obviously, problematic); and translation, arguably, severs the connection between the reader and the author's original intentions entirely anyway. These problems mean, according to Malmkjær, that the usefulness of Grice's CP in analysing what goes on in translation remains unclear. Malmkjær does, however, admit that removing this theory of meaning from the equation – in an interim period whilst awaiting a more viable foundation theory – will not nullify the CP, and doing exactly this in her article, she goes on to observe that many instances of flouting and implicature in translated texts "can be explained by the theory of cooperation" (Malmkjær 1998: 34). And what is being "explained" is how well a given source text implicature has been preserved in the target text.

### *1.1. From "maxims," via "norms," to "intersubjective constraints on interaction"*

Moving on to the main concern of this paper, *maxims* are seen to be the main ingredients in the flouting process leading to a-i effects and implicature, and thus identifying the exact nature of maxims will give us an idea of how far the phenomenon of flouting actually extends (and in turn, how widely we should cast our net when trying to identify such phenomena and the ways in which they are being dealt with in translation).

Grice himself only offers vague, and rather contradictory, clues as to what maxims might be. On the one hand, he sees them to somehow derive from human beings'

inherently rational nature (“I would like to be able to think of the standard type of conversational practice not merely as something that all or most do in fact follow but as something that it is *reasonable* for us to follow” [Grice 1989: 29]); on the other hand, he sees them as some kind of social, intersubjective entity that is “learned . . . in childhood.” The most important clue to what maxims might be, however, stems from Grice’s descriptions of what these maxims *do*: the fact that they can be breached (to produce implicature, see above) strongly indicates that they are some kind of *normative* entity.

The general norm theory outlined and discussed within translation studies offers an enlightening point of departure for a more thorough understanding of maxims. The nature of a *norm*, the core of which seems to be generally agreed on, is perhaps most neatly summed up by Toury:

Sociologists and social psychologists have long regarded norms as the translation of general values or ideas shared by a community – as to what is right and wrong, adequate and inadequate – into performance instructions appropriate for and applicable to particular situations, specifying what is prescribed and forbidden as well as what is tolerated and permitted in a certain behavioural dimension... Norms are acquired by the individual during his/her socialization and always imply sanctions – actual or potential, negative as well as positive. (Toury 1995: 54-55)

This definition seems to cover the Gricean maxims as well: they are “performance instructions” applicable to the particular situation of text production (and perhaps also to other situations, see Grice 1989: 29). Note, furthermore, that the definition echoes some of Grice’s own statements regarding these entities (for example the claim that they are learned or acquired), and that it adds at least one important dimension that Grice failed to emphasize, such as the fact that norms (including maxims) always imply *sanctions*. This is important, since it explains the general floutability of norms (see Greenall 2002),<sup>3</sup> and by extension, the floutability of Gricean maxims, in the sense that implied sanctions increase the likelihood of a breach being noticed, and hence that an intended potential effect is achieved.

From a Gricean perspective, this reconceptualization of Gricean maxims as norms has a number of repercussions. One of the most important ones is the clear break with the idea that the maxims should form a limited, fixed (albeit extendable; see Grice 1989: 28) set of entities which, moreover, because of Grice’s suggestion that they might be anchored in human rationality, many have claimed to be universal or criticized for not being universal (enough) (see overview in Greenall 2002), or have more or less implicitly treated as something which ought to be universal (for example, within the field of translation studies, Thomson 1982; Hohulin 1987; Hatim and Mason 1990, 1997; Aghbar 1995; Okolo 1996; but see Baker 1992: 237-238, for an opposing view). Conceiving of maxims as part of a set of (non-universal) floutable norms, as is being done here, obviously forces reconsideration both of the phenomenon’s extent and its stability. These aspects will be dealt with in turn.

Firstly, whereas the category of “maxim” may have emerged as neat and manageable, the category of “norm” may, by contrast, appear unlimited. Are there ways of circumscribing this category in any efficient sense? Translation studies norm theorists have tried to do so, in trying to delimit the notion of norm using some notion of “convention,” on the one hand, and some notion of “rule” on the other:

- Idiosyncrasies – norms – rules (Toury 1995: 54)
- Conventions – norms – rules – decrees (Hermans 1996: 32)
- Conventions – norms – judicial laws (Chesterman 1993: 6; 1997: 55)

These scales are all seen as continua, with norms situated in the middle, weaker convention-based regularities on the left of the scale, and some notion of rule (often seen to involve codification and stronger sanctions) on the right. The details of these theorists' definitions of where one entity lets off and the other begins vary slightly, which is only to be expected since there are no definite cut-off points, especially between conventions and norms. The most important thing to bear in mind regarding maxims-as-norms, however, is the following: obviously, Toury's idiosyncrasies, and the weaker end of the convention category will not be the right place for maxims, since a certain frequency and regularity of a given behaviour and a certain measure of implied sanction strength will be necessary for breaches (flouts) to be noticed and hence be able to convey implicatures. In addition, maxims-as-norms will tend to include the category of *rule*, since breaches of rules or laws can also in some cases be intended and perceived as flouts, and convey implicatures. It is, for example, quite possible to imagine someone causing someone else bodily harm or even committing murder in order to convey a message (for example, hired thugs trying to bully someone into paying up, or gangs trying to warn other gangs off their territory). In other words, if floutability is the criterion, then we need to go beyond the category of norm. Thus, here, strong conventions, Gricean maxims and other norms (including narrative and translational norms), rules, laws and decrees are all seen to belong to a broad category of intersubjective constraints on interaction (Greenall 2002). Note that this is not intended to entail a view of the category of intersubjective constraints on interaction as one where one can necessarily postulate objectively existing members; rather, maxims (and all other intersubjective constraints on interaction) are seen as social assumptions that are constructed and re-constructed in each situation of use, so that it is possibly "methodologically preferable to work out the maxims that each language user [or social actor] is constructing in a given speech situation" (Robinson 2003: 131).

### 1.2. *Aspects of the variability of intersubjective constraints on interaction*

Norm theorists tend to emphasize the *socio-cultural variability* of norms; Toury is one of them:

there is absolutely no need for a norm to apply – to the same extent, or at all – to all sectors within a society. Even less necessary, or indeed likely, is it for a norm to apply across cultures. In fact, "sameness" here is a mere coincidence – or else the result of continuous contacts between subsystems within a culture, or between entire cultural systems, and hence a manifestation of interference . . . Even then, it is often a matter of apparent rather than of genuine identity. After all, significance is only attributed to a norm by the system in which it is embedded, and the systems remain different even if instances of external behaviour appear the same. (Toury 1995: 62)

Furthermore, Robinson's (2003) view, that maxims (which are examples of norms/intersubjective constraints on interaction) are constructed *in situ*, obviously takes the idea of variability even further: not only do such entities vary across cultural or social groupings, they may also vary from situation to situation. Here, however, it



is important to take a sober view and emphasize the fact that there are obviously forces that keep these entities intersubjectively manageable, i.e., there have to be factors that contribute to a shared core understanding of constraints – an understanding of what they are, how they work and who they apply to – quite simply because we do seem to share such understandings (this is evidenced, among other things, by the fact, that without such a shared understanding, the constraints would not be able to continue to perform their functions; see Hermans 1996: 26). Having said this, it may well be the case that as soon as we wander “out of one social group and into another (let alone out of one language and into another) [there] will always [be] [...] a certain amount of uncertainty as to the maxims that govern speech” (Robinson 2003: 130). Here, Robinson might be right in assuming that uncertainty might set in as early as at the point when one crosses over into another social group, but it is nevertheless reasonable to believe that “culture” (Robinson’s “language”?) – despite the fact that most cultures will consist of an intermix of *different* cultures – is the most likely demarcation point for a transition into potentially (completely) unknown territory: *within* a culture, people are at least likely to know the same constraints, even though they don’t necessarily feel that they all apply to them; *across* cultures not even this knowledge is (normally) shared. Hence, the legitimacy of the below outline of types of *cross-cultural* variability.

### 1.3. *Types of cross-cultural variability*

The first type of variation is the simplest one:

- a) Constraint X occurs in culture A, but not in culture B.

A possible example here might be Basil Hatim’s “‘evaluation’ maxim” (Hatim 1997: 118) as it applies to Arabic rhetoric. This “maxim” dictates that one’s contribution should always cater to the rhetorical needs of those who support one’s views, ignoring those who do not (Hatim 1997: 171), and is not seen to occur in English-speaking cultures.

- b) Constraint X occurs both in cultures A and B, but in different sub-cultures, speech situations or genres in the different cultures.

An example here might be provided by Grice’s first maxim of Quantity (Be as informative as is required), which seems to be rather prevalent and generally applies across the board in English-speaking societies (culture A). Keenan (1976), in her famous study of verbal interactions in a Malagasy society, found that this maxim is not an expected feature of many speech situations in this society (culture B): “The expectation that a speaker will observe such a norm varies according to context [...]. A speaker is more likely to withhold information when that information is significant than when it is not significant” (Keenan 1976: 76).

- c) Constraint X occurs both in cultures A and B, but is interpreted differently in the two cultures; that is, different kinds of action or different degrees of intensity of the same action are needed in order to fulfil the requirements of the constraint.

An example of this kind of situation might be found in the difference between English and German discourse, as described here by Mona Baker:



unlike English, German discourse is non-linear and favours digressions. In some extreme cases, such as Fritz Schütze's *Sprache soziologisch gesehen*, there are "not only digressions [...] but also digressions from digressions. Even within the conclusion, there are digressions." (Clyne 1981: 63, quoted in Baker 1992: 235-236)

This suggests a stricter interpretation of the maxim of Relation in English than in German discourse, in the sense that for an English-speaking audience, the relevance requirement is fulfilled sooner than it is for a German-speaking audience. Or, put differently, in order to "Be relevant," German speakers/writers have to say more (i.e., provide a higher degree of intensity of the given action).

- d) Constraint X exists both in cultures A and B, but is put to different (textual) uses in the different cultures.

This is a scenario where examples do not seem to abound; however, Hatim and Mason (1997: 140) do make a reasonably convincing case for the fact that in English-speaking discourse, the first maxim of Quality is the maxim most often used to create irony, whereas in Arabic, this maxim is not used for that purpose at all. What is used instead is the second maxim of Quantity. In other words, while English speakers/writers signal that something is ludicrously not the case by saying things that are plainly not true, Arab speakers/writers will tend to do so by using repetition and other kinds of stacking of information (see Hatim 1997: 196-197).

- e) Constraint X occurs in both cultures A and B, but is "stronger" in culture A than in culture B.

This represents a quite subtle, hitherto virtually uninvestigated, type of variability, despite the fact that it is of great importance (something which will be evidenced by the case presented below – that of translating swearing from English into Norwegian). What is meant by saying that constraint X is *stronger* in culture A than in culture B is the following: even within one and the same culture, some constraints are more strictly enforced than others, i.e., they are more strongly normative than others. Obviously, an unwritten convention dictating when to wear and when not to wear a tie, or a maxim stating that one should avoid prolixity (one of Grice's Manner maxims) will be less strongly normative than a codified law, such as one prohibiting the taking of human lives. Here, too, however, it is important to bear in mind that constraints in general, including considerations of their strength, are socially variable and negotiable *in situ*, and thus that constraint-strength, too, will vary across social groups and situations. Again, however, there will be an intersubjectively identifiable *core* strength, a point of departure, so to speak, for strength calculations *in situ*. And this core (understanding of) constraint strength will most likely ensure a relatively fixed hierarchy of strengths between conventions and norms on the one hand and codified laws, etc. on the other within one and the same culture, and also a relative stability across situations which makes it reasonable to talk about the same constraint (to the extent that constraints can ever be the same across cultures (see Toury 1995: 62, above) being more strongly normative in culture A than in culture B.

This kind of scenario obviously presents challenges for translation, not least because of the frequent demand for equivalent effect. A recent expansion of the Gricean scheme to include a consideration of the potential a-i effect of a flout (i.e., heightened attention and increased interpretational activity [Greenall 2002: 208-265])

was mentioned at the outset. As a general rule, breaches of weak constraints will cause weaker a-i effects than the breach of a stronger constraint. Thus, if the same constraint is weak in the SC and strong in the TC, and the translator does not take this into account, then he or she might end up with stronger a-i effects in the TT. In the following, we take a look at a translation from English into Norwegian where this has arguably happened.

## 2. Breaches of the swearing constraint in Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments* and their translation into Norwegian

As regards the notion of swearing, a useful point of departure is provided by Anna-Brita Stenström's definition of swearwords as words

which are totally or partly prohibited in social intercourse, [and] are often referred to as "taboo words" [...] in particular concepts related to religion, sex and excretion [...]. If such words are used figuratively, signalling the speaker's emotions and attitudes, they are used for swearing. (Stenström 1991: 239)

What this definition indicates, is that swearwords flout constraints on two different levels; firstly, they flout a swearing – or "taboo" – constraint<sup>4</sup> (producing, as shall be seen, social or expressive implicature), and additionally, they flout Grice's maxim of Relation, producing figurative meaning (hence *fucking*, for example, at one point implicated [something like] *very*, a meaning which has now become conventionalized, in terms of having become a *generalized conversational implicature* [Grice 1989: 37-38]). Both breaches cause(d) a potential a-i effect, but it is nevertheless mostly breach of the swearing constraint that concerns me here.

The Irish novelist Roddy Doyle's texts are littered with swearwords. The fact that this constitutes a breach of a constraint in Ireland (and elsewhere in the world where the novel is read), is evidenced by the fact that "Doyle has often been accused of overusing bad language in his novels" (Asián and McCullough 1998: 57). Doyle's defense against such accusations reveals his acknowledgement of the existence of the constraint:

That's the way the characters talk, it's plain and simple, what more can I say? Not all the characters use bad language. Pound for pound, *The Van* has more bad language than the rest, because it's largely Jimmy Sr's story, and he's a man who laces his language continually with four-letter words of various shapes and sizes, and I don't make any apology for that. I have no problem justifying the bad language. There's very little violence in it and it's not there for shock value. In a culture where many films are created purely to shock people, trying to shock people by a choice of words doesn't work anymore. (McArdle 1995: 113)

Doyle's acknowledgement of the constraint lies, among other things, in his acceptance of the notion that swearing constitutes "bad language." The quote also reveals, however, a number of other interesting observations that Doyle has made regarding constraint breaches. He notes, for instance, the fact that breaching constraints can be used for purposes of characterization ("That's the way the characters talk"); he realizes the attention-getting potential of constraint breaches (what he calls their "shock value"), and he notes – in line with the pivot claim made in this paper – that some constraints may be stronger than others (i.e., [visual] representations of

violence can be more powerful than swearing). Finally, he defends himself against his detractors by pointing out that constraint strength is something that changes over time, and that this particular constraint has indeed done so: “trying to shock people by a choice of words doesn’t work anymore.”

Doyle’s work *The Commitments* is the first of three novels in the *Barrytown Trilogy*. It is the story of a group of unemployed, working class youths from Dublin who decide to get together to start a soul band. The group’s class affiliation and the fact that the text of the novel is largely made up of a large number of (written representations of) spoken dialogue are all likely reasons behind the choice to introduce such a richness of expletives in this particular work: the working classes are generally seen to swear more freely than the rest of society (although there is also evidence to prove that, for example, certain age groups, irrespective of class belonging, give the working classes ample competition in this respect; see for example Stenström 2006), and spoken genres generally contain more swearing than written ones (Farr and Murphy 2009). Here is an extract (1a) which provides some of the flavour of the book as a whole; the band is arguing over whether or not they should cover a song by Depeche Mode:

- (1a) – It’s just *fuckin’* art school stuff, said Jimmy.  
 [...]
  - Hang on, Jimmy, he [Derek] said. – That’s not fair now. The Beatles went to art school.
  - That’s different.
  - *Me hole* it is, said Derek. – An’ Roxy Music went to art school an’ you have all their albums, so yeh can *fuck off with yourself*.
  - Jimmy was fighting back a redner.
  - I didn’t mean it like tha’, he said. – It’s not the fact tha’ they went to art school that’s wrong with them. It’s – (Jimmy was struggling.) – more to do with – (Now he had something.) – the way their stuff, their songs like, are aimed at *gits* like themselves. *Wankers* with funny haircuts. An’ rich das.
  - An’ *fuck* all else to do all day ‘cept *prickin’* around with synths.
  - Tha’ sounds like *me arse*, said Outspan. – But I’m sure you’re righ’.
 (Doyle 1988: 4-5; my emphasis)

Swearing in this novel is essentially an expression of the anger and frustration of its working class characters, and, within the work, gets aimed both at the “others” (*Wankers with . . . rich das*) and, seemingly misplaced, at other members of their group, whenever tempers rise (Derek to Jimmy: *Me hole it is*). The explanation of the latter phenomenon resides, of course, in the fact that swearing is a strong marker of group identity, and hence gets used across the board, not merely vis-à-vis the class enemy. No matter whom it is directed at within the work, however, the main point here is that vis-à-vis the reader, *the swearing is possibly the most important tool for projecting the aggressive, frustrated working class backdrop against which everything else in the book must be understood* (see Ghassempur, forthcoming), the main message of the book being how the band becomes a place where its members actually manage to pick up a scrap of self-worth, enabling them to see possible avenues out of their miserable lives.

### 2.1. *Translating the potential a-i effect*

Literary “evidence,” of the kind found in *The Commitments*, gets company from an overwhelming amount of anecdotal evidence testifying to the fact that Irish English speakers – and perhaps especially Dubliners (see Hickey 2005: 141) – swear a lot.<sup>5</sup> Recently, this kind of evidence has, however, been backed up by evidence of a somewhat harder kind. In a recent corpus linguistics study, O’Keeffe and Adolphs (2008: 81) note a higher frequency of use of swearwords as response tokens among Irish English speakers than British English speakers. In another corpus linguistics study, Farr and Murphy (in press) note a generally higher frequency of use of swearwords among Irish English speakers as compared to their use in several other varieties of English. Although both of these studies are limited to spoken language and to swearwords within a limited semantic domain (the religious domain), they are nevertheless making a good start at consolidating the folk-linguistic conception of Irish English speakers as liberal swearers.

The connection between a large amount of swearwords used by individuals within a culture on the one hand and the relative strength of the swearing constraint on the other is of course by no means straightforward: insistent repetitions of a “forbidden” act *can* be evidence of violent resistance to a strong, but somehow unpopular constraint; however, it is more likely a reflection of a constraint that is weak or that has weakened. This is more likely not least because of the fact that repetitive breach will tend to – precisely – weaken constraints. Hence, it is concluded that for Irish English speakers, the swearing constraint is generally relatively weak, something which seems to be supported by O’Keeffe and Adolph’s observation that “The Irish speakers seem to accept swearing as a normal and frequent response token” (O’Keeffe and Adolphs 2008: 81).

Note that positing some such thing as a *general* constraint strength might be seen as problematic, insofar as the group of Irish English speakers cannot be claimed to be in any way homogenous, and exactly how strong or weak a constraint is perceived to be by any one individual within this speech community will depend on, for example, their sociolinguistic affiliation (see Allan and Burridge 2006: 237), their cultural progeny (since a speech community need not be culturally homogeneous), and finally, on how individuals re-construct the constraint in any given situation. Furthermore, being a novel with broad appeal written in a language of wider communication, the book’s readership will also extend far beyond the Irish English speech community. It may nevertheless be useful, for purposes of comparison, to generalize across this group, and this may also be a more justifiable course of action than it might initially seem to be: firstly, authors and translators of works such as *The Commitments* often have to write with a generalized reader in mind, and secondly, the majority of readers within this larger speech community will have at least some stereotypical conceptions regarding the status of the swearing constraint in the Irish English speech community, and will hence have the necessary background for “borrowing” (if they will) the reactions and responses of the most immediate target group of readers (this being a potential aspect of the process of identifying oneself with the world presented by a work of fiction). The generalized reader postulated here is hence someone who is either a member of a (heterogeneous) core group of source text readers sharing at least some of this group’s characteristics, or someone capable of aligning themselves

– and likely to align themselves – with this core group, because they have some understanding of shared conceptions of, among other things, constraint strength.

These general remarks also hold for the readers of the Norwegian translation (*The Commitments* – *Da soul'en kom til Dublin* [1994]<sup>6</sup>). And with this in mind, it could be said that the swearing constraint for a generalized Norwegian reader is less weak. Although there is very little hard evidence to back this claim up, the assumption is nevertheless a reasonable one to make: in addition to a strong folk perception that Norwegians are poorer swearers than, for example, the Swedes (Jenstad 1987: 44) or the English (who, as we have seen, are well underway to be proved to swear less than the Irish), there are several indications that Norwegians are still very hung up in their “puritan traditions” (Tveit 2004: 112). Norwegian swearwords being mainly from the domain of religion means, for example, that they constantly fuel the resistance of the actively Christian population of Norway, resulting in much attention to this topic in the press in the form of debate and attempts at putting a muzzle on Norwegians who swear.<sup>7</sup> An additional indication is the recorded effects of a translation such as that of *The Commitments* into Norwegian on a Norwegian audience, represented, in this instance, by a handful of colleagues who were asked, informally, to assess selected parts of the translation. The following extract (1b) was, by all, experienced as unduly attention-demanding, strange, unnatural, exaggerated and/or (even) shocking:<sup>8</sup>

- (1b) – Det er sånn *jævla* kunstskeledritt, sa Jimmy.  
 [...]
  - Stopp nå, Jimmy, sa han [Derek] – Det er urettferdig. The Beatles gikk på kunstskele.
  - Det er noe annet.
  - *Faen* heller om det er, sa Derek. – Og Roxy Music gikk på kunstskele og du har alle lp'ene deres, så du kan bare gå hjem og *drite* og legge deg.
  - Jimmy kjempa med rødfargen i ansiktet.
  - Jeg mente det ikke sånn, sa han. – Det er ikke det at de gikk på den *forpulte* kunstsken som er feil. Det er (Jimmy kjempa) mer det at (Nå var han inne på noe) greiene deres, låtene, er retta mot *kødder* som dem sjøl. *Ronketasser* med *bedritne* frisyre. Og rik pappa. Og ikke en *faens* dritt å gjøre på hele dagen, annet enn å *klå* på synther.
  - Det der høres ut som *ræva mi*, sa Outspan. – Men du har vel rett.
 (Doyle 1888/1994: 10, translated by Ragnar Hovland; my emphasis)

The problems with this passage have both a qualitative and quantitative dimension. Apart from the fact that expressions such as the following:

- (2) *jævla* kunstskeledritt  
 [devilish art-school shit]
- (3) du kan bare gå hjem og *drite* og legge deg  
 [you can just go home and have a shit and go to bed]

will tend to seriously singe the sensibilities of many Norwegian readers, the relatively high frequency of breaches of the swearing constraint in the original is replicated in the Norwegian translation, creating an unusually high frequency of breaches for a similar Norwegian situation (the same thing was found to be the case in the translation of *The Commitments* into German; see Horton 1998: 425). Matters are not improved by the fact that the translator, Ragnar Hovland, merely within the short

span of this passage, has found room to *add* two swearwords where there are none in the Irish-English original, namely

- (4) art school  
den *forpulte* kunstscolen  
[that *fucking* art school]
- (5) with *funny* haircuts  
med *bedritne* frisyrer  
[with *shitty* haircuts]

The result is most likely a rather sizeable distance between the potential a-i effect of the text on the SC audience at large vs. that on the TC audience.

The difference in constraint strength *alone* is however in this case not what generates the difference in potential a-i effect between the ST and the TT. Another important factor in determining the general level of this effect is whether or not the flout producing it has become *conventionalized*. Because the claim that flouting causes heightened attention and increased interpretational activity to an extent which is proportional to the strength of the breached constraint only holds fully in situations where the flout is fresh – that is, where the textual vehicle (expression) that carries the breach and all the other co-textual and contextual elements that contribute to the given flout and the attendant implicature have only appeared in that particular combination a few times (in a given speech community). If the flout is not fresh in this sense, but rather conventionalized (by virtue of frequent repetition of the co-textual/contextual constellation just described; see Robinson 2003: 125), the potential for causing heightened attention and increased interpretational activity diminishes. For example, whereas a freshly created metaphor, such as *My love is a flight of stairs* (a flout of Grice's first maxim of Quality), will have a maximal potential for creating an a-i effect, an old and trite one, such as *My love is a red rose* will not have the same potency (although, obviously, the degree to which any of these potentialities are actualized will vary across groups, individuals and situations within a given speech community).

As far as swearing is concerned, the vehicle of the flout of the swearing constraint, i.e., the product of the flout of Grice's maxim of Relation (the figurative meaning), is often highly conventionalized, at least for the core group of target readers (for example, in *The Commitments*: *fuck*, *fuckin'*, *fuck all*, *fuck off*, *gits*, *wankers*, etc.) (see Hasund 2005: 26-27). The fact that swearing, despite this fact, often manages to make itself noticed by a majority of the audience, merely testifies to the realness of the swearing constraint. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that if swearing should come in the form of a fresh coinage (i.e., a fresh flout of the maxim of Relation), it would have an even stronger potential impact than usual. This is something which a translator should perhaps be particularly aware of, since the lack of a reasonably equivalent *conventionalized* swearword might tempt one to coin a new one, something that would amount to a fresh flout, which would, in turn, produce a much stronger response in a (generalized) TT audience than the conventionalized original would manage to produce in the (generalized) ST audience.

It would be tempting to conclude that the Norwegian translator of *The Commitments* is not very aware of this problem: whereas a number of conventionalized flouts are indeed translated as conventionalized flouts, quite a few others, even where close



conventionalized equivalents exist, are translated by means of new coinages. Three extracts from (1a) and (1b) deserve special mention:

- (6) *yeh can fuck off with yourself*  
 du kan bare gå hjem og *drite* og legge deg  
 [you can just go home and *have a shit* and go to bed]
- (7) *Wankers*  
*Ronketasser*  
 [Masturbating manikins]
- (8) Tha' sounds like *me arse*  
 Det der høres ut som *ræva mi*  
 [That there sounds like *my arse*]

All of the three originals are conventionalized flouts (at least to an audience reasonably familiar with Irish English usage), whereas all of the translations are, to my knowledge, new coinages. Example (6) stands out by virtue of the fact that *fuck off with yourself* has a perfectly acceptable conventionalized equivalent in Norwegian, namely *dra til helvete* (*med deg*); literally, *go to hell (with yourself)*. Instead of adopting this possibility the translator has chosen to move from the domain of religion (prevalent in Norwegian swearing) to the domain of excretion (less prevalent in Norwegian swearing), and also to insert the word from this latter domain (*drite*) in an elaborate, new expression which, precisely because of its newness, is highly attention-grabbing. The translation of *Wankers* (7), which has no conventionalized counterpart in Norwegian, is translated into *Ronketasser*. This translation combines the notion of masturbation with the notion of a small person to form the non-pre-existing compound *Masturbating manikins*, which has an even stronger effect (perhaps to the degree of a shock, for some readers). The translation in example (8) constitutes a more or less direct transfer of the English source, which results in another new coinage. Direct transfers – as long as they, like here, do not correspond to a pre-existing lexical item or structure in the target language – will always start out as non-conventionalized and will hence generally be rather more noticeable than their ST counterparts. All of this leads to the conclusion that if equivalent effect is aimed for (for a generalized segment of the audience), then conventionalized flouts will have to be rendered by flouts with a similar degree of conventionalization, even when this might entail a loss of semantic and pragmatic meaning. Which brings us, of course, to a closer consideration of – precisely – the *meaning* conveyed by the flouts in question.

## 2.2. Translating the implicature(s)

So far, the main consideration has been of the strength of the flout's potential a-i effect and the challenges involved in re-creating comparable levels of this effect in the TT (if this is desirable). The a-i effect does, however, also have a content side which has to be considered. The process which has been termed increased interpretational activity does have an outcome (implicature), although this outcome is probably much less circumscribable than has generally been assumed in the post-Gricean literature (Greenall 2002: 248-265). Despite this relatively low level of circumscribability, one simplifying working distinction will nevertheless be made, namely between two



different types of implicature which often co-occur. One, the traditional type, we could call coherence-preserving implicature, the other has been termed *social implicature* (Mao 1996) or *expressive implicature* (Altieri 1981). Coherence-preserving implicature arises when communicators use an utterance with a given “literal” content to communicate a related or completely different (“nonliteral”) message where the latter ensures that the utterance contributes a meaningful piece in the textual coherence chain. All swearwords convey coherence-preserving implicatures (non-conventionalized or conventionalized ones). *Fucking*, for example, as mentioned at the outset, was originally a flout of the maxim of Relation producing the implicature *very*, the latter obviously being needed to preserve the coherence when the word is inserted into contexts such as *fuckin’ art school stuff* in (1a). All swearwords also, however, convey social or expressive implicature, and these arise when speakers perform a flout for the purpose of conveying an implicature that says something about *who they are* (see Altieri 1981: 88). Swearwords, being breaches of a swearing constraint with taboo value, typically generate this type of implicature. *Fucking*, for example, in the context of *The Commitments*, may be said to convey a social/expressive implicature to the effect of “I am a working-class Dubliner and an aspiring musician (and hence tough, cool, determined, etc.” (see the notion of covert prestige, for example Ljung 1987: 20), which establishes a ubiquitous context for everything else that goes on in the novel. In this way, social/expressive implicatures, too, contribute to the coherence chain, but in a different way from coherence-preserving implicatures. Rather than linking individual, identifiable utterances together in a co-text-context interplay, they create, within literary works, characterizations which may form general themes hovering under and above the text, connecting other, apparently unrelated elements in the work.

The next question concerns how these implicatures – coherence-preserving and/or social/expressive – fare in the translation. If we look again at examples (6 – 8) we get a clear impression that at least in these examples, the coherence-preserving implicatures have been prioritized, to the detriment of the social implicature: in (6) – *yeh can fuck off with yourself* – the coherence-preserving implicature “I violently disagree” (or something to that effect) is reasonably well conveyed by the Norwegian *du kan bare gå hjem og drite og legge deg* (which, we recall, translates literally into *you can just go home and have a shit and go to bed*). The same is the case in (7) and (8), where the coherence-preserving implicatures “Good-for-nothing,” and “That’s just silly talk,” respectively, are generally as (re-) producable by the target-text reader as by the source-text reader. If we turn to the social implicatures, however, things immediately become less clear-cut. Whereas the ST examples convey the social implicature mentioned earlier (“I am a working-class Dubliner and an aspiring musician [and hence tough, cool, determined, etc.]”), it is rather difficult to say what the TT “equivalents” convey. They certainly do not convey what the ST conveys. If anything, they seem to (socially) implicate something like: “I am a bit clever, aren’t I, making up all of this interesting swearing.”

Part of the problem seems to be that swearing in itself does not necessarily express (the right kind of) group affiliation (or, in other words, the right kind of specification of the generalized social implicature associated with swearing). For that, the *right kind* of swearing is also a necessity. And for swearing – or anything else, really – to be of any *kind* at all, it will have to be recognizable, in other words, it will

have had to be uttered before, perhaps up to the point where it will have become, precisely, conventionalized. It may seem to be the case that fresh swearing basically takes us out of the realm of expression of group identity, and into the realm of expression of individual identity. Thus, the Norwegian translation, where many of the examples are fresh coinages, only manages to establish a very unstable projection of group identity, much unlike the ST, where this principle is very strong. The reader of the translation never really feels certain what the individual's group affiliation is, or whether there indeed exists a group that this particular type of language use is connected to, and will therefore have no choice but to pin the verbal gymnastics on the individual's project of projecting him or herself *as* individual, which creates a rather different context for the interpretation of the novel for the target audience.

### 3. Concluding remarks

The focus of this paper has been on differences in the normative strength of intersubjective constraints on interaction across (and within) cultures, and on the challenges that this might pose for translators, since these differences in strength will, in typical cases, lead to a difference in potential a-i effect when the same constraint is flouted in the ST and the TT. This point was illustrated by a look at selected examples of breaches of the swearing constraint in the Irish-English novel *The Commitments* and its translation, since, it was claimed, the swearing constraint is, generally, normatively weaker in Irish than in Norwegian culture (although much headroom must be made here for intracultural variability). The fact that the translator has translated all of the swearing and more will constitute too-strong a breach of the already stronger Norwegian swearing constraint, and the result will be a stronger potential a-i effect for the target audience. The fact that the translator also often chooses to translate conventionalized breaches of the swearing constraint by means of non-conventionalized ones contributes, it was claimed, to this effect. A further consequence of the latter is a marked blurring of the social/expressive implicature, which is possibly a lamentable fact, since, it was pointed out, the latter is important, in this novel, as a backdrop for its general interpretation.

A possible objection to this kind of conclusion might be that it may seem to be based on the view that translating is first and foremost a matter of reproducing authors' intentions,<sup>9</sup> or, in other words, that it does not take into consideration the translator's role as an independent actor with a license to flout of his or her own (Robinson 2003: 137-138). Rather than being oblivious to the differences in constraint strength in the examples discussed, it may be the case that the translator has deliberately chosen to disregard it, that he has deliberately chosen to breach or flout the ubiquitous translational norm or constraint dictating that equivalent effect should be aimed for. Even if this were the case, however, it ought to be legitimate to ask what the translator hoped to achieve in doing this, and whether or not he has achieved it (the breach of a constraint is, after all, only redeemable by virtue of a purposeful and successful outcome [Grice 1989]). The likely answer in this day and age would be that the translator hoped to achieve some foreignizing effect (Venuti 1997). And to the question of whether or not the translator has achieved this the answer is a tentative yes, insofar as breaches and/or flouts of well-established translational norms tend to bring about precisely this effect. The question is, however, even if this effect has been

achieved, what good has it done, and what further purpose has it served? Has, for example, the target audience been aided in understanding the role of swearing in Irish English and/or within the context of this novel? (Foreignization is often claimed to have some kind of pedagogical effect). On the one hand, there is little doubt that the target audience has become alerted to the fact that Dubliners swear a lot. On the other, however, a misleading conception that they contribute masses of *fresh, imaginative* swearing may also have been created. Moreover, the attempt at creating something new in the target text (which is what translator flouting will always amount to) by making up swearing, furthermore fails, as was pointed out near the end, because it does not succeed in building up an image of a unified social group, which could, in some ways, be said to do damage to the coherence of the work as a whole in failing to answer the question: who are all of these things that happen in the book actually happening to?

All in all, the result of the (possible) flout of the translational norm of equivalent effect, may be too confusing to count as a proper redemption of the constraint breach, something which might distract from and even ruin the reading experience for some readers. Others, however, may not find the exacerbated effect intrusive at all. Our generalized reader will find him or herself somewhere in the middle between these two extremes.

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#### NOTES

- \* Before 2003, the work of the author appeared under the name of Ann Jorid K. Greenall.
- 1. DOYLE, Roddy (1988): *The Commitments*. London: Minerva.
- 2. Simple verbal irony provides an illustrative case: a breach of the first maxim of Quality in uttering *Lovely weather!* on a stormy day will cause the hearer, who is assuming that the speaker is cooperating, to wonder what the speaker may have really meant (since he or she cannot have meant what they said). The search for an alternative meaning is in this case rather straightforward: the speaker could only have meant, or implicated, something along the lines of *Nasty weather!*
- 3. The latter being an aspect of norms in operation rarely considered by translation studies norm theorists (but see Chesterman 1997: 66).
- 4. Possibly a sub-part of a larger constraint "Be polite" (Leech 1983; Grice 1989: 28).
- 5. Here are a handful of examples: "Cursing and swearing are far more common in daily conversation in Ireland than in most other places" (*Essortment*. Visited on 18 June 2009, <[http://www.essortment.com/all/englishirishhi\\_rfde.htm](http://www.essortment.com/all/englishirishhi_rfde.htm)>); "Anyone or anything Irish kicks ass on anyone or anything non-Irish in the swearing dept. The Irish seem to take swearing and make it almost classy ... and def. uber cool!" (*What Swearing Can Teach Us* [Updated last: 10 July 2008] Visited on 18 June 2009, <<http://roboseyo.blogspot.com/2008/07/what-swearing-can-teach-us.html>>); "I disagree that there are few swear words in English – there are loads! And especially in Irish English, we have loads of extra ones" (*Local Lingo* [Updated last: 19 February 2006] Visited on 18 June 2009, <<http://www.myczechrepublic.com/boards/viewtopic.php?p=18241>>); "Swearing is quite common and bad language is used freely ... Swearwords are even used *midfuckenword* for emphasis" (Coughlan and Hughes 2007: 32).
- 6. DOYLE, Roddy (1994): *The Commitments – Da soul'en kom til Dublin*. (Translated by Ragnar HOVLAND). Oslo: Cappelen.
- 7. See, for example, *Norske Barne- og Ungdomsbokforfattere*. Visited on 18 June 2009, <<http://www.nbuforfattere.no/pub/nbu/aktuelt/?aid=452>> for a glimpse into the Norwegian debate on the allowability of swearing in books published by a given Christian publishing company. See also Hasund (2005).

8. Note that the attention-getting effect of a flout of the swearing constraint does not necessarily always develop into a full-blown "shock." Two different kinds of situation may, for example, cause a more neutral experience: 1) a given individual does not, in a given situation, perceive the swearing constraint as being very strong there and then, or 2) the given individual knows about the constraint but does not feel that it pertains to him or herself. In the latter kind of situation the given individual may experience the breach in an indirect way, realizing the shock it may cause others, but experiencing it more neutrally him or herself.
9. See Malmkjær's (1998) previously mentioned preoccupation with the transfer of implicature.

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