The Politics of Translation in a Colonial Context

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Abstract:

Translating and interpreting do not always take place in ideal civil circumstances. In *Translations*, Brian Friel stages the crisis of translating and interpreting in an Irish colonial context. Critics of the play often focus on political, historical, and linguistic issues and hardly touch on the dilemma the translator finds himself in. My paper will focus on the role that both the translator and translation play between two conflicting cultures. It will demonstrate through a brief historical review how translation and interpretation facilitated conquests and how translators were used and abused by colonial powers. This historical overview will be connected to what Friel does in his play and how he dramatizes the role of translation in an Irish local area. It will become clear in the paper how an initial innocent translation job can turn into a collaborative work with the enemies of one's country and can have dangerous consequences on both the translator and the community as well. The translator will gain his epiphany when he sees that the detachment of British engineers charged with making a map of Ireland and anglicizing Gaelic place names is in fact a colonial unit that does not hesitate to use unlimited military force against the innocent natives when one of British engineers is missing. Upon being disrespectfully ordered by the British officer to translate what he says to the natives, and seeing the destruction to Irish land and crops the translator stops his collaboration with the British and secretly decides to join his town's people in resisting the enemy.

The Politics of Translation in a Colonial Context

Translation and interpretation played a crucial role in the colonial endeavor. Christian missionaries, politicians, administrators, traders, and educators realized that in order to control and subjugate another land and people, a group of natives mostly men must be taught the language and ways of the colonizer, in order to play the important role of interpreters and translators between their own people and the European colonizer. Thus, in his infamous "Minute on Indian Education" Thomas Macaulay says:

It is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must, at present, do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.

The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, p.430

Macaulay's call became the official position of the British government in India. Not only did the British government produce translators, but the English Language eventually became official and replaced all the native languages spoken in India.[1]

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[1] . See Gauri Viswanathan for more detail on teaching English Literature in India; in her book *The Masks of Conquest*, she indicates that English Literature was first created as a discipline by the British colonial administrators in order to pacify and re-form a potentially rebellious Indian population, and then it was imported to England.

Similar policies were adopted in different parts of the colonial world. The story of La Malinche is well known in translation studies. When she was a little girl, she was sold to slave traders and ended up in Tabasco, where she became part of a group of twenty women given away to Cortes, the Spanish leader, in 1519. During his conquest of Mexico, Malinche demonstrated a wonderful skill in communicating with the natives. This prompted Cortes to promise Malinche her freedom in return for acting as his interpreter and secretary. The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* states that "she became much more than this – his companion, advisor, secret agent, and the mother of his child" (p.506). While doing her job, "She was expected not only to translate but also to persuade her own people not to resist the invasion" (*Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies* p.438). As a colonized subject, she can be viewed as a "subject in translation, caught between misrepresentation and cultural survival," (Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies p. 438).[1]

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[1] . For more information on the character of La Malinche from a feminist viewpoint see Rosemary Arrojo's essay "Interpretation as possessive Love" pp 141-161, in *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice.* Also Sandra Messinger Cypess's book *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth.* Here Cypess focuses on revisionist and re-formation studies of La Malinche from a nationalist point of view where La Malinche's figure acquires positive traits.

One can find many other examples in other cultures of translators or interpreters who have played crucial roles in certain colonial contexts; few examples will suffice. Peter Erasmus (1833 – 1931) was a famous interpreter in Canadian translation tradition. He helped negotiate a treaty between the governor of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories in 1876. The Lieutenant-governor told Erasmus upon the completion of the negotiations that: "You are the first man I ever heard who interpreted to such a large audience without making a mistake" (*Routledge Encyclopedia* p. 365). That same year Erasmus was hired by the government as an interpreter at a salary of $600 a year, "a substantial sum in those days." (*Routledge Encyclopedia* p. 365). Another famous Canadian interpreter was Jerry Potts (1837 – 1896); he joined the North West Mounted Police as an interpreter, diplomat, peace-maker and negotiator. (*Routledge Encyclopedia* p. 365).

In American translation tradition, Simon Girty (1741 – 1818) was an Irish immigrant's son who was kidnapped and adopted by the Senecas (an Indian tribe). He learned several Indian languages which he used in the service of the British during the period of revolution. "For over 40 years Girty interpreted for English military commanders and enlisted Indian tribes in raids on settlements in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, and Detroit, gaining a reputation as 'renegade, and a white savage'" (*Routledge Encyclopedia* p. 307).

The African tradition of translation shows us that translators and interpreters enjoyed a high social status in the pre-colonial era. They were known as professional *linguists* or (griots) and were revered and feared for their political influence in the royal courts. The colonial era, however, saw a decline in the importance of those *linguists.* Those pioneers of African translators and interpreters were reduced to mere guides to their colonial masters. An interpreter would occasionally be asked to join a colonial expedition to translate, mediate and advise the colonialists. He was expected to have a thorough knowledge of the territory and to have the physical endurance to sustain long, tedious and often dangerous journeys. Though he still enjoyed some respect because of his association with the European colonialists and his slight knowledge of a European language, the professional linguist was often despised by the local population and considered a 'traitor' for showing colonialists around and helping them gain access to the tribal lore and secrets of the people. Thus, the professional linguist had become nothing more than the servant of the European colonialist, and he was generally disposed of as soon as his task was completed, to be called back only if and when he was needed (*Routledge Encyclopedia* p. 298-99).

Post- Colonial studies on translation are interested first in showing that translation can be a means of service of imperialism,

since it facilitates imperialism's processes; secondly, in showing translation as a site of resistance. This paper will demonstrate this paradoxical nature of translation in Friel's *Translations*. Furthermore, the paper will attempt to provide a close insight and better understanding of colonial power relations, of the limits of cultural transfer, and of the problematic of difference and alterity.[1]

Brian Friel is an Irish playwright who was born in 1929 and is still alive. In addition to *Translations* he has written many plays such as: *Philadelphia, Here I come*!, *The Loves of Cass Maguire*, *The Freedom of the City*, *Volunteers*, *Living Quarters, Faith Healer*, *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *The Communication Cord*. He is one of the most accomplished playwrights writing in English. His central theme is language and its ability to communicate difficult issues in the theatre.

Translations depicts the lives of a group of Irish people after the potato plight in the thirties of the nineteenth century. Hugh and his son Manus run a local hedge-school in an Irish town called Baile Beag. Bridget, Doalty, Maire, and Sarah are their students; Manus is in love with Maire and intends to marry her; Jimmy Jack is

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[1] . Tejasweni Niranjana was one of the first theorists to study translation as an instrument of colonization. See her pioneering book *Siting Translation*. Here, she shows how colonized India was represented by colonial translators as the "non-western other", and then through the imposed English education, these representations have come to be accepted as "reality".

Hugh's friend of old times and he keeps him company in the school. Owen is Hugh's second son who will work as a translator to the British soldiers. The two other characters are Captain Lancey and Lieutenant Yolland who are serving with the British army in Ireland. The play shows how anglicizing the Irish place names will have far reaching effects on these Irish characters, their community, and culture.

In *Translations*, Friel deals with the general issue of language including the more specific one of translation. In order to understand his position on translation, however, we need to know briefly his views of language.

Friel's *oeuvre* displays a constant interest in language and its importance in building myths, illusions, and narratives which, in turn, construct not only the identities of individuals, but the dreams, aspirations, and histories of whole communities and peoples. The major source of influence on Friel's concept of language derives from George Steiner's *After Babel (1975).* Friel read *After Babel* in the seventies of the twentieth century and embraced many of its views on language. One such view, that will be basic in *Translations,* is Steiner's belief that: "Language is the main instrument of man's refusal to accept the world as it is" (quoted by McGrath, p.5).

In Ireland's colonial context, as depicted in *Translations,* we witness Irish characters that are conscious of the importance of language. For Owen (Roland), for instance, language is magical:"We name a thing and – bang! It leaps into existence!" (Friel, 56). This means, indirectly, that illusions, myths, and even history are products of language, discourse, and narrative (McGrath, pp. 18-19). Like his countryman before him, Oscar Wild, Friel believes that art constructs reality. Reality, therefore, has to imitate art. Both Wild and Friel are aware that to imitate reality in a colonial Irish context means to embrace the colonial present, the status quo. Thus, Anglicizing Irish place names in *Translations* is a colonial strategy to create a new British colonial reality by using the English language. Friel, like Wild, believes that truth is a matter of style. Thus, reality becomes a fiction that we construct of ourselves, nature, and society.

A British regiment of engineers is in Ireland for an ordinance survey and a drawing of a map of the country. Owen, Hugh's younger son, has come with the regiment to work as a translator for the officers. Owen has already spent six years in London during which he has become rich. He introduces captain Lancy and Lieutenant Yolland to his father and the other Irish characters in the Hedge School owned and run by his father.

Captain Lancy addresses the group of Irish characters in the hedge school and Owen (mis)translates.

LANCY. His Majesty's government has ordered the first ever comprehensive survey of this entire country – a general triangulation which will embrace detailed hydrographic and topographic information and which will be executed to the scale of six inches to the English mile.

OWEN. A new map is being made of the whole country.

LANCY. This enormous task has been embarked on so that the military authorities will be equipped with up-to-date and accurate information on every corner of this part of the empire.

OWEN. The job is being done by soldiers because they are skilled in this work (33-34)

Owen's translation of Lancy's colonial discourse is a shocking (mis)translation. Though he tries to mitigate his town's people fears, he inevitably ends up misleading them away from the imperial intentions of the British Military's colonial mission. Owen, here, sounds more of a collaborator, a complicit, most likely, for a handful of money, though he is rich, than a faithful translator. The dialogue between Owen and his elder brother Manus who questions the accuracy of Owen's translation indicates how Owen is functioning as an oppressor of his country's history and culture while Manus is a defender of that history and culture.

This is the first meeting between the British soldiers and the Irish natives in the play. Owen's translations would have passed as normal if it were not for his elder brother Manus who objected: "what sort of a translation was that, Owen? You weren't saying what Lancy was saying!" to which Owen answers by quoting Steiner's *After Babel* : "Uncertainty in meaning is incipient poetry…"[1]; but Manus is not fooled by this excuse.

MANUS**.** There was nothing uncertain about what Lancy said: It's a bloody military operation, Owen!....What's incorrect about the place names we have here?

OWEN. Nothing at all. They're just going to be standardized.

MANUS. You mean changed into English?

OWEN. Where there's ambiguity, they'll be Anglicized.

MANUS. And they call you Roland!

OWEN. Owen – Roland – what the hell – It's only a name. It's the same me isn't it? (36-37).

Owen's incomplete translations do not evade his brother Manus. Manus realizes that there is nothing wrong with the Irish

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[1] . Many critics have indicated how much Friel is indebted to Steiner's views about translation and language presented in his seminal book *After Babel, 1975*. For more information on this, please see MacGrath and especially Richard Kearney's essay "Language Play: Brian Friel and Ireland's Verbal Theatre" in *Brian Friel: A casebook* pp. 77-117 where he lists in an appendix to the essay all the important and relevant passages from *After Babel.*

place names. He knows that what the British soldiers are doing is a systematic linguistic and topographical rape of Ireland. By Anglicizing Irish place names, the British will erase Irish culture and history. Even Owen himself is not Owen for them; he is Roland, and Manus confronts him with this, but Owen, in a witty way, tries to lessen the importance of this renaming by suggesting that it is the same "him".

Owen seems to be naively collaborating with the British colonialists; he does not realize the historical, political, cultural, and linguistic consequences of what he is doing. However, his job as a translator has just started, and the Anglicizing of the Irish place names will begin soon.

Owen's job as a translator did not always go smoothly. Some of the Irish place names presented a real challenge to any possibility of translation. The first difficult example was translating "*Bun na hAbhann*". Owen explains that "Bun" is the Irish word for *bottom*, and "Abha" means *river*. So literally, the full meaning should be the *mouth of the river*. Yolland claims that there is no English equivalent for a sound like that, and it is better to keep it as it is. However, Owen finds out that in the church registry, it is called *Banowen.* The list of freeholders calls it *Owenmore*; and in the grand jury lists it is called *Binhone*. Owen suggests Anglicizing

it as *Bunowen*, but he hastens to say that this is "Somehow…neither fish nor flesh".

OWEN. We are trying to denominate and at the same time to describe that tiny area of soggy, rocky, sandy ground where that little stream enters the sea, an area known locally as Bun na hAbhann…Burnfoot! What about Burnfoot? (40).

Yolland agrees with Owen saying to him: "Good, Roland".

The process of naming in this colonial context demonstrates how colonial discourse erases prior constructions of the land, allowing it to be seen as an empty space, ready to receive the colonizer's inscriptions (*Key Concepts*, 175). Thus land becomes a palimpsest upon which different histories are written in different languages, depending on the language of the colonizer. It is clear how place becomes a contestable issue within language itself. Although "Burnfoot" is an arbitrary signifier that has no logical or natural connection with the place (signified) that it has been assigned to describe, yet it captures and defines the place in language, the language of the colonizer.

The theory of place does not propose a simple separation between the 'place' named and described in language, and some 'real' place inaccessible to it, but rather indicates that in some sense place is language, something in constant flux, a discourse in process. (*Key Concepts*, 181 – 182)

In this constant flux of naming and renaming of land, previous inscriptions that are erased and overwritten remain as traces within present consciousness. Owen remembers the different meanings attached to the place names. We shall see this clearly when he tries to Anglicize the place name "*Tobair Vree*", and also when he will be asked by captain Lancy to translate these place names back to Gaelic! However, this reversal process of naming will prove very difficult for Owen / Roland. The reason is because colonialism always brings with it a sense of dislocation between the environment and the imported language (English), which is used to describe it; the gap exists between "experienced" land by the Gaelic and the sudden and mostly arbitrary descriptions English provides (*Key Concepts*, 178).

The example of *Bun Na hAbhann* shows the impossibility of translation. The signifier (word) is separated from its signified (place), from the reality and history of the place itself. Owen tries desperately to grasp a fixed origin, a fixed and finalized meaning of the place name, but he tragically fails. His failure illustrates the absence of a fixed original meaning that can be easily translated into English. Instead, there are multiple meanings: historical, cultural, religious, and geographical. Thus, there is an impossibility of accurate translation. Anglicizing the Irish place names will

succeed in suppressing past names or at least marginalizing them and consequently the Irish landscape will lose its Irish identity.

The possible loss of the Irish identity is clear in translating *Tobair Vree* (which means a crossroads). Owen believes that there is no need to keep this original name. He still does not realize the historical, cultural, and political danger of transforming the names of the Irish landscape into English. For him the British existence in Ireland is not colonial; this explains why he still naively believes that his role as a translator is to take Irish place names that are, as he says, "Riddled with confusion" and standardize them in English. Thus, he believes *Tobair Vree* is confused with meanings: geographical, historical, and religious as well.

Because a hundred and fifty years ago there used to be a well there, not at the crossroads, mind you- that would be too simple- but in a field close to the crossroads. And an old man called Bryan, whose face was disfigured by an enormous growth, got it into his head that the water in that well is blessed; and everyday for seven months he went there and bathed his face in it. But the growth didn't go away; and one morning Bryan was found drowned in that well. And ever since that crossroads is known as Tobair Vree- even though that well has long since dried up. (*Translations*, p. 53)

It is clear that *Tobair Vree* is a place, a crossroads that has got a wonderful, though sad, historical story. Bryan whose face is

deformed, going to that well for seven months to immerse his face in its water thinking it is holy, and that his face deformity will disappear makes a quite impressive story. This impressive historical and religious story, one might say mythological, since Ireland as Hugh says is a land of myths, will disappear if Anglicized; Owen claims that nobody in Baile Beig knows this story, that it is long dead; he knows it because his grandfather has told him about it. However, ironically, this was not convincing for Yolland who insists on keeping it as it is in the newly Anglicized map. Unlike Owen, Yolland knows the dangerous consequences of mapping Ireland, of Anglicizing the country. For him, in Anglicizing the Irish place names, something will be "eroded"; the whole military operation is an "eviction of sorts". Irish land will be evicted of its history, religion, and mythology. And since Owen remembers the story, Yolland believes that this should be sufficient to keep the name. At this moment in their work on the map, and because Yolland insists on keeping the place name *Tobair-Vree*, it dawns on Owen that a name is an identity. Therefore, he bursts shouting that his name is not Roland but Owen. Owen reclaims his name and becomes himself again! Sarah (who is a student in the hedge-school and symbolizes Ireland), on the other hand, intimidated by captain Lancy's threats to destroy the locals' fields

and stock, is unable to pronounce her name, and thus loses her identity.

Though Owen reclaimed his Irish name, his identity back, events did not unfold in his interest. Yolland was missing; captain Lancy got furious and came to the hedge school to tell the local people of his plan in case Yolland was not found. What interests us here is first to see how the British regiment of engineers, ordered to make an Ordinance Survey of Ireland, is indeed a real military regiment that will inflict severe punishment on the whole population for the missing soldier. Second, Owen's position is most critical at this juncture, since Yolland was working with him on making the map.

Captain Lancy's threats amount to orders of eviction of population, destroying land and crops, and killing cattle. Meanwhile, Owen is shocked at hearing these threats which he has to translate. Hesitant to do so, Lancy shouts at him asking him to do his job and translate "at once". The irony is that Lancy begins to read the names of places to be evicted or destroyed as translated into English by Owen, who now has to translate them back into their Irish names! Owen felt so humiliated by Lancy and realized that his job as a translator was not an innocent thing and that the British regiment of engineers was not merely a group of engineers, but, rather, a unit of colonial soldiers.

LANCY. …we will shoot all livestock in Ballybeg….we will embark on a series of evictions and leveling of every abode in the following selected areas-

OWEN. You're not - !

LANCY. Do your job. Translate (p. 80).

However, while threatening the hedge school students, Doalty sees through the window that captain Lancy's camp was on fire and very calmly asks Owen to translate that to him. Thus, resistance began openly on a large scale against the British presence in Ireland.

DOALTY. I've damned little to defend but he'll not put me out without a fight. And there'll be others who think the same as me….If we'd all stick together. If we knew how to defend ourselves.

OWEN. Against a trained army.

DOALTY. The Donnelly twins know how.

OWEN. If they could be found (p. 84).

Upset by colonial humiliation and encouraged by Doalty's decision to fight the British invaders, Owen decides to take the side of his own people. Though this decision to fight might prove futile to the natives, they still would resist. They would hide their animals somewhere the British do not know, and will join together for

resistance. The Donnelly twins who are accused of kidnapping and probably killing Yolland will be the leaders.

Thus, Irish characters in the play made their choices in light of the British invasion of Ireland. Manus decided to go to Mayo, the Erris Penensula, where his mother had some relatives. There, he will continue his father's tradition working in a hedge school. This is Manus's form of resistance. He will never submit to work in the British National schools and will continue the Gaelic tradition of education. The Donnelly brothers, Doalty, and Bridget will not share Manus his form of cultural resistance but will fight the invaders. Owen most likely might join them. Maire, wants to learn English in order to immigrate to the United States as so many Irish did. Hugh, on the other hand, decides to stay. Indicating the Name-Book of the standardized Irish place names to Owen, Hugh says: "We must learn to know those new names….We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home." (p. 88). Though Hugh is deeply immersed in teaching Latin to his Irish students, he is still conscious that holding tightly to the 'facts' of the past can be futile. He believes that it is not the literal facts of the past that shape the Irish, but "images of the past embodied in language….We must never cease renewing these images; because once we do, we fossilize" (p. 88). Thus

Hugh, the old man, is ready to adapt the past in order to be fit for the present.

Friel shares Hugh's position; like him, he decides to stay in Ireland and to use the English language without being nostalgic for his Gaelic tongue. Unlike Manus who blindly and nostalgically sticks to Hedge Schools, Friel accepts the cultural and linguistic consequences of the British colonization of Ireland. However, like Shaw, Joyce, Yeats, and Synge he decides to appropriate the English language to fit his Irish culture. Using this appropriated English Friel is admirably able to "translate a Gaelic past into an Anglo-Irish present. In this way *Translations* ingeniously preserves Irish history, literature, and culture" (McGrath, p. 195). Friel, indeed feels that reviving Gaelic culture and language, in addition to being almost impossible, will be useless. The British have been colonizing Ireland for centuries and English has become an Irish language, as it were, so it must be used by Irish writers. This does not necessarily mean, in his view, to neglect the Irish past; it can and must be preserved in English.

Thus, in *Translations* Friel demonstrated clearly how the encounter between Gaelic culture and the English language has resulted in a hybrid culture which can be described in Homi K. Bhabha's words as "less than one and double". Since ancient history Irish space has been named and renamed by various

invaders of Ireland. Friel represented this naming and renaming of Irish places in Owen's translations into English of the Gaelic place names of Irish geography. Through Owen in particular, and other Irish characters in the play, Friel dramatized the conflict between the two cultures, and showed how both were entangled and interconnected despite the resistance that the characters demonstrated each in his\her own way. Through Owen, we have been able to see how translation can be so important for colonizers and how translators can shift their positions from being collaborators with the colonizers into becoming rebellious upon gaining the insight of the danger of the role they were playing. Owen indeed learned the lesson that in a colonial context translation cannot be innocent and one would be better off to take the side of his own people.

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سياسة الترجمة في سياق كولونيالي

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ملخص الدراسة:

تطورت الدراسات الترجمية في الثمانينيات والتسعينيات من القرن العشرين حتى أصبحت حقلا معرفيا غنيا. وقد كان للدراسات الأنثروبولوجية ودراسات ما بعد الاستعمار أثر كبير في تطور هذا الحقل المعرفي وثرائه الفكري. ويكفي الباحث المهتم أن يلقي نظرة متأنية على عناوين الكتب والدراسات التي نشرت حتى الأن في هذا المجال كي يدرك حقيقة ما ذهبنا إليه آنفا.

أثرى باحثوا الكولونيالية وما بعد الكولونيالية الدراسات الترجمية من خلال ما قدموه من دراسات حول الترجمة وأهميتها في سياق كولونيالي. إذ إن من المسلم به أن كل أمثلة الاستعمار في التاريخ قد اتكأت في نجاحها، ولو جزئيا، من بين أشياء أخرى، على استخدام مترجمين كانت مهمتهم تسريع إنجاز احتلال الأراضي الجديدة وإقامة مراكز تجارية وتوجيه السكان الأصليين لاعتناق الديانة المسيحية، وأمور أخرى لا مجال لذكرها في هذه العجالة.

تتكئ هذه الدراسة على هذا الجانب النظري في الدراسات الترجمية وتطمح إلى تقديم تحليل نقدي لدور الترجمة والمترجم في سياق كولونيالي وذلك من خلال التركيز على عمل الكاتب المسرحي الإيرلندي المعاصر برايان فرييل في مسرحيته التي تحمل عنوان *ترجمات*. والواقع أن هذه المسرحية ،وهي عمل إبداعي، تتخذ من اللغة وأنواع الترجمات التي تعرضها موضوعا رئيسيا لها. وفرييل ينطلق في ذلك من موقع نظري ما بعد حداثي في نظرته إلى خطورة الدور الذي تمثله الترجمة والمترجم في سياق كولونيالي. سوف يعالج البحث الدور الخطير الذي يلعبه المترجم في مساعدة المستعمر في السيطرة واحتلال الأراضي في إيراندا ثم يحلل أسباب تغيير المترجم الإيرلندي موقفه من عملية الترجمة وتحوله للدفاع عن بلده مع بقية أهل قريته.