

Translation ‘is a Dialogue’ in Brian Friel’s *Translations*

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DOI: [10.36348/sb.2019.v05i10.005](https://doi.org/10.36348/sb.2019.v05i10.005)

| Received: 21.02.2019 | Accepted: 30.02.2019 | Published: 30.10.2019

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Abstract

This paper argues that translation in *Translations* ‘is a dialogue’ for the sake of communication to highlight social and political issues of Irish people. *Translations* (1980) also aim to highlight the decline of Irish culture and language through communication with gradual shift after English invasion. This paper focuses on the decline of Irish language and culture through powerful English language and English invasion. Focusing on the decline of Irish language and culture, it is concluded that Friel’s *Translations* is an attempt to see external issues of Irish nation through translation process.

Keywords: Translation, communication, social and political demise.

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INTRODUCTION

Translations (1980) is a three act play written by Brian Friel in the 19th century. The story takes place in a hedge school where Irish students faced English invasion of English speaker soldiers. Owen got the duty to help British army in making a new map of Ireland. He also had to translate Irish language/conversation into English among the English soldiers and Irish citizens.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Translations (1980) ends with social and political issues. The focal point of the play is the ruin of Irish culture and language. Friel says, “a fundamental irony of this play is that it should have been written in Irish” [1]. *Translations* (1980) traces English sanctioned ordnance survey of Ireland in Ireland Baile Beag village. The ordnance survey left negative effects on Irish citizens like unemployment, theft, flight and violence. In the play, Greek, Gaelic and Latin languages were replaced by commercial English language. Throughout in the play, the translating process appeared problematic and left Irish citizens on the verge of ruin with the destruction of their native language despite the fact that many Irish citizens liked English language [2].

Moreover, the translating process also kept Irish citizens far away from the history, geography, methodology and literature. Furthermore, Irish language overall suffered a lot in the play as Friel says that

Translations is only about language and language [1]. On the other hand, Filoloxía says that language is Friel’s obsession [3] while Holstein asserts, “Mapping any territory lays claim to it; stamps it as one’s own. The occupiers must know the land they occupy, and they know it by ‘translating’ it (...) from the unfamiliar to the familiar... It is not simply different words: the words redefine, re-limit the landscape” [4, 1, 2]. It indicates that the goal of Ordnance Survey was to redefine a landscape but it had further meanings as well.

Notably, the tuition was through Gaelic language however in the Hedge schools it started to decline and Irish citizens started to believe the worth and value of English language. The feelings developed gradually in the hearts of Irish citizens. Commenting on the will of Irish nation, Kiberd says, “native language declined not as an outcome of British policy so much as because the entire generation of the Irish themselves decide no longer to speak” [5]. Kiberd’s statement indicates that *Translations* (1980) starts off with language issues but ends with social and political issues.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The British assaults aimed to rename old Irish place, rivers and street names in English. By doing so, they wanted to transform old Irish history, its name and prestige into English for the sake of transformation

along with to disassociate Irish from its cultural background [2]. As Marie says,

Maire: And from the very first day you go, you'll not hear one word of Irish spoken. You'll be taught to speak English and every subject will be taught through English and everyone'll end up as cute as Bunrana people (4, 23).

In the light of above text, *Translations* reflects nineteenth century English empire builders where language is appreciated for colonial power [2]. The use of English language presented Irish villagers as displaced people in their native land and made them unfamiliar of native things and places in their native land [2]. Audience sees play's bilingual scene where Marie and Yolland come back from a party and share the moment with each other. They share their love for each other without knowing that which language they are speaking Latin, Greek or Gaelic. They indirectly say to the audience about the suspension of disbelief. They also assumed Yolland is speaking English while Marie is speaking Gaelic. Their conversation is as under:

Yolland: (*Indicating himself*) George.

(Maire nods: Yes-Yes. Then)

Maire: Lieutenant George.

Yolland: Don't call me that. I never think of myself as Lieutenant.

Maire: What-what?

Yolland: Sorry-sorry? (*He points to himself again.*) George.

(Maire nods: Yes-yes. Then points to herself)

Maire: Maire.

Yolland: Yes, I know you're Maire. Of course I know you're Maire. I mean I've been watching you night and day for the past –

Maire: (*Eagerly*) What-what?

Yolland : (*Points*) Maire. (*Points*) George. (*Points both*) Maire and George.

(Maire nods: Yes-yes-yes.) (I-I-I, 1).

Maire: Say anything at all. I love the sound of your speech.

Yolland: (*Eagerly*) Sorry-sorry? (In acute frustration he looks around, hoping for some inspiration that will provide him with communicative means). . .

Maire tries Latin:

Maire: Tu es centurio in – in – in exercitu Britannico –

Yolland: Yes-yes? Go on – go on – go on – say anything at all – I love the sound of your speech (4, 63).

Through this conversation, Friel's trick is obvious as the play is performed in English but the characters tried to speak Latin, Irish and English. Specifically, about this scene, Lee says that the loss of Irish language would be a little discussion for identity in republic (6) while Murray sarcastically says that Friel

used two language devices in the play however only one language i.e. English is spoken on the stage [7]. Marie also sarcastically says to Hugh that she wants to learn English language,

Maire: I'm back again. I set out for somewhere but I could'nt remember where. So I came back.

Hugh: Yes, I will teach you English, Marie Chatach.

Maire: Will you, Master? I must learn it. I need to learn it (III 89).

Hugh: I will provide you with the available words and the available grammar. But will that help you to interpret between privacies?" (III 89, 90).

According to Kilb, Dan O'Connell and Maire think that with the use English language they can progress in future personally and socially. Hence, Maire's desire to speak English can affect Ireland's traditions [8]. When Yolland fell in love with Maire and wishes to learn Irish, Hugh gives him a reminder,

Hugh: [. . .] that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of ... fact (4, II 52).

This may be true even in the case of Irish as he says,

Hugh: 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 (50).

Hugh's reminder appeared right because he had the idea about the ruin of Irish language [8]. Grene says that Friel's attempt to portray a conflict of Irish and English language is an attempt to portray political and social issues between the two nations [9]. Grene further says an Irish playwright writes in English to communicate however it shows that English colonizers have deprived him [9]. Yet, only Hugh realizes the situation and in the last scene of the play he realizes the advantages and disadvantages of tradition in the face of change as he says,

Hugh: It is images of the past embodied in language, not the facts as such, which shape us, he insists, and goes on to explain that we must never cease renewing those images (4, III, 88).

The above text shows that with the use of English language, Friel sarcastically used English language for communication and to tell the audience about the motives of the British and the importance of English language.

Bertha says that Friel is the most influential political playwright among his contemporaries who is, “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” [10].

Khojastehpour and Fomeshi assert that Friel’s focus on linguistic issues is in fact a ladder to highlight social and political issues with the demise of Irish culture and language. In this context, Friel highlights many issues in the play which are directly or indirectly connected with the language issues [11]. According to Loomba, colonial discourse is as important as cultural heritage and political issues [12] while Amuta says, “cultural action cannot be divorced from the larger struggle for the liberation of the nation” [13].

Culture is closely related to language as Fanon says, “To speak means to be in a position to use certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture to support the weight of a civilization” [14]. History shows that culture and language are always affected by colonialism. Later, it was continued by translating process. Thus, colonialism and translation are corresponding agents [14].

On the other hand, Loomba says Friel portrayed the play on the grounds of, “the colonial struggle in Ireland [that is] is represented as a contest over words and language” [12]. The remaking of name places is a typical example of colonialism and through this transformation, in fact the British wanted to make Ireland a New England and to understand it with better perspectives. It is obvious in the following conversation,

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, 36).

Khojastehpour and Fomeshi say that in the act of translation; audience sees British’s act of ruling a culture and a language (11). Owen is the most interested character; eager to translate his native places’ name into English. Through his character, Friel shows his carelessness and the mispronunciation of his name by British soldiers as they used to call him Rolland instead Owen. The following text shows that he does not bother about it. A glimpse is felt in the following conversation,

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? (4, I, 33).

Owen did not realize that by mispronounced name; they try to snatch his true identity. On the other hand, Tymoczko says that we cannot progress without translation. It is significant for communication and without translation we lock ourselves in restricted linguistic communication and “Inter-language communication through translation is crucial” [15]. No doubt, Friel has done it in his play. Hugh’s statement also justifies it

Hugh: We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home” (4, III 88).

While Maire says,

Maire: [...] the old language is a barrier to modern progress [...] and he is right. I do not want Greek. I do not want Latin. I want English (I, 25).

Furthermore, the insignificance of old language is no more accepted by some characters as Maire again says,

Maire: Teach the old classics to the cows (I 31).

In this context, Kearney points out that Friel focuses on “crisis of language as a medium of communication and representation” [16] and Maire’s disgust about the classic language shows how to hate old language as it is now useless thing for them. Literature shows that Friel’s *Translations* (1980) is taken as a serious play yet not tragic so far [16] and his play presents, “a narrowly nationalistic attitude toward language could be invoked as a refusal to communicate with others” [16].

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Translations (1980) is the ruin and decline of Irish language and culture. The British won the game by implementing their rules, changing Ireland’s place names in English through the mode of communication in English language. These various implementations also ruined Irish cultural heritage, history and left Irish nation on the verge of lost identity. Literature shows that through *Translations*, Friel tries to give evidence about the brutality and cruelty of colonialism along with

the effect and impact of English language on some specific characters.

Thus, this paper concludes that translation in *Translations* is a dialogue between British and Irish citizens that could not remove dependency of Irish nation but it aimed to fix British's plans and strategies against the Ireland. By all means, by mean of English language communication, through the character of Hugh, Friel wants to show that Hugh is unable to recover Irish cultural history and its dependency on British [1] similarly Filoloxia says that Hugh is the only character who is aware of the decay and ruin of Irish language and he also knows that consciously or unconsciously trusting English language would only result in false notions and lies [4].

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