



Appropriation and Heteroglossia in *Translations*

—Finding Coexistence Across Prejudice

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Abstract. This paper offers a postcolonial interpretation of Brian Friel’s *Translations* from the perspective of Bakhtin’s theories of appropriation and heteroglossia. Firstly, it analyzes the concept of appropriation to uncover the intentions of British occupation, evoking a sense of loss among the Irish people concerning their past, present, and future. Secondly, it explores Friel’s approach to addressing cultural conflicts and power inequalities by describing and manifesting heteroglossia. It advocates for a proactive response to the challenges of cultural preservation, recognizing the importance of dialogue and coexistence in a world characterized by heteroglossia.

Keywords: appropriation; heteroglossia; postcolonialism; *Translations*

1 Introduction

Translation can be seen as a tool of colonial conquest, “an indispensable channel of imperial conquest and occupation” [1]. Written by the Irish playwright Brian Friel in the 1980s, the play *Translations* is set against the backdrop of British colonization of Ireland. Hence, it is apparent that the central theme of the play revolves around language and colonialism. By setting the story in Baile Beag, an Irish town in Donegal, Friel depicts the cultural and identity crisis faced by the Irish people during the colonial era and addresses how the nation could preserve and promote itself in the face of external factors, such as colonial aggression.

The play has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention, with studies delving into its historical and political dimensions. The play centers on the historical event of the British surveying of Irish land. Smith highlights the colonial functions of new maps made by Britain, as “these maps are documents in two ways: first, they represent the colonial control over the landscape and its people; second, these maps have been used uncritically as the single authoritative truth of that colonial control” [2]. In *Translations*, geography is introduced “as an area of knowledge which helped the British government to augment its dominance in Ireland and wipe out the Irish Culture to consolidate the position of English power in the Isles” [3].

Another topic of this play is the issue of language, translation, and identity. As Irish scholar Kiberd remarks, “one of the first policies formulated by the Norman occupiers

was to erase Gaelic culture” [4]. Because “word and world are intertwined” [5], as Meissner puts it, “when the English mapped Ireland in 1833, they came away with a larger, better known England, not an Ireland which no longer was speakable by only ‘an Irishman of the savage kind’” [5]. Lojek argues that the Anglicization of Irish place names is an erasure of Irish culture: “The nineteenth-century British ordinance team which anglicized the place names of Ireland was part of a deliberate effort to wipe out Irish culture (and therefore Irish cohesiveness and power) by wiping out the Irish language” [6]. Kitishat believes that Friel “presented his indirect criticism of the Irish indifference to their language as an interrelated paradoxical relation between politics and national identity” [7].

Additionally, scholars examine the themes that Friel seeks to convey in the play. *Translations*, “a play about language and only about language” [8] said by Friel himself, should have already jumped from the frame initially set by its author to topics including identity cognition, cultural conflicts, and political disputes. In the context of postcolonial studies, “childhood” refers to the colonized being condescendingly treated as immature by the colonizer, who assumes the role of educator for the colonized to become “mature”. Friel does not refuse to change, but he “prefers to manage a change that is imposed upon Irish people (by the British colonialization) in a way that serves the Irish language” [9].

However, few have yet analyzed cultural erosion and cultural integration against the background of colonization from the perspective of appropriation and heteroglossia proposed by Bakhtin. This article attempts to reinterpret the above two issues in *Translations*. Hopefully, this analysis will expand the applicable dimensions of Bakhtin’s theory. The first involves analyzing appropriation to unveil the British occupation’s intentions, evoking a sense of loss among the Irish people regarding their past, present, and future. The second seeks to explore Friel’s approach to addressing conflicts and power inequality through the description and manifestation of heteroglossia.

2 Synopsis of *Translations*

The play takes place in a rural Irish village that was colonized by the British in 1833. It narrates the endeavors of British cartographers to anglicize Irish place names. Baile Beag is an ordinary and underdeveloped village fictionalized by the author. This is a remote rural village where the inhabitants rely on farming for their livelihood. Despite their economic poverty, they possess a rich spirit. The protagonists in the story are polyglots who know Latin and Greek.

The story centers around four main characters: Owen, Maire, Manus, and Yolland. Owen, a resident who has been away for six years, achieves prosperity in Dublin, boasting nine big shops, twelve horses, and six servants. He brings two “civilized” Englishmen, Captain Lancey and Lieutenant Yolland, to his hometown to survey and Anglicize Irish place names. Owen acts as a translator for this project. He is the second son of Hugh, the principal of a local hedge school. Hugh is multilingual and knows Latin, Greek, Irish, and English. The main objective of his lecture is to teach Greek and Latin. The heroine of the story is Marie, a strong-minded and strong-bodied woman who is a

student in the hedge school. She and Hugh's eldest son, Manus, were lovers. However, Marie assumes that Manus is not financially capable of supporting their future family and gradually becomes indifferent to him and plans to emigrate to the United States to pursue a better life. After Yolland arrives in their village, Marie and Yolland break the language barrier and fall in love. Marie speaks only Irish and Yolland speaks only English, which are two completely different languages in the author's setting. They don't understand each other's language but can still express their love. Their love ends abruptly due to Yolland's sudden disappearance. Although not explicitly stated in the play, various signs suggest that Yolland is likely to have been killed by the Donnelly Twins, members of the local anti-British forces. Lancy orders the villagers to immediately hand over Yolland, otherwise he will kill all the livestock of the villagers within 24 hours and drive them out of their homeland where they were born and raised within 48 hours. This is essentially where the play's plot stops. The author ends the story without revealing Yolland's destiny or providing a happy ending. But the story outside of the plot does not stop, as the rich poetry of Friel's writing "seems perfect evidence that the Irish voice has not and be silenced" [8].

3 Appropriation, Heteroglossia, Translation and Postcolonialism

Appropriation is a term used by Bakhtin to explain the polyphonic nature of language, generally referring to borrowing, adapting, or directly using something that belongs to others. Bakhtin believes that appropriation is a fundamental essence of language, as "the word in language is half someone else's" [10], and further explains that "prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions" [10].

Heteroglossia refers to the coexistence of multiple languages and the cultural and ideological pluralism presented through the medium of languages. Bakhtin posits that no language in the world remains uninfluenced by or divorced from, dialogues with other languages. Every language, passive or active, is constantly being intertwined and negotiating with other languages, and therefore, the world we are living in is made up of mixed languages. This world is also dynamic with powers conflicting and negotiating. Powers are not inherently equal, and the conflicts that arise from inequality are inevitable. However, throughout the development of language and history, heteroglossia and coexistence are the main lines, and even the most turbulent waves will eventually merge into the ocean. No matter how strong a culture, language, or even power is, it cannot exist independently and has to accept the reality of coexisting with others.

"In a post-colonial context, the problematic of translation becomes a significant site for raising questions of representation, power, and historicity" [11]. Translation is the first step for colonizers to carry out colonial acts because languages must circulate first for the purpose of domination. Translation involves both superiors and inferiors,

namely colonizers and colonized, as well as the role of interpreters, which may seem neutral but cannot be achieved. The process and practice of translation could be understood as a demonstration of power dynamics inherent in colonial systems. The main aim of colonizers is often singular: to exert control over the colonized population through translation and other mechanisms. Among the colonized individuals, diverse reactions can be observed, ranging from compliance to resistance, or even the exploration of alternative paths during times of turmoil, which is vividly depicted in the characters within the play *Translations*. From the perspective of language changes alone, colonization could foster the assimilation of foreign languages into local languages. Initially introduced as isolated words, foreign vocabulary may gradually evolve into its functional system within the local language framework, eventually becoming integrated. In Singaporean English, a substantial portion of vocabulary and grammar is drawn from Hokkien, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Malay, exhibiting characteristics akin to Creole language structures. Interpreted from a colonial perspective, this phenomenon reflects the mutual influence and eventual fusion of diverse languages and cultures within the local context. Language compatibility will further affect the cultural field and even ideology. If history is segmented, the colonial period's destruction of the local language and cultural erosion is malignant and irreversible. Even some indigenous languages and cultures may disappear as a result. However, in examining the history of human development, adherence to self-professed beliefs does not invariably result in societal advancement. Colonization, an inherently condemnable practice, paradoxically catalyzed the merging of diverse cultures through exchanges.

The subsequent section will elucidate the relationship between appropriation and translation within the framework of postcolonialism and delve into the association of heteroglossia with postcolonialism.

3.1 Appropriation and Translation under Postcolonialism

“Appropriation (from Latin *appropriare*, meaning to make one's own) is the act of taking possession of, or assigning purpose to, properties or ideas” [12]. That is to say, “it consists of making something one's own” [12]. Examining the meaning of appropriation from a definition alone reveals a natural connection with colonization. Bakhtin explains that appropriation at the level of language is borrowing the language of the other, but the influence of appropriation he refers to is not only confined at the level of language, and Bakhtin says, “not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property” [10].

Bakhtin's allusions to “submission” and “seizure” suggest a form of coercive control over both property and individuals, essentially reflecting the colonizers' objectives. In colonization, translation serves the function of transportation in appropriation. The translator could appropriate or implant languages of colonies and their ideologies into the language system of the colonized, thus helping the colonial power to achieve the goal of military conquest, as “language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated - overpopulated - with the intentions of others” [10], which is especially true in the colonial era.

Niranjana mentions in her book that British translator Jones attempted to assist the British government in enslaving Indians by translating Indian laws into English. "In Jones's construction of the 'Hindus,' they appear as a submissive, indolent nation unable to appreciate the fruits of freedom, desirous of being ruled by an absolute power, and sunk deeply in the mythology of an ancient religion" [11]. Jones put English into the laws of the Indians. He was to "enslave" the Indians, to make them "submit" to their inferiority, and thus to "seize" them for use by the British.

Assimilating local languages and cultures through translation is by no means an easy task, as Bakhtin says, "expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process" [10]. Appropriation will encounter resistance, as described by Bakhtin that "many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them" [10]. Other uncontrollable factors will also appear, because "the colonized always resist and restructure the 'transformation' or 'interpellation' in more or less unpredictable and uncontrollable ways" [1]. Appropriation during the colonial era is fundamentally aimed at conquest. This process entangles with resistance and requires negotiation. They are the self-protection reactions of colonized peoples. Translation serves as a mediator, eventually evolving into "a powerful channel of cultural survival through both accommodation and resistance" [1].

The next section will discuss heteroglossia and its relationship with postcolonialism.

3.2 Heteroglossia and Postcolonialism

Bakhtin emphasizes that language "is never unitary" [10], and it is "heteroglot from top to bottom [10], which "represents the coexistence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form" [10].

Heteroglossia challenges the notion of a unified and authoritative language and recognizes the diversity of voices and perspectives present in any given society. For Bakhtin, language is not a multivocal system, but contains a dynamic and complex interplay of various discourses, as "all languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values" [10]. These discourses are in constant tension and negotiation with one another, shaping and reshaping the meaning and interpretation of contextual, cultural, and social practices, as he puts, "they may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically" [10].

"As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other" [10]. Through dialogues, there are interactions and exchanges between different languages in the system of heteroglossia, and those languages may come from different classes, ages, or even countries. Dialogue is not innate or self-proclaimed, but rather breaking

free from constraints. Each language needs to step out of its own system to communicate with the other, and thus, heteroglossia arises at the borders. The result of breaking conventions is to nurture new things, as “these ‘languages’ of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying ‘languages’ ...” [10].

Heteroglossia is closely tied to social and ideological power relations, because “all socially significant world views have the capacity to exploit the intentional possibilities of language through the medium of their specific concrete instancing” [10]. The conflict between local languages and the language spoken by colonizers and the problems brought about by translation intervention can be seen from this perspective as the issue of language competition and the search for ways of coexistence. Can indigenous peoples defend their own languages against the colonizers so that they are not affected in any way? Can the indigenous dwell on the glories of their past and refuse to change? Can colonized languages, such as English, resist the encroachment of indigenous languages? Answers seem to be no.

Undoubtedly, the predominant language of the colonizers, supported by their military power, exerted considerable influence throughout the eras of colonial history. However, from historical results, colonial languages could not “wipe out” other languages because of the resistance encountered. Linguistic and cultural coexistence would be the reality in places with a history of colonization, such as India and the Philippines in Asia or Northern Ireland in Europe.

In summary, as conceptualized by Bakhtin, heteroglossia highlights the multiplicity, diversity, and dynamic nature of language and discourse within a society. It emphasizes the coexistence, interaction, and negotiation of multiple languages and speech varieties, challenging the notion of a single and fixed language system. Heteroglossia offers a lens through which to examine the complex interplay of linguistic, social, and political forces in shaping meaning and communication.

We have discussed the relationship between appropriation, translation, and heteroglossia. During the colonial period, it has to be admitted that translation acted as the colonizer’s henchman, a medium or vehicle for the appropriation of the colonizer’s language into the colonized language. The introduction of a foreign language, perceived by colonizers as a tool of invasion, into the native language would provoke local resistance and resentment. Some individuals will inevitably resist oppression, and there is concern among local communities that their ethnic symbols may be lost as their native language is supplanted. A foreign language is like an axe, splitting open the closed but glorious past. With the surging influx of different cultures, ideologies, and even military forces, different languages clash with each other. But conflict is only the starting point. Different languages collide and communicate with one another, negotiating to find a state of coexistence. The world is harmonized not by uniqueness but by plurality and heteroglossia.

Next, we will explore appropriation and heteroglossia in Translations. The following section will begin with a synopsis of Translations and previous research and then discuss the storyline in Translations in terms of two main themes, “appropriation and disorientation” and “transcendence and coexistence.”

4 Appropriation and Disorientation

The central theme of the play *Translations* is Owen's role in translating and anglicizing the names of places, as he guides Yolland on a journey to each location in his hometown. This theme is intertwined with the historical event of the Ordnance Survey.

4.1 Appropriation of the Ordnance Survey

The Ordnance Survey was "an intensive mapping project of the whole of Ireland at a scale of 6 map inches to every mile on the ground" [13] undertaken by the British government in the 1830s. In *Translations*, Lancy, an English military general, describes the English army going to Ireland to survey and map the land there as a kind of gift from the English king because the English land had not been so acted upon. In Owen's translation, he simplifies the details of the whole survey as Lancy describes it, summarizing the whole event only by saying that the soldiers come to make new maps. Lancy says that the maps are made for fair taxation, and Owen explains that maps are made to protect the legal rights of the locals and for tax reduction. The exact dialog is as follows [14]:

Lancy His Majesty's government has ordered the first ever comprehensive survey of this entire country - a general triangulation which will embrace detailed hydrographic and topographic information and which will be executed to a scale of six inches to the English mile.

Owen A new map is being made of the whole country.

Lancy This enormous task has been embarked on so that the military authorities will be equipped with up-to-date and accurate information on every corner of this part of the Empire.

Owen The job is being done by soldiers because they are skilled in this work.

Lancy ...The present survey has for its object the relief which can be afforded to the proprietors and occupiers of land from unequal taxation.

Owen The captain hopes that the public will cooperate with the sappers and that the new map will mean that taxes are reduced.

Lancy Ireland is privileged. No such survey is being undertaken in England...

Owen This survey demonstrates the government's interest in Ireland...

In *Translations*, Friel utilizes dramatic writing techniques to present the pivotal role of translation in colonization. Through Owen's translation, the British military intention of annexing the Irish land is weakened and trivialized by mentioning that the survey would be carried out by soldiers. The so-called equalization of taxes, which is merely a cover for the British government's desire to enrich itself by taxing Ireland, is transformed into a lowering of taxes by the interpreter. Scholars have debated whether Owen misunderstood Lancy's words. However, I contend that Friel uses this as a literary device to emphasize the colonial implications of translation, showing how "translation as a practice shapes, and takes shape within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism" [13].

4.2 Disorientation from Appropriation

The involuntary, sudden, and widespread invasion of a foreign language into a local language could have a cognitive impact on the identity of local language holders. Indigenous people must face new things, ways of living, and even ways of perceiving brought about by the new language in a short period of time. Confusion and uncertainty result in identity crises, as individuals struggle to reconcile their previously unquestioned perceptions of the past with the altered historical narrative imposed by colonizers. The colonizers aim to denigrate, belittle, or oversimplify this newly constructed past to assert their dominance. Just as in the 18th century, Britain devalued India's original religion, defining it as "the 'wild mythology' and 'chain of unmeaning panegyric which distinguishes the religion of ignorant men' [that] is characteristic of the rude mind's propensity to create that which is extravagant" [11]. The negation of a nation's history can disorient its population. If the language, myths, and beliefs of the past, which are cherished or accustomed to and on which a people's identity is based, are denied or altered, it can create a crisis of identity. This theme is portrayed in this play by the story of Irish place names being forcibly changed to English names; and Friel keeps us vitally aware that to "lose the language is an 'eviction' of their culture and identity" [8].

In Irish literature and cultural traditions, Irish place names are often endowed with rich cultural connotations in addition to their semantic meanings. They not only describe the terrain features but also record the legends and historical events associated with them, as described in Act Two by Friel. "Bun na hAbhann' means a tiny area of soggy, rocky, sandy ground where the little stream enters the sea" [14]. Changing the name of an ancient land with a deeply rooted cultural legacy to a foreign language may risk creating a formal and spiritual disconnect between the land's residents and their heritage, potentially causing confusion and prompting a reassessment of the Irish people's identity. Friel's play deals with the ways in which "the consciousness of an entire culture is fractured by the transcription of one linguistic landscape (Gaelic and classical) into another (Anglo-Saxon and positivist)" [15]. In *Translations*, this disorientation and rethinking is shown in the villagers' responses to English learning: Jimmy, a 60-something bachelor whom the villagers call *Infant Prodigy*, chooses to immerse himself in Athens and Greek mythology and claims to marry the goddesses therein; Marie chooses to learn English actively and plans to emigrate to the United States to make a living; Manus, Marie's ex-boyfriend, chooses to find a place similar to his hometown to duplicate his previous job; the Donnelly's join the local anti-British forces and kill Yolland, the officer who comes to the village on a translation mission.

The author poignantly depicts Ireland's profound sense of disorientation. However, his intention is not to stir up anti-British sentiment among the public. Friel attempts to convey, via Hugh's epiphany, the fallacy of romanticizing Ireland's historical grandeur in confronting the challenges stemming from the erosion of their national identity and the absorption of their unique Irish culture into English culture. In the author's opinion, moving forward, namely, reflecting on the outcomes of colonization and identifying potential avenues for national development within these transformations, maybe a prudent strategy for safeguarding and nourishing Irish culture in the contemporary context.

5 Transcendence and Heteroglossia

The theme of the play is colonization, but it does not focus on the life of the people under the heel of colonization; as Friel says, “I don’t want to write a play about Irish peasants being suppressed by English sappers”[16].

5.1 Transcending the Past

Friel demonstrates his disapproval of a fixation on the past and reluctance to move forward through the character of Hugh. To Hugh, Jimmy, or James as Hugh nicknamed him in the play, is steeped in Latin and Greek mythology, which leads to a misunderstanding of what molds their identity: “it is not the literal past, the ‘facts’ of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language. James has ceased to make that discrimination” [14]

While Hugh agrees that ancient languages bring temporary spiritual solace, he admits that the Irish language is “a rich language, ... full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope” [14] and as an Irishman, Hugh has his own pride, and his distaste for the English language comes through loud and clear, “English succeeds in making it sound ... plebeian” [14]. However, his perception of the condition of Ireland is sensible and moderate. He aptly highlights the presence of “self-deception” [14] in Irish culture, because “... words are signals, counters. They are not immortal ... it can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of ... fact” [14]. In Hugh’s view, stagnation in the past does nothing for the development of culture, “we must never cease renewing those images; because once we do, we fossilize” [14].

5.2 Coexisting with Heteroglossia

The author has left the ending open, not stating whether Lancy would massacre the city, or explaining the final choices of the male and female protagonists in the play. However, the theme of the play has emerged. In response to linguistic invasion, the Irish people need to overcome their prejudices against the exotic, the reconstruction of Irish identity through heteroglossia, a coexistence of different languages and diversified cultures, values, ideologies, and potential differences.

In *Translations*, Friel constructs a text of heteroglossia by presenting Latin and Greek, which have a long affinity with the Irish language, as well as many Irish place names. The playwright not only makes references to classical texts such as *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, but also creates in detail scenes of Hugh and his students practicing etymological derivations and enjoying communicating in Greek and Latin, such as *perambulation* (*perambulare*), *caerimonia nominationis* (naming ceremony), and *Gaudeo vos hic adesce* (welcome). Incorporating Greek and Latin into a play written in English, Friel not only highlights the cultural heritage and historical continuity between Irish and classical languages but also aims to redefine the articulation of Irish cultural identity through language diversity, which signifies cultural hybridity.

In contemplating the societal landscape at the close of the colonial era, Friel grapples with the challenges presented by cultural diversity rather than engaging directly with colonial issues. Friel is not glorifying colonization or weakening Ireland; he trying to tear open the scars of his nation to try to exhort his people to face the future head-on.

6 Conclusion

This paper attempts to apply Bakhtin's theories of appropriation and heteroglossia in the analysis of Friel's play *Translations*. The colonial influence on a country or nation is complex and multifaceted, as "at worst, empires destroy entire peoples and cultures; at best, they bring about a fruitful mixing and mingling of cultures that gives new life-blood to isolated communities" [1]. The reality we inhabit lies between these two extremes. For countries that have endured a colonial past, the memories are often fraught with pain. However, merely dwelling on this pain is insufficient. The ability to glean insights or lessons from this suffering ensures that past experiences are not in vain. This notion is eloquently articulated in Friel's exploration of Ireland's colonial history in his works. To safeguard and pass on the Irish language and culture effectively, it is essential to maintain the vitality of their language and culture in the current context. In Friel's view, one way to inject vitality is through heteroglossia.

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