

*Linguistic Fluidity and Unrealized Territories in Brian Friel's Translations*¹

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Abstract: *Before completing Translations (1981), Brian Friel registered in his diary the wish that the play dealt with “language and only language,” saying that the text would be “lost” if it became overwhelmed by the political context in which it is set. A number of critics quote this diary entry in order to argue that language in Ireland is inextricably political. However, the reading of language solely through an Irish/British binary risks identifying Ballybeg natives and British officers as two opposing, yet homogenous groups. An analysis of Friel's preliminary notes for Translations complicates this binary by introducing the concept of linguistic fluidity, which emphasises the importance of other languages, as well as different means of communication operating in the play. Moreover, an analysis of his manuscripts can enrich our understanding of language in his oeuvre by recognizing, without being necessarily centred in, the binary negotiation between colonizers and colonized.*

Keywords: *Brian Friel; Translations; language.*

In their collection *The People of India* (1868-1875), the British colonial ethnographers John Forbes Watson and John William Kaye compiled nearly five hundred annotated photographs of native Indians supplied by amateurs employed by the British government. Ania Loomba analyses their project in *Colonialism-Postcolonialism*, highlighting the fact that Watson and Kaye squeezed “the bewildering varieties of Indian peoples” into narrow categories of caste, race, and inheritance. Loomba also suggests that *The People of India* “reveals the attempt both to master the colonial subject and to represent them as unalterably alien; it thus represents both the intrusiveness of the colonial gaze and an inability to comprehend what it seeks to codify” (86). In other words, more than being a testament to the brutality of the colonizer, Watson's and Kaye's initiative proves that the foreign eye often fails to recognize the richness and the complexity of the colonial subject. Parallel to this initiative, the Ordnance Survey of 1825-1841 was an attempt by the British government to carry out a full survey of Ireland through the remapping of the land. The enterprise gave the British colonial control over the landscape, but also over the people and their heritage. Brian Friel's *Translations* is a representative postcolonial text of Ireland inspired by the process, and

Friel chooses to represent the complexity of the colonial subject on a linguistic level. But reducing language in the play to the Irish/British binary would be an interpretative violence.

Many languages are spoken in Ballybeg. In one of his preliminary notes for the play, Friel indicates that he wanted to locate the events in a time of “linguistic fluidity” (MS 37,085/1 – “A” 3).² The year 1833 is a year of such fluidity.³ At this time the Gaelic language was the dominant language employed by people to communicate in Ireland, but it was endangered by the arrival of new National Schools professing an all-English curriculum. On one level, the play represents the historical process of renaming and mapping the Irish landscape for taxation purposes, but it also represents a more complex process of colonisation.⁴ Thus, “linguistic fluidity” is a phrase that indicates that *Translations* discusses historic processes as well as discrete events. Additionally, the text testifies to individual processes of transformation: the events affect characters differently, and an audience might notice small shifts in different character’s behaviour, which are brought to light by the character’s altered use of language.

“Linguistic fluidity” can be used to refer to the absence of fixed borders separating languages in the play: characters speak English and Irish, but also ironically converse using “dead” languages such as Latin and Greek. The play encompasses the technical terminology of cartographers, along with Jimmy Jack’s literary language and the mathematical language used in the hedge school. Body language is important as well, not only because it dictates the actor’s movements on stage, but also because characters’ gestures often communicate a lot. For that reason, “linguistic fluidity” is a term that points to whether is it enough to know how to speak English or Irish properly in order to communicate, given that well educated characters repeatedly fail to express themselves, while the illiterate are generally able to convey their ideas effectively.

Critical consensus on *Translations* has tended to view language mostly in relation to the process of colonisation, stressing the opposition between English and Irish speakers. The dissertation, conversely, initially focuses on the *avant-texte* and rough drafts left by Friel on *Translations*, and does so to provide an analysis of what language means to each character and how each one uses a different form of language to communicate. In dialogue with Christopher Murray’s compilation of Friel’s diary entries, which in many ways elucidate the playwright’s creative process, this analysis aims to demonstrate how the work of art can be interpreted through the moment which gave birth to it.

The National Library of Ireland holds a sizeable amount of material related to Friel: material relating to his short stories, thirty of his radio and stage plays, documentation about the establishment of the Field Day Theatre, correspondence with actors, directors, producers, writers and academics, and also articles and theses on his work. When given to the Library early this century, the material filled 116 boxes. The numerous items related to *Translations* were divided by the librarian Helen Hewson into five categories: Manuscripts, Texts of Translations, Productions, Screenplay, Financial Returns and Miscellaneous.

The first folder of the Manuscripts section refers to twelve bundles of loose pages of holograph notes. They are labelled as follows: “Characters” (n.d., 14pp); “A” – notes made between 22 November and 9 December 1978 (14pp); “B” – notes made between 24 March and 12 April 1979 (25pp); “Extracts from B” notes dating 5 – 11 May 1979 (8pp); “C” – notes made between 12 and 27 May 1979 (18pp); “D” – notes made between 29 May and 2 June 1979 (8pp); “Paper Landscape’ relating to J.H. Andrews’ 1975 publication *A Paper Landscape. The Ordnance Survey in the Nineteenth Century* (15pp); “Steiner” (n.d., 6pp) (George Steiner, author of *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (1975); “Resume – 9 Sept. 1979” (5pp); Patrick J. “Dowling’s *The Hedge Schools of Ireland*” (1968) (n.d., 6pp); “Bluebeard’s Castle” (n.d., 1p.) and miscellaneous notes (n.d., 10pp). These notes were written between November 1978 and September 1979. Therefore, some are prior to and some were written concurrently with Friel diary entries on the play.⁵ The main focus of the dissertation was the content of this folder, and specifically the notes that refer to or clarify the use of language in the play.

The second and third folders of the Manuscripts section refer to copybooks of notes and draft scripts of the three acts of the play. The first act’s script is prefaced by a list of possible titles, including “Baptisms, Tongues, The Naming Ritual, Landscapes, Maps, Sticks & Stones, Christenings, Contours, Words, Denominations, Counters, Tokens, Nominations” and “Entitlements.” There are numerous typewritten pages of the script edited by hand as well as handwritten script pages. Loose pages of typewritten drafts, and also drafts of notes for use in the programme for the premiere on 23 September 1980 in Derry’s Guildhall make up the fourth and fifth folders of the Manuscripts section, and the last folder contains a photocopy of “Letters Containing information relative to the Antiquities of the County of Donegal Collected during the progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1835.” Although not dealt with in the dissertation, the material in these folders opens up new ways of analysing Friel’s work and is likely to influence future research on *Translations*.

The section under the name “Texts of Translations” presents two drafts of the French translation of the play by Pierre Laville, and also the Spanish translation by Teresa Calo Fontan. The seventh folder reunites the material from productions in Derry, Belfast, Dublin, Northern Ireland, and also in North America, Europe (and the copy of a letter from Harold Pinter regretting that he could not direct the production in London), Australia and Africa. This section gathers newspaper articles on Field Day Theatre, the play and its actors, letters to Friel, communications between him and George Steiner regarding his use of Steiner’s quotations in the play (June 1980 and July 1984), opening night good luck telegrams and cards, programmes, black and white production photographs, reviews, box office returns, and contracts. The section “Screenplay” offers correspondence on a possible film, along with a copy of the first draft and of the final version of Neil Jordan’s screenplay of *Translations* (3 March 1983). “Financial returns” is devoted to royalty statements for the play and the “Miscellaneous” section reunites letters to Friel concerning the translation of the text into various languages, fan mail,

notice of the play's nomination for prizes, and letters from various representatives at Faber & Faber on the publication contract, accompanied by a copy of the published text of *Translations*.

Focusing upon the issue of "linguistic fluidity," the dissertation studies how this concept structures *Translations*, and also how Friel revisits it in a couple of other plays. It does so by engaging with classic interpretations of Friel's work, such as F. C. McGrath's analysis of the political implications around the use of language or Tony Corbett's study of language and identity in the Irish postcolonial context. But the dissertation looks closely at Friel's manuscripts – and much of this material has yet to be engaged scholarly –, aiming to demonstrate how an analysis of the first stages of the compositional process allow for a unique reading of the play. The dissertation then moves to a close reading of the text in an attempt to explore Ballybeg's linguistic richness.

The first chapter is dedicated to an analysis of how the map, a recurrent image in Friel's annotations, works as a metaphor for linguistic fluidity and language in *Translations*. The fact, for instance, that characters understand the map differently, and that this leads to conflict, illustrates just how complex the village actually is. Exploring the map metaphor, the chapter demonstrates the ways in which the play represents an ongoing historical process – linguistic transformation unfolding gradually from the year of the Educational Act (1831) onwards. In this period, Gaelic is beginning to lose strength as the main language spoken in Ireland. Manus's character encapsulates the complexity of this process. Although being able to speak both Irish and English, Manus insists on using only the former, which derives from his desire to keep a private territory, and acts as resistance to colonial imposition. But Manus, like some of the other characters, also fails to communicate effectively on a number of occasions. The specific ways characters develop to deal with such a failure is also analysed.

The second chapter opens with a brief critical background on the linguistic issues raised by the play, and how these relate to, rather than oppose, local politics. Friel expressed in his diary the desire to write a play about language and not politics, but language in Ireland seems to be inextricably political. In an attempt to avoid the Irish/British binary, the chapter explores the linguistic plurality in the village and examines how each character's means of communication contrasts with the others. Not all the Irish people in Ballybeg, for example, believe that English would free them from "serfdom" (MS 37,085/1 – "A", 11). Analysing linguistic difference is important in order to prevent a reductive reading of the community and the British officers as two homogenous groups, when they are each comprised of diverse people and perspectives.

The final section of the dissertation attempts to understand how the notion of linguistic fluidity reverberates in two plays other than *Translations*. For instance, one of the characters in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Jack, has "scarcely any trace of an Irish accent" (31), and has trouble remembering English words; however, he is fluent in Swahili (62). If, in *Translations*, the renaming of places "cuts off the natives from their culture," in *Dancing at Lughnasa* the character seems cut off from his culture after returning

from missionary work in Uganda (Rollins 36). Having lived abroad for more than two decades, Jack wanders from room to room, confused by the layout of his own house and revealing that he no longer feels part of Irish society. Characters in *Faith Healer* are also travellers affected by their journey. The monologic structure of the play allows for their linguistic particularities to be fully explored: Frank, the Faith Healer, refuses to discuss certain events, but communicates on a spiritual level; Grace's language is a product of her traumas; and Teddy's language is business oriented. In their soliloquys, characters reveal very personal, and often contrasting, interpretations of the events they have experienced together. More than revealing differences between the characters, an analysis of the different means of communication allows for the questioning of their interpretations of history, even if only on a personal level. Each character's particular use of language; the relationship between language, identity, and the feeling of belonging; and the importance of understanding language in a broader sense, are but a few of the main points raised by the dissertation that reverberate in *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Faith Healer*. Therefore, an analysis of Friel's manuscripts may pave the way for a profitable reading of language in his oeuvre that recognizes but is not necessarily centred in the binary colonizer *versus* colonized.

Notes

- 1 This article is the result of my dissertation for the title Master in Philosophy in Irish Writing, at the School of English, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin, thanks to the ABEI/Haddad 2015-2016 Fellowship. Quotations allowed with the kind permission of the Estate of Brian Friel.
- 2 References to Friel's manuscripts are abbreviated and cited parenthetically. "MS 37,085/1" is the location of the folder according to the National Library of Ireland's catalogue; "A" is the title of this specific bundle of loose pages and "3" is the number of the page where this annotation was found.
- 3 In his preliminary notes for the play, Friel explicitly says that he needed to "choose the date precisely" (MS 37,085/1 – "A" 5). The Catholic Emancipation of 1829, the Name Book policy (which became official from 1830 on), and the Educational Act of 1831 (which established National Schools) oriented his decision. He also notes that Irish language scholar John O'Donovan, the correspondent to Owen in the play, was appointed for a job in the Topographical Department of the Ordnance Survey in 1830; and that Colonel Thomas Colby, who directed the enterprise, married an Irish woman in that same year. Most importantly, Friel registers that Derry maps with detailed description of the land were published in 1833 (MS 37,085/1 – "A" 3 / "C" 3, 17 / "D" 2, 5 / "Paper Landscape" 9-12 / "Resume" 1 / "Dowling's *The Hedge Schools of Ireland*" 1).
- 4 Loomba comments on the fact that some critics accuse Friel of "dissolving economic issues into the politics of language." In response, she points out Declan Kiberd's argument that "the struggle for the power to name oneself and one's state is enacted fundamentally within words, most especially in colonial situations." To Loomba, a concern with language is more of "an investigation into the depths of the political unconscious" than a retreat from politics (87-8).
- 5 The "Extracts from a Sporadic Diary" edited by Murray on Translations range from 1 May 1979 to 5 November 1979 (73-8).

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