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“Words Are Signals”: Language, Translation, and Colonization in Brian Friel’s *Translations*

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Abstract

The Irish playwright, Friel is among the most prominent contemporary writers. In his works he deals mainly with socio-cultural issues in Ireland. His 1980 play, *Translations* focuses on the problem of language and cultural colonization in Ireland. Hailed as a postcolonial work, the play is not limited to the depiction of the problem; it presents some suggestions and probable solutions to the problem, especially with a different look at the role and significance of “translation”. While showing a tangible picture of colonial struggles, it tries not to depict a one-sided picture of the problem. The present paper focuses on Friel’s different view toward Irish colonization and Irish cultural nationalism. The objective of the paper is to show how Friel looks differently at the function of language and the crucial role of “translation” in colonial struggles.

Keywords: Colonization; Language; Translation; Brian Friel; Cultural Identity

Introduction

The Irish playwright Brian Friel (1929-) is among the most distinguished figures in contemporary Irish drama. He is noted for addressing in his works significant socio-cultural and historical issues of Ireland. Due to his emphasis on subjects such as race, ethnicity, cultural identity, language, and power he is known today as a postcolonial writer. His works have been “concerned with the nuances of both personal and cultural-national identity and its relation to colonial dispossession, issues of home, language, tradition, the workings of private and public memory, all issues that inform postcolonial consciousness” (Bertha 2006, 154).

One of the most translated and staged plays after WWII, Friel’s *Translations* (1980) mainly concerns language. In this play Friel focuses on the crises over linguistic and cultural identity and refers to cultural colonization where language plays the most significant part. He also addresses other significant issues in colonialism which are of course directly or indirectly connected to language, issues such as education, historical background, map-making, distance between the colonizers and the colonized, and miscomprehension.

What Friel does in this play is, however, more than illustrating the problem. He goes further than presenting lively scenes of cultural clash and colonial struggle in Ireland. Not only does he pose the question, but, with specific emphases in the play, and also in some other ways, especially with showing a different look at the role of language and the significance of “translation” in colonialism, he proposes probable solutions and answers. The present article focuses both on the ways the colonial struggle and cultural clash are represented in *Translations* and on the solutions and answers Friel proposes.

Discussion

Language and culture have always been considered significant assets to claiming some kind of identity, whether individual or communal. The correlation between linguistic identity, ethnic heritage, and the place of linguistic identity in the individual as a member of a group or groups has been investigated in numerous studies (Lee 2003, 8). Throughout history, nations have realized that only with an awareness of themselves and their history and culture can they attain the independence and identity they need. Cultural identity is crucial in forming a nation and it is difficult to claim a national identity without a substantial cultural heritage. Although the words “nation” and “state” are usually confused (especially in English and other modern languages), attempts have been made to distinguish between the two. Smith associates attributes such as a “historic territory, shared myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a single economy and common rights and duties for all members’ (2000, 1) to the word “nation”, and defines “states” as ‘sets of autonomous, public institutions with a legitimate monopoly of coercion and extraction in a given territory, and sovereignty in relation to those outside its borders’ (Ibid.).

In colonial discourse, including both the discourse of colonialism and that of anti-colonialism, cultural aspects are as significant as political ones. As Loomba asserts, “the cultural, discursive or representational aspects of colonialism need not be thought of as functioning at a remove from its economic, political or even military aspects” (2005, 86-7). From the very beginning of colonial sovereigns, “the use of arms was closely connected to the use of images” (Ibid., 87). Cultural action “cannot be divorced from the larger struggle for the liberation of the nation” (Amuta 1995, 159). Discourses of identity, cultural or political, are usually “nostalgic of the past and authorize themselves through myths of origins, stereotypical representations of landscape and vernacular uses of the language” (Gonzalez Arias 2007, 113).

Culture is directly connected to language. As Fanon contends, “To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a *culture*, (italics mine) to support the weight of a civilization” (1986, 8). Fanon goes further to assume a key role for the relationship between language and culture in colonization:

Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the *language* (italics mine) of the civilizing nation; that is, with the *culture* (italics mine) of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards (Ibid., 9).

Thus, in colonization the need is felt to adapt the colonized to the culture of the colonizers, a process where language plays the most important role. This process has another significant process within itself: translation. It is now generally agreed that translation has a lot to do with colonization. In Bassnett and Trivedi’s words, “colonialism and translation [go] hand in hand” (1999, 3). Cheyfitz argues that translation has been “the central act of European colonization and imperialism in America” (as cited in Bassnett and Trivedi 1999, 3). Today the close relation between translation and colonialism is more strongly recognized. Now we can notice more superbly “the extent to which translation was for centuries a one-way process, with texts being translated *into* European languages for European consumption, rather than as part of a reciprocal process of exchange” (Ibid., 5). Also, as Bassnett and Trivedi put it, “the role played by translation in facilitating colonization is also now in evidence. And the metaphor of the colony as a translation, a copy of an original located elsewhere on the map, has been recognized” (Ibid.).

This is actually what Friel is addressing in *Translations*. The play reveals, in Meissner’s words, “the inherent danger in translation, particularly between cultures, and especially when there is a political agenda” (1992, 166). In this play “the colonial struggle in Ireland is represented as a contest over words and language” (Loomba 2005, 87). The play is set in a hedge-school in the small town of Baile Beag (Ballybeg), part of Donegal, in 1833. The teacher, also the schoolmaster of this school, is named Hugh. Manus, Hugh’s lame son also helps his father in teaching. Owen, Hugh’s other son, works as a translator for the British regiment which has the mission of renaming the Irish places and making a new map for Ireland. The main figures of this regiment shown in the play are the cartographer and orthographer Captain Lancey and Lieutenant Yolland, who have been sent to Baile Beag to remap Ireland and change place names into anglicised and standardized versions. What Friel shows hand in hand with the translation and transliteration process to highlight the cultural colonization is the education system. A new English-language system of National education is being applied to the place which is to replace the local Irish-speaking schools including the hedge school the play is set in. In the hedge schools Latin and Greek are considered beneficial and English language and English literary canon are unknown. At the end of the play, after the disappearance of Yolland, Lancey threatens to evict the town settlers unless the English soldier is found and it is here that the true aims of the English survey group become known to all the Irish inhabitants.

Friel portrays several main sub-issues of colonialism simultaneously: the problem of language, the education system, and the system of map-making. He also includes some significant metaphors and symbols of colonialism in the play, the most noteworthy of which is the love affair between the Irish girl Maire, who was previously in love with Manus, and the British soldier Yolland. A significant metaphors of colonialism is “that of rape” (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999, 4), of husbanding the lands, of “tilling them and fertilizing them” (Ibid.). Of course the British soldier Yolland begins to fall in love with the whole place since the very beginning of the process. This feeling is, as will be discussed later, one of Friel’s ways to show a different picture of the colonial struggles and the nature of the problem.

This different depiction of colonialism and this effort in avoiding a one-sided view towards the phenomenon shows itself in all issues in the play which refer to colonialism. Friel shows at first the dark and bitter realities of colonialism like any other competent postcolonial critic. He shows clearly the imperialistic nature of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland by the military agents of the British government in the period 1824-1846. The re-mapping of Ireland, with giving new names to old places is an evident symbol of colonialism. The process of re-mapping an area “renders obsolete an existing representation – the way the inhabitants had previously perceived their geographical space-and imposes a new representation which changes how they perceive that space” (Arkins 1991, 202). The process of cartography totally changes the way an area is represented. The process of re-mapping Ireland was in fact an attempt to make a larger, better-to-understand England, without actually “standardizing” of the names which were considered normal and *standard* for the inhabitants. Friel highlights the point in a discussion between Owen and Manus:

Manus: [...] it’s a bloody military operation, Owen! And what’s Yolland’s function? 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 Anglicised (I, 32).

In the process of remapping Ireland, the British in fact “make Ireland England and, in the authoritative position of colonizer, offer the colonized a place to live” (Meissner 1992, 170). The place, however, is totally different. The act of re-mapping, “the act of erasing the old and making the new, is equivalent to an ideologizing act of plunder: in other words, a re-dramatization of the colonial encounter” (Ibid.).

Through its “re-naming” process, the act of re-mapping serves as a powerful colonial means in addressing the most crucial of all human attributes: language. In re-naming Irish places in fact “the language of the imperial colonial power, English, replaces the language of the subject colonized country, Irish” (Arkins 1991, 202). The problem is not only the fact that this act of re-naming the places presumes ownership. The act of translation or the act of “removing Gaelic and enforcing English as the only accepted verbal commerce, not only reenacts the master/slave relationship, but brings the hierarchical relationship to mind every time the newly instituted place name is articulated” (Meissner 1992, 171). In the relations between the colonizer and the colonized, “the revaluation introduced by the translational mapping ratifies, in the eyes of the English at least, a justified position of authority and superiority in all relationships in which language is the medium of commerce” (Ibid.). We should note that “in 1824, the year the Ordnance Survey began and less than ten years before the time of *Translations*, well over two million people in Ireland spoke Irish” (Arkins 1991, 202). Now the number of native speakers in Ireland is about forty thousand. The “majority of the Irish people now speak English as their mother tongue, and even those whose mother tongue is Irish are fluent in English, totally bilingual” (Ibid., 208). The play is written and enacted in English although it is imagined that most of the characters speak in Gaelic. Although Friel was nearly forced to do so because Gaelic was nearly wiped out as a language, this act of his is “a clever way of making the ‘postcolonial’ audience aware of its own lack of Gaelic, and reflect upon the legacy of colonization” (Loomba 2005, 88).

What Friel shows hand in hand with language is education. The two issues, both significant in colonialism, are connected in the play through the “hedge-school”. In the play most actions happen in a class in a hedge-school, where Hugh, the schoolmaster, teaches Latin and Greek to students, most of whom are adults. Hedge-schools were the dominant education systems of the nineteenth century. The distinguishing feature of these schools was that “they taught not only the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also Latin and sometimes Greek. This emphasis on the Classics brought fame to the hedge schools and is very often seen as their characteristic feature” (Arkins 1991, 203). The classics “were taught in the traditional way, which strongly stressed the learning of rules of grammar and writing of sentences to illustrate them. But this rigorous approach very often instilled a love for Classical literature among the pupils” (Ibid., 204). This love for and emphasis on classics shows the need on the part of the Irish to have a strong historical and cultural background. Hugh refers to the beauty of his language and literature in a conversation with Yolland. Ironically, he expresses the most passionate defense of his language while he is getting more and more drunk, a situation that annoys Owen:

Yolland: And your Gaelic literature – you’re a poet yourself –

Hugh: Only in Latin, I’m afraid.

Yolland: I understand it’s enormously rich and ornate.

Hugh: Indeed, Lieutenant. A rich language. A rich literature. You’ll find, sir, that certain cultures expend on their vocabularies and syntax acquisitive energies and

ostentations entirely lacking in their material lives. I suppose you could call us a spiritual people.

Owen: (Not unkindly; more out of embarrassment before Yolland) Will you stop that nonsense, Father (II, i, 42).

This humorous way Hugh talks can be implied as Friel’s poking fun at this strict “classicness” of the Irish and its sticking to past in order to claim cultural identity. Paying attention to this fact is what helps us read Friel and his anti-colonialism better. As mentioned, Latin and Greek languages and literatures were taught in hedge-schools so that the Irish could claim prestige and civilization and cultural identity. This can be seen somehow as a reaction on the part of the Irish to their being colonized by the British. With sticking to classics, the Irish want to preserve “both the old fact that the Romans ruled England and the new fact that an Irishman, from a country never ruled by the Romans, can re-impose Roman dominion over the language of his conqueror” (Arkins 1991, 209). They want to learn the language of the conquerors over England, not the language or literature of England itself. Hugh’s feeling towards English literature seems to be an ignorance mixed with contempt. He even clearly states this feeling once while talking to Yolland in the second act: “Wordsworth? ... no. I’m afraid we’re not familiar with your literature, Lieutenant. We feel closer to the warm Mediterranean. We tend to overlook your island” (II, 41). Or for example, after translating for Yolland a piece of verse he has composed “after the style of Ovid” (41), he adds: “English succeeds in making it sound ... plebian” (II, i, 41). (Lancey and Yolland seem to be ashamed and embarrassed of this lack of knowledge).

But this is not everything Friel is telling us. Through subtle references he makes us look at the whole problem differently. Hugh expresses his hottest comments on the superiority of Gaelic language and Latin and Greek literature over English while he is drunk. He has taught Latin and Greek in the hedge-school for thirty-five years, and, with his fluency in speaking and even writing poetry in Latin language, he is the true manifestation of an Irish master. Yet in the play he makes the most influential expressions about the richness of their language and literature when he is extremely drunk. It seems that there is a symbolic relationship between the Irish passion for classics and their being drunk. The more they are submerged in the past and the more fluent they speak classic languages, the drunker they are. The most exaggerated example of this, almost a caricature of the situation, is Jimmy Jack. He a fluent speaker of Latin, and, as he states, knows the first book of Horace's *Satires* (1,030 lines!) by heart. Yet this character is so merged in the language and literature of Latin that he cannot even distinguish between reality and imagination. He excitedly tells Hugh near the end of the play that he got a marriage proposal from the goddess Athene! In this conversation both Hugh and Jimmy are drunk.

Jimmy: I’m going to get married.

Hugh: Well!

Jimmy: At Christmas.

Hugh: Splendid.

Jimmy: To Athene.

Hugh: Who?

Jimmy: Pallas Athene.

Hugh: *Glaukopis Athene?*

Jimmy: Flashing-eyed, Hugh, flashin-eyed! (*He attempts the gesture he has made before: standing to attention, the momentary spasm, the salute, the face raised in pained ecstasy – but the body does not respond efficiently this time. the gesture is grotesque.*)

Hugh: the lady has assented?

Jimmy: She asked *me* – I assented.

Hugh: Ah. When was this?

Jimmy: Last night.

Hugh: What does her mother say?

Jimmy: Metis from Hellespont? Decent people – good stock.

Hugh: And her father?

Jimmy: I'm meeting Zeus tomorrow. Hugh, will you be my best man?

Hugh: Honored, James; profoundly honored (III, 65).

This exaggerated picture shows the extreme extent of being drowned in a remote, illusionary and mystic world which is far from the real world of practical, everyday life. We should keep in mind that Latin is now but a dead language which is not used in daily communications. Perhaps it is time the colonized learned the dominant, widely-spoken language of their colonizers, to get involved with them, to communicate with them, to make them known to them with their medium of communication instead of locking themselves in their own memories of the past, real or imaginary. This is what Maire and Hugh notice, of course, with different degrees. In act one Maire asks Hugh to teach English to the students of the hedge-school: "I don't want Greek. I don't want Latin. I want English" (I, 25). At the end of the play Hugh promises Maire to teach her English. He goes, of course, further than Maire's sense of urge to involve into progress. He realizes that it is no use to stick to the past. He wants to reclaim his own identity to the colonizer through the very language which is more practical and more widely spoken in the real world: "We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home" (III, 66).

We should also look at the title of the play: *Translations*, not translation. This may refer to different factors. For one thing, the title may refer to different cases of translation, such as Owen's translating from English into Gaelic and vice versa, Hugh's translating his composed verse in Latin into English for Yolland, etc. For another, the plural of "translation" may refer to different layers of meaning for translation. Besides "a transference of meaning from one language into another," translation may as well be a colonial act. Kiberd states that "[a] root meaning of 'translate' was 'conquer'" (as cited in Loomba 2005, 88). As mentioned earlier, translation and colonization went almost hand in hand. Colonial attempts to classify and systematize the colonized societies were, as Loomba contends, "attempts to re-order worlds that were often incomprehensible to the masters and make them more manageable, comprehensible for imperial consumption" (Ibid., p. 88). Such attempts "restructured, often violently, the world of the colonized, and birthed new concepts, images, words and practices that bear testimony to the complexity of colonial 'translations'" (Ibid.). As Bassnett and Trivedi put it, translation has been "a means both of containing the artistic achievements of writers in other languages and of asserting the supremacy of the dominant, European culture" (1999, 6). Tymoczko mentions the etymological meaning of translation as "the activity of *carrying across*, for instance, the

transportation and relocation of the bones and other remains of saints” (1999, 19) to highlight how post-colonial writing can be a form of translation, where “venerable and holy (historical, mythic and literary) relics are moved from one sanctified spot of worship to another more central and more secure (because more powerful) location” (Ibid., 20), at which “the cult is intended to be preserved, to take root and find new life” (Ibid.).

In this side of translation we may see the act of translation as the colonizing act of ruling out a language and culture. Of all the characters, Owen is mostly involved in this act. He takes part in the process of re-mapping his land and re-naming his native place-names. Friel makes his role in cultural colonization and his carelessness towards it clearer to us with his metaphoric ignorance to the mispronouncing his name by the British soldiers. They call him Rolland, instead of Owen, but he does not care, not at least until Manus warns him of the situation:

Manus: And they call you Roland! They both call you Roland!

Owen: Shhhh. Isn’t it ridiculous? They seemed to get it wrong from the very beginning – or else they can’t pronounce Owen. I was afraid some of you bastards would laugh.

Manus: Aren’t you going to tell them?

Owen: Yes – yes – soon – soon.

Manus: But they ...

Owen: Easy, man, easy. Owen – Roland – what the hell. It’s only a name. It’s the same me, isn’t it? (I, 33).

Owen may not be aware at this time that with this carelessness in pronouncing his name, the British are unwillingly showing their contempt toward his identity, reducing him to his job, an interpreter, or an interpreting machine.

Yet this is not everything about “translation”. As de Campus contends, translation “is a dialogue” (as cited in Bassnett and Trivedi 1999, 5). We should note the significant role of translation in communication. Without translation, there would be no communication, no interaction, not any movement forward, just staying fixed and locking oneself in a linguistic framework. In post-colonial writing translation is seen as an important tool. Ngũgĩ, who has written both in English and in his native language Gikuyu, believes that through translation “the different languages of the world can speak to one another. . . . Inter-language communication through translation is crucial” (as cited in Tymoczko 1999, 33).

Today the previously detached cultures are coming together and establishing close relations. Although we should not undermine the inequality brought about by colonization, we should not neglect either the fact that today “Western society as a whole has turned into an immense contact zone, where intercultural relations contribute to the internal life of all national cultures” (Simon 1999, 58). While cultural identity should be considered a crucial issue, we should beware not to think of culture as “an envelope which securely binds all the members of a national community within the same coherence of meaning” (Ibid.). Today the “ease and rapidity of global communication have created an international mass culture” (Ibid.). So the idea of “culture as a set of unchanging and coherent values, behaviors or attitudes” (Ibid.), is replaced by the idea of “culture as negotiation” (Ibid.) and “symbolic competition” (Ibid.). In this view of culture translation becomes specifically important as a means through which cultural communication becomes possible.

In Friel's play, this view towards translation is also obvious. Unlike many of his contemporaries for whom "the choice of Irish as a creative medium is a political statement against cultural colonization" (Gonzalez Arias 2007, 117), Friel writes in English. This is, besides being the clever act of making his audience aware of the situation mentioned above, related to Friel's noticing of the importance of English as a widely-used language. He may belong to the large group of writers who "are aware that English is their 'stepmother tongue' – the language of empire in which every word comes loaded with a power relationship – but also acknowledge the inevitability of using English if that was the language of the home" (Ibid.). This idea goes with what some of his characters grasp as the play proceeds, especially Hugh, who comes to the conclusion that makes him state that "We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home" (III, 66).

In this way we may realize that, contrary to the idea of those who accuse Friel of supporting political nationalism, Friel has not presented a one-sided picture of a colonized nation. He has focused instead on the "crisis of language as a medium of communication and representation" (Kearney 1987, 510). There is no doubt that the shift of language in Ireland has been a colonizing act with an imperialistic nature. But is closing the door and locking oneself in a linguistic and historical framework the best solution to the problem? Friel poses this question in his play. In a later play entitled *The Communication Cord* Friel (1983) more directly satirizes the nationalistic and cultural prejudice. Where *Translations* deals with pre-famine Ireland bracing itself for the final transplantation of Gaelic into English, *The Communication Cord* takes up the story more than a century later. It shows us "modern Ireland taking stock of its linguistic identity and attempting to recover the ancient pieties of its pre-famine heritage" (Ibid., 511). Its central character, Donovan, is the caricature of the exaggerated romanticism of Irish cultural nationalism. Although he enjoys the facilities of the modern multi-national society, he "still clings to the craven illusion that nothing has changed, that Romantic Ireland is alive and well in a restored Donegal cottage waiting to be purchased by the highest bidder" (Ibid., 513).

Comparing the two plays may reveal significant points about Friel's nationalist and post-colonial views. If one play "features the old language looking forward to its ominous future, the other features the new language looking back to its dispossessed origins" (Ibid., 511). *Translations* seems a serious, if not a bit tragic, play, while *The Communication Cord* is apparently a farce. This shows Friel's moving forward in stating more and more clearly that "there is no going back in history; that the best that can be achieved is a playful deconstruction and reconstruction of words in the hope that new modes of communication might be made possible" (Ibid.). The latter play confirms the idea Friel presents in *Translations*: that "a narrowly nationalistic attitude toward language could be invoked as a refusal to communicate with others" (Ibid.), that, as Hugh brilliantly states at the end of the play, "it is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language" (III, 66). And more importantly that, again as Hugh says, "we must never cease renewing those images; because once we do, we fossilize" (Ibid.).

Conclusion

The Irish experienced the linguistic colonization. From one point of view, the language of the colonizer has won over the language of the colonized, and this may be seen as a cultural loss for the Irish. From another point of view, however, "the acquisition of English in the form of Hiberno-English that preserves features of both Gaelic syntax and Elizabethan pronunciation must be counted as gain" (Arkins 1991, 208). It is praiseworthy that Ireland has "produced in its Anglo-Irish writers a literary idiom in Hiberno-English that is truly magnificent" (Ibid.). As the British colonization of Ireland has a long history of literary aspect and the English poet Edmund

Spencer were among the first to inject the British thought system to Irish society with his works such as *The Faerie Queene* and *View of Present State of Ireland*, (Yigit 2012, 124) the Irish take advantage of literature to deal with colonization. The Celtic Revival or The Irish Literary Renaissance, which was the dominant cultural movement in the period 1880 – 1939, is one attempt to reclaim Irish cultural identity, with the very means with which it was apparently humiliated. The movement “produced some of the greatest poetry, drama, and prose fiction written in English during the first four decades of the twentieth century” (Abrams and Harpham 2009, 42). One of its most eminent figures is James Joyce (1882-1941), who, although “abandoned Ireland for Europe and ridiculed the excesses of the nationalist writers” (Ibid.), clung “to Irish subject matter and characters in all his writings” (Ibid.). In his masterworks such as *Ulysses*, he, as a member of the colonized nation, introduces “various forms of indigenous formalism to the dominant culture” (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999, 33) by “importing the standards of Irish epic, elements of Irish poetic form, characteristics of Irish prose, and structures of Irish narrative genres” (Ibid.).

Today nobody can claim that the literature produced by Irish has the same language as the English literature has. It is the *Irish* version of English that distinguishes its literature, just as the American version of English by which its literature is identified, or just as the language of the Spanish-speaking colonies is distinguished from that of their colonizers through the mastery of form. This is what Friel hails in *Translations*. The clever use of English, previously by figures of the Celtic Revival and now by poets and writers who choose the *Irish* English artistically, may confirms Seamus Heaney’s statement that “English is by now not so much an imperial humiliation as a native weapon” (as cited in Arkins 1991, 208).

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