

Translating "Translations": The Importance of Conversational Analysis in this Play

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Heidegger's idea that "man acts as if he were the shaper and master of language, while it is language which remains mistress of man" (foreword to George Steiner's *After Babel*) forms part of the ideology behind the play *Translations*. Friel says in an interview in *Magill* in 1980 that this was quoted in the programme notes to *Translations*. The implication in the interview is if language is the mistress of man and not vice versa then the English as spoken in Ireland "forms us and shapes us in a way that is neither healthy nor valuable for us ..." (59). Consequently, Friel maintains that we must make English "inidentifiably our own language" (61). Michael Barry and John Harris, among other scholars, draw our attention to the fact that the English spoken in Ireland is quite identifiably different to that spoken in other parts of the world. Friel manifests this difference in his translation of Chekov's *Three Sisters*, using English as spoken in Ireland. But he obviously felt it necessary to make a stronger statement of this difference, showing how the language problem in Ireland has formed and shaped the Irish. *Translations* is set at the moment in Irish history when the Royal Ordnance Survey set about changing the place names in Ireland into anglicized versions, showing Friel's view that the English presence was negative. It is significant that the writer has chosen this moment when Gaelic was being subjected to an onslaught from the colonial language, English. The play would seem to be a study of language but in cultural terms, using the metaphor of the Ordnance Survey's translation

of real names as signifying the way Irish culture and Irish people were changed by the new language, English. That language can do this for Friel is made clear by that significant quote from Heidegger in the programme notes. All the characters in one way or another manifest this cultural trauma. Hugh is confused by the linguistic uncertainty caused by the invader and falls back on the more familiar discourse of Gaelic, Greek, Latin and drink. Máire is willing to leave the Gaelic culture and learn English but because of economic necessity. Yolland wants to form a part of the Gaelic culture but is always alien to it due to his lack of knowledge of the language. Owen is perhaps one of the most central characters in the play. Friel in his *Magill* interview calls him a typical SDLP man, that is a mediator between two cultures, the colonial presence which Friel sees as malign and the Gaelic culture. It is interesting that he helps in the anglicization of the Irish place-names, translating this culture into English terms, but also interesting that he is caught in the middle as the English do not even know his correct name, they call him Roland. He is a victim of being caught between two languages, just as Yolland is caught between two cultures, and in his very desire for clarity seems to become even more confused. He says that place names are riddled with confusion but perhaps it is he who suffers from this, due to a racial identity crisis. Doalty is the typical revolutionary Irishman who reacts violently to colonial oppression. Manus seems to be a metaphor for the Gaelic culture, like Sarah. They are both crippled, he is lame and she is dumb. They seem to personify the country, mute and maimed under oppression. And Manus does so as well, especially in his passive tolerance of his father and of the final confusion which causes him to flee. His reaction to the English presence in his country is predictable, he understands Lancey but is quite puzzled by Yolland. He understands colonial aggression but cannot comprehend Yolland's interest in his native culture. Manus in some ways seems to be the central character in the play and reacts in the way we would expect him to.

What seems to be clear is that Friel is using the characterization in *Translations* to show his ideology and this is reflected in the language. Each character has his own way of speaking. Hugh speaks with a florid confusion of languages, showing his linguistic disorientation. Máire expresses herself in a matter-of-fact and optimistic way, reflecting her pragmatic character. Owen speaks English correctly but yet with Irish idiom, as suits a middle man. Yolland is correct but hesitant, and this hesitancy reflects his attempt to assimilate an alien culture. Manus speaks in an idiomatic way but this is a modern Irish idiom, and it seems as if he is characterized in a way to which

would help a modern audience to feel more at ease with this period piece and even more at ease when he reacts in the form we, the audience, would expect. Lancey, the stereotype colonizer, speaks in a condescending way, treating the Irish characters as children because they do not understand English. Jimmy is comic relief due to his linguistic confusion.

Language has great importance for Friel and we have to take this importance into account when we are translating this play. The two communities in *Translations* are clearly differentiated by the characters' linguistic codes. The contrast between the characters is at both a linguistic and a thematic level. Language can tie a person to his community and, at the same time, distance him or her from another. Through his use of language Friel manages to convey a sense of an Irish community. The first words of each character communicate this to us. As the play goes on we can observe that the ideology of the author is foregrounded and the linguistic codes become less and less obvious.

We have chosen two extracts from the play. One from Act one, p.394, which shows a distinct lack of communication between Máire and Manus, and another from Act two scene II, pg.426-428, which is the most important love scene in the play. As we have already mentioned, Brian Friel writes of a community formed by a group of Irish people who speak standard English with great difficulty. And another community, formed by English soldiers, who express themselves in standard English only. These two contrasting scenes show the lack of communication amongst the group of Irish people and the communication without words between Máire and Yolland, the representatives of the Irish and English group respectively. In the extract from Act one, Máire and Manus seem to be at cross purposes, even though they are supposedly speaking the same language, Irish. In Act two, scene II, Máire and Yolland, who do not speak the same language and at the beginning of the scene cannot understand each other, can do so without using words when the scene comes to an end. The extract from Act one makes many references to the historical background to the play, references to the Famine and emigration, two landmarks in the history of nineteenth-century Ireland, which halved the Irish population. Act two, scene II, is much more personal, it is a love scene, and does not make so many explicit references to the historical background to *Translations*. The contrasting features of each passage are shown in the language used.

We have selected the extract from Act one because it clearly shows that a non-pragmatic reading of the play is not sufficient. In Act one we are made

aware that Manus, Máire, Doalty and Bridget are from the Irish-speaking community due to the Irish idioms they use, for example, Máire says "For God's sake, sure you know he'd never - ". Manus' questions and Máire's abrupt answers give us an idea of the problems in their relationship. Manus begins with a normal, straightforward, direct question: "Can I help you? What are you at?" This sets in motion a conversation combining assertion and interrogation where no real communication exists, where the questions posed are not always answered. Máire answers him: "There's ten below me to be raised and no man in the house. What do you suggest?" to which Manus does not reply. Instead he asks her "Do you want to go?" Now he expects an answer but Máire does not reply to that question, instead she poses a direct question which seems irrelevant, "Did you apply for that job in the new national school?" Thus we get the first direct answer when Manus shortly replies "no". At this point the reader or the audience realize that there is something wrong in the relationship between Manus and Máire, which is not apparent if we only examine the lexis and the syntactic structures.

When we approach a text from the point of view of translation we have to analyse lexis, grammatical structures, prosody and discourse. But perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of translation is the difficulty of conveying the subtle communication contained in the discourse. As Leech and Short point out when they analyse an extract from a conversation in E.M. Forster's *The Celestial Omnibus*, "we also have to use *pragmatic* interpretative strategies" to understand the text properly (290). Consequently, we are now going to analyse this extract from the point of view of discourse analysis in order to make this aspect of the text clearer to the translator.

What Leech and Short have written about conversation in the novel may also be said to a play.

In order to understand the interaction of character and character in dialogue it will be useful to see how we can profitably apply the work of those who have developed the pragmatic analysis of ordinary conversation (290).

What Deirdre Burton says when speaking of language in drama is also relevant to the analysis of this play, "the only possible linguistic level to use as a basis for such analysis is *discourse*, or, even more specifically, conversation, as an aspect of discourse"(8). The possible translator of the scene should take into account both dialogue and discourse, as Leech and Short and Burton affirm above. Prosody may be important in the translation of

a play. If we want to study the dialogue of a play taking the pragmatic analysis into account, we cannot ignore prosody. As Leech and Short point out:

In real conversation tone is so important as to overrule the actual sense of what is said: "It wasn't so much what she said, as her tone of voice that I objected to." The phrase "tone of voice" here brings out the significance of phonetic factors such as intonation and voice quality; but even if these are unavailable (as they are in written dialogue) tone can be indicated by varied and subtle use of grammatical, lexical, and graphological markers, as well as by authorial descriptions of a character's manner of speech (309).

Nevertheless, keeping all this in mind we are now going to analyse the play from the point of view of discourse analysis only. We find two characters in linguistic conflict. In scene two they speak different languages, they cannot understand each other, however at a discourse level there is, in fact, communication between them. Both characters are united by discourse but not by language. In the extract from Act one they speak the same language but there is a distinct lack of communication. We can analyse conversation in the play using Grice's cooperative principle, a principle which indicates the agreement between speakers when they converse in order to cooperate "conversationally towards mutual ends" as Leech and Short state. The cooperative principle is made up of four maxims, quantity, quality, relation and manner. The maxim of quantity, that is to say not giving too much or too little information, is important in the extract from Act one. Even though the questions posed and answers given may not seem relevant, the characters give just enough information to understand each other and we, also, are given sufficient information to realize that something as important as the close relationship between these two characters is about to be ended. From the information about their financial affairs we can guess that their intention to get married is not going to be carried out. Even though they seem to be at cross purposes they understand each other perfectly when only talking about money. Their feelings are not mentioned.

MAIRE: It's 56 pounds a year you're throwing away.

MANUS: I can't apply for it.

MAIRE: You *promised* me you would.

MANUS: My father has applied for it.

MAIRE: He has not!

The last remark shows Máire's disbelief, but the audience know that relationship is ending when Máire finishes the conversation crossly with "suit yourself" (pg.394). This last idiomatic expression is once more a possible problem when it comes to translating this play. The intonation pattern, combined with the idiomatic meaning which is difficult to translate, is more important than the lexis. But it is very significant in the play as a whole in that it shows us when Máire loses interest in Manus and also leads to her future love for Yolland that shall be discussed later.

The maxim of quality, that is making one's contribution true and obvious, is present too. As we have already seen, when talking about the job in the new national school Manus says something as obvious as "I can't apply for it" and "my father has applied for it". But even though their contributions observe the maxim of quality, there is a profound lack of communication between the two. Manus cannot understand why Máire wants to emigrate and she cannot understand why he will not apply for the job.

The maxim of relation, that is being relevant, and manner, being orderly, are broken here. Questions are asked and no relevant answers are given. They interchange questions which are not answered until Manus nervously replies:

MAIRE:...What do you suggest?

MANUS: Do you want to go ?

MAIRE: Did you apply for that job in the new national school?

MANUS: No (394).

The maxim of manner is not observed as we can see that the characters jump from one topic to another without order, even though there is a central theme, their financial state of affairs and how this influences the future of their relationship. So we go from Máire's reply that she is looking at the map of America, to the new national school and finally to their interchange about Manus' father and his application for a job there. By breaking the maxims of relation and manner the author conveys that these two characters know each other very well and do not need to follow an orderly conversation, as they understand each other without using too many words.

In Act two, scene II, Máire, who speaks Irish, cannot speak English well and does so with a strange accent, as the stage directions tell us when she first appears. Yolland, an English soldier, cannot understand Irish and speaks standard English. Again lexis and syntactic structures take second place to

discourse analysis. In scene two we can see that Maire and Yolland use standard English when they communicate. However, we have to emphasize that the author reminds us that Máire speaks English with difficulty when in her linguistic code he introduces "O my God, that leap across the ditch nearly killed me." (426), something with a distinct Irish flavour which differentiates her code from Yolland's. After this the author, except in a certain stage direction, (428) does not bother to show Irish influences in Máire's linguistic code. The reader is aware that the characters speak two different languages. For this reason we believe that lexis and grammatical structures take second place in this scene. The maxim of quantity is not important in this scene. The maxim of quality is not important here either. However, the maxim of relation and manner are important in that scene because they are broken by the characters producing a certain effect in this way.

The maxim of relation is broken when Máire says the only English line she knows is "In Norfolk we besport ourselves around the maypole " (428). What she is saying here is not relevant and is totally out of context thus creating a comic effect. However, Yolland does make it relevant to his own life saying "That's where my mother comes from - Norfolk ..." Just afterwards, the maxim of relation is also broken when Yolland talks using only place names (429). On this occasion, on the contrary, it is Máire who makes his seemingly nonsensical dialogue relevant by saying "Lis na nGradh", which means the Fort of Love in Irish. "Love" is the key word here, in this love scene, the author wants to create a certain atmosphere as is clearly indicated in his stage directions just after Máire says the above: (*They are now facing each other and begin moving - almost imperceptibly towards one another*) (429).

The maxim of manner is also broken due to the absence of order in this conversation, the two characters jump from one thing to the other in their incoherent attempt to communicate no matter what. They speak of such different themes as "the grass must be wet", of their names, of water, fire, earth, Norfolk, toponyms, and then begin to understand each other without words.

The use of repetition is also important in conversation analysis. On the one hand, it unites the two characters, but on the other it emphasises the lack of communication between the two. As a consequence, it creates a feeling of frustration. The sense of unity between the two characters is to be seen in

MAIRE: The grass must be wet. My feet are soaking.

YOLLAND: Your feet must be wet. The grass is soaking.

This seems to be an echo more than mere mechanical repetition, as the characters seem to be reading each other's thoughts.

Burton, summarizing Jefferson, has the following to say:

Firstly, she distinguishes between a repeat a functional item - which is used to produce more talk on the referent to that item - and a "replication", which may have functional load, such as "framing" or "locating" a focus item, but which may have no prospective structural purpose in the interaction, acting instead as a cohesive device (16).

Whereas the above repetition is a cohesive device which shows unity between the two characters, there are other types of repetition in this scene which do not have this same function. One of them is where Máire and Yolland keep on repeating their own words, rather than the above, which is a repetition of each other's words. Máire says "what-what?", Yolland "sorry-sorry?", she again says "what-what?" and he again says "sorry-sorry?". This shows their frustration at their lack of communication, as the stage directions indicate *In acute frustration he looks around* (427). Just before Yolland's words "sorry-sorry?" Máire has said "I love the sound of your speech", supposedly in Irish. Yolland's repetition shows he does not understand her yet a few lines later he repeats her words exactly "I love the sound of your speech", but this time in English. The author seems to be suggesting by the use of this repetition that there is communication between the two characters, but not because of the words they are using, because Máire is speaking in Latin here and we know that Yolland does not understand it. The syntactic structures which they use are informationless, that is to say phatic communion is present here, following Malinowski's definition of it. He defines it as "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words" (Burton:19). We know that communication exists between the two characters, communication without words because, if not, Yolland would not repeat exactly the same words that Máire has used.

In their moment of most acute frustration when the audience believe that communication does not exist, then these two characters really begin to communicate, as this repetition shows. Yet, they do not really understand each other and still do not when the scene ends. We see at the very end of

the scene that they are still talking at cross purposes, and Yolland uses the conditional tense to express what they would say if they could speak the same language. Yolland says "I would tell you...", four times (429). Even though Máire does not understand English, she tells him "Don't stop - I know what you're saying" (429), when it is obvious she does not understand his words at all. Phatic communion is also present at the very end of the scene, when Yolland expresses his desire to live with her "always". Máire does not understand the word "always" and says "Always?" "what's that word - 'always'?" (429). A second later, Máire also expresses her desire to live with him "always" and Yolland says "always? What's that word - 'always'?" So they are repeating exactly the same and the author is very careful to use the same punctuation for the two utterances, indicating in that way that they are using not only the same words but also the same intonation.

Act two, scene two presents a problem to a possible translator, as it is very obvious that communication does not exist at the level of words but, instead, at discourse level. The extract taken from Act one is also difficult to translate, as a discourse analysis of the conversation makes clear that Manus and Máire are about to end their relationship, which is not apparent if we examine lexis only. The series of seemingly irrelevant questions and answers ends with the abrupt, idiomatic expression "suit yourself". This is difficult to translate at lexis and discourse level, as we have said. However, it is very important to an understanding of the action in the rest of the play. Consequently, the translator must be careful to transmit the discourse meaning to the target language, which a mere word for word translation would not convey.

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