

## Brian Friel's Translations: Logocentric Flux

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# Brian Friel's *Translations*: Logocentric Flux

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We can ever see or describe a narrative  
to the history of naming.  
Seamus Deane<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In this essay, I focus on logocentric flux in Friel's *Translations*. In the play the English military comes to Baile Beag to make a map; the aim is not only to spread British authority politically throughout Ireland by military force, but also to change place names from Irish to English. Changing names indicates changing Irish people and their identities. One of the significant characters in this play, Hugh makes a decision when he faces the crisis of losing his linguistic identity. I analyse first, through the case of place names, how we consider the meaning of a name and its narrative, which is a tool to remember the origin of the place name. Next, I examine the crisis of the Irish language is the face of English language, finally, I consider the possibility/impossibility of translation. I describe the surviving narratives in the peculiar situation in which original language is in crisis. To analyse the language crisis, I conclude that linguistic flux is needed to survive traditional narratives in Baile Beag.

## Meaning of Names

*Translations* was written in 1980, and first presented by Field Day Theatre Company in the Guildhall, Derry on 23 September 1980. The action takes place in Baile Beag, County Donegal. In August 1833, Owen, one of the important protagonists, comes back from Dublin as a translator with the English General Survey, whose aim is to make a map of Baile Beag. In the process, they put in place new names under the supervision of General Lancey and Lieutenant Yolland. Neither understands any Irish and, therefore tries to anglicize all Irish place names. The villagers are anxious about the Anglicization not only of place names but also that the Irish are being forced to use English. Some oppose the English authority, but a schoolmaster, Hugh, makes the decision to accept the Anglicized world.

In Act 1, Owen is called Rolland by the English colleagues. He does not seem to mind this, but his brother Manus is surprised at his brother's attitude toward his name.

OWEN: ... Owen --- Roland --- what the hell. It's only a name. It's the same me, isn't it? Well, isn't it? (*Translations*, 408)

When Owen appears with the General Ordnance Survey to make a map, he is called "Rolland". His brother, Manus asks him why he is called "Rolland". Owen replies that his colleagues, the English cannot pronounce "Owen". He thinks that his name is not its only significance thing that identifies.

It is true that a name is only a name that belongs to someone. However, this is not its only significance for a person. Everybody has a name and each contains a meaning, such as religious, or being named after someone. Though there is no indication why Owen is named "Owen", his name also has a certain background and meaning. Even place names, like Baile Beag, have meanings based on their historic narrative or myth.

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<sup>1</sup> Deane: 1993. 104.

Anderson describes the appearance of a name as follow.

No one can give the date for the birth of any language. Each looms up imperceptively out of a horizonless past ... language thus appear rooted beyond anything else in contemporary society. (Anderson: 1983, 132)

He explains that a place name has an ancestral meaning because it contains a certain event related to that place. And whenever we hear its root, the place becomes historical, beyond the temporal dimension. Silverstein also comments that "Names function as "abbreviations" of narratives ... the name becomes the repository of a (narrative) history that allows the object to appear on the stage of (temporal) history." (Silverstein: 1992, 137) As he says, a place name has a simultaneous narrative meaning and every time we refer to the name place, we can associate with its narratives. In the play, Owen tells the story of "Tobair Vree".

OWEN: ... we call that crossroad Tobair Vree. And why do we call it Tobair Vree? I'll tell you why. Tobair means a well. But what does Vree mean? It's a corruption of Brian --- (*Gaelic pronunciation*) Brian --- an erosion of Tobair Bhriain. 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. [...] I know the story because my grandfather told me [...]. (*Translations*, 420).

Owen heard of the story from his grandfather, but it is not well known by the villagers, and it seems it is no longer remembered by many people. In other words, narrative cannot live without being narrated by someone, and a place name is one of the simplest signs. Silverstein uses the term, "abbreviation of narratives" (Silverstein: 1992, 137); Jameson refers to narrative and its contained history: "History is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but ... it is inaccessible to us except in textual form and ... our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through ... it narrativization. (Jameson: 1981, 35) He utilizes the word, "narrativization" in which he indicates that history exists in narrative.

Furthermore, Owen says after the above quotation.

Owen: ... So the questions I put to you, Lieutenant, is this: what do we do with a name like that? So we scrap Tobair Vree altogether and call it --- what? --- The Cross? Crossroads? Or do we keep piety with a man long dead, long dead, long forgotten, his name 'eroded' beyond recognition. Whose trivial little story nobody in the parish remembers? (*Translations*, 420)

From the above quotation, it seems that the narrative will soon be forgotten after Anglicization. Every time we talk about place name, its narrative emerges in front of us vividly. Silverstein explains how the narrative survives through our oral tradition.

The recitation of narrative allows the "we" of "we call it Tobair Vree" to transcend the discontinuities separating Owen's Baile Beag from the Baile Beag of one hundred and fifty years ago, and (re) create Baile Beag as a space of temporal simultaneity (Silverstein: 1992, 138).

Though Owen participates in the map making team, he understands well how place names link to names narrative and that anglicizing a name means losing identity. Irish place names have their narrative but when the Irish name is translated into an English name, it is only a name to indicate the place itself. Kearney notes that the meaning of naming is different between Irish and English. The former embodies its historical roots or narratives, while the latter just indicates the place geographically.<sup>2</sup> In short, the Irish place name has a historical meaning and an Anglicized place name is just a geographical sign.

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<sup>2</sup> Andrews: 1985, 170.

## The Possibility/Impossibility of Translation

Why did the English force the Irish to speak or use English? Not only Irish names but also place names are changed into English names. Holstein proposes that translating from Irish to English is a very violent deed.

But one can certainly, particularly if one believes one's own language to be superior to all others. And this linguistic chauvinism reverberates throughout *Translations* as well as throughout the history of English and American encounters with other languages. (Holstein: 2004, 4)

Forcing the population to use English was common in colonized countries, such as Ireland, India and some African countries. In this play, the English military tries to make a map, anglicize place names and establish national schools all over Ireland. This means that, step by step, English is being spread throughout the country. Prohibiting the use of the Irish native language is a way to ruin the cultural identity of the Irish. Moreover, education in English is an easy way to increase English use in the Irish community. In the case of Tobair Vree, once the Irish language becomes obsolete, Tobair Vree's narrative may disappear soon and for ever. Silverstein also points out the violence of forcing others to use a non-native language. "... [t] he process of naming refuse to name is the power of violence to enforce the identification of (English) names with the creative word." (Silverstein: 1992, 134)

Lancey speaks only English, and he is very surprised when he finds out the villagers in Baile Beag cannot speak English.

HUGH: ... --- I encountered Captain Lancey of the Royal Engineers who is engaged in the Ordnance survey of this area. ... He then explained that he does not speak Irish. Latin? I asked. None. Greek? Not a syllable. He speaks --- on his own admission --- only English; and to his credit he seemed suitably verecund ---. (*Translations*, 399)

For Lancey, English is the superior language and other languages are inferior. It seems that Lancey is a very egoistic person, a particular type of a colonizer. In fact, in 1833, England governed many colonized countries, and forcing the population to use English was the most convenient way of mastering them and reducing their native identity.

In the play, Hugh quotes Ovid's line ironically:

HUGH: [...] Barbarus hic ego sum quia non intelligor ulli (I am a barbarian in this place because I am not understood by anyone.) -- James?" (*Translations*, 442. English translations are from *Translations*, 443.)

He calls himself a barbarian but it is very curious that at the same time, Ovid's lines imply that here is a sophisticated place but he is an alien and barbarian so he cannot be understood by anyone. Hugh quotes these lines in Baile Beag; he is not an alien here and the Irish language is the major language for villagers. At first glance, Hugh seems to be talking about himself, but in fact he is criticizing the English. However, although the English try to force the villagers to use English, their native language will remain Irish as long as they live.

As a highlight scene, Hugh talks to Jimmy about the new situation. "We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home." (*Translations*, 444) This is a surprising comment by Hugh. Because he is not only a schoolmaster in the hedge school but also a godparent in Baile Beag. He is regarded as very wise person. Many expect Hugh to fight against the English General Ordnance Survey, but he just says "We must learn where I live" (*Translations*, 444). Although he is not keen to use English, he chooses to speak it to swim with the tide.

HUGH; ... But remember that words are signals, counters. They are not immortal. And it (Anglicization) can happen --- to use an image you'll understand -- it can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of ... fact. Gentlemen. (*Translations*, 419, Supplemental explanation is mine.)

He knows even though we can translate one language to another language word by word, we cannot translate its signifier completely. Language is a sign (*signifiant*)<sup>3</sup> to communicating with people in the same community. Anderson's definition of the nation as an image community, proposed that "[b]ecause the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (Anderson: 1983, 15) According to him, language as a *signifiant* is inextricably related with image = *signifier*. In short, we use language to express an image that we want to share. The language must be a communication tool between speakers, because the image and the language are firmly tied to each other. Anderson called this situation "imagined communion"<sup>4</sup>.

Language and image are always altogether, but in the play, Owen and Yolland try to change all Irish place names to English style names. Hugh tells Lancey that English cannot express the whole Irish meaning. Irish has its own unique image and this is not suitable for English. In other words, Irish cannot be translated into English.

Deane says "Translation is interpretation" (Deane: 1993, 107). It is certain that translation is the means of delivering meaning from one language to another. However, in many cases, each notion is slightly different from language to language or word to word. This means, that each *signifiant* has a *signifier* and this notion works properly only in the same imagined communion. So, when we translate our language to another language, we have to interpret the *signifier* deeply and look for the most similar what most closely represents what we are taking to communicate. However, even if we take the closest meaning for the image that we want to express, it is impossible to explain the image completely. In my opinion, we cannot represent the whole range of images or emotions that occur in our mind even with our native language. Language is a medium to express not only some concrete and practical things but also cognitive and abstract ideas. Derrida (1996: 337-477) uses the word "transfer" to explain "translation".

All such discussion of language, posits "for the notion of translation of translation we would have to substitute a notion of *transformation* ... We will never have, and in fact have never had, any 'transfer' of pure signified --- from one language to another, or within one language --- which would be left virgin and intact by the signifying instrument or 'vehicle'".<sup>5</sup>

Derrida points out that translation is a transfer with language and we use the language to deliver the meaning like a vehicle. Malenich also regards language as a tool to communicate with each other. He comments:

Language is the means through which we communicate our experiences and understanding of reality with those who share this system of symbols with us.... A symbolic relationship exists between cultural identity and language, since a culture and its experiences distinctly shape the language that it speaks; but language also maintains the history and heritage that is a cultural identity (Malenich: 2001, 68).

Language is a communal tool for understanding, and Malenich's proposal is very similar to Anderson's "imagined communion". Through language we communicate with each other and recite narratives of our historical background.

On the other hand, Pine insists that translation to another language is a distortion of idea or ideology that is constructed by tradition.

[t]ranslation is not only a release or liberation of a word/concept from one language to another, it is also an act of betrayal a carrying across from the camp of the true to that of the false, from dexter to sinister, adroit to gauche. Such a tradition, or 'handing over' (*tradere*), is a subversion or perversion of tradition conceived as continuity, or 'handing down.' (Pine: 1990, 158)

<sup>3</sup> *signifiant* and *signifier* are Saussure's terms in linguistic. See Saussure: 1960.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson: 1983, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida: 1996, 337-447.

It is clear that translation, especially in the situation of *Translations* is crucial to destroying language and is linked to the disappearing Irish language. In fact, villagers in Baile Beag cannot resist the situation, even though some of them become terrorists to resist the English military. Their resistance will be in vain.

### Surviving of Narratives

Language is not only an essential part of identity but a medium to express a person's ideas; in other words, it is a communication tool. Hugh tells Lancey not to force the use of English in Baile Beag, but he finally changes his mind and says "We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home". (*Translations*, 444) It seems he is giving up the use of Irish. Is he abandoning one of the most important features for his identity? No, in fact, he gives up Irish language to protect his identity as a villager of Baile Beag. He says.

HUGH: It is not the literal past, the 'fact' of history, that shapes us, but images of the past embodied in language ... we must never cease renewing those images; because once we do, we fossilize. (*Translations*, 445)

He is afraid that a remembrance of history is embodied in his language, and this will be forgotten for the sake of not being narrated any longer. Though English cannot represent completely images in Irish language, at least place names can keep their meanings, and changing the language from Irish to English may be an inevitable way of keeping up with the times. Silverstein explores narrative and history. "Hugh's point, however, that the villagers must translate such a fact into the images through whose renewal the nation will continue to exist as an "imagined community", a subject of and in (hi)story." (Silverstein: 1992, 140) His idea is related to Benjamin's "The Task of Translator" (Benjamin: 1996, 253-264). In his essay, Benjamin suggests, that literature should be translated into other languages: it is like a current that is always changing its shapes and never stays, it is temporal, so when we pursue the fashion of language it never remains in the same place. Furthermore, from place to place, each language is different; therefore, when the literature has been read by people all over the world for many centuries, the work is translated into various contemporary languages.<sup>6</sup> In short, text needs to be adapted to any kind of language. For Benjamin, maintaining narrative or text is more important than language, which plays the role of renewing the text to make it more readable for present readers.

Hugh also realizes that narrative is more important than language. Even though the new language (English) cannot translate the narrative completely, it is better than a disappearing narrative. This is the flux of narrative. Hugh's giving up the Irish language is sometimes criticized, but Andrews explains us Hugh's decision as "Hugh argues for renewing the images of language to avoid fossilizing." (Andrews: 1985, 176) "Fossilizing" means the narrative belongs to the past and is forgotten by people. Narrative never becomes a fact in the past. Adapting to a new language is a flux.

Traditions, he sees, can only survive through translation. He replies to 'inevitable', not by escaping into romantic fantasy (like Jimmy Jack), not by intransigence (like Manus) and not by revolt (like the Dinnelly twins, Doalty and Owen), but by seeking to adapt to change, by looking for ways to reconcile the traditional and the modern, emotion and reason, the intimate reality of the parish and larger perspectives that cut across time and place. (Andrews: 1985, 176)

I agree with Andrews comments and thus, narrative has a life in people's spirits. Narrative lives along with the present language.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin states: "For any translation of a working originating in a specific stage of linguistic history represents, in regard to a specific aspect of its content, translation into all other languages. Thus, ironically, translation transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm, since it can no longer be displaced by a secondary rendering. The original can only be raised there anew and at other points of time." (Benjamin: 1996, 258)

## Conclusion

In this essay, I analysed Brian Friel's *Translations* from the point of language flux. First, I mentioned the meaning of naming and explained the significance and the background. Next, I addressed the crisis of the Irish language faced with English. I considered the role of language and the possibility/impossibility of translating into another language. Then I discussed narrative and language, which is related not only to narrative but also to people's identity. Through these observations, I conclude that narrative has to be adapted to contemporary language and must keep being renewed the *narrative* to survive its contextual origin, even if it is partly lost through linguistic change.

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