

# Translation and postcoloniality in Ireland: the particular and peculiar relationship between Irish Gaelic and English

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*Translations in Ireland (between Irish Gaelic and English) take place in two very different scenarios. In the southern Republic, the Irish language is officially the first national language, but it is now spoken by a bare fraction of the population, and is steadily declining as a living language. Translations between Irish and English are supported by the Republic's government in various schemes, but are often viewed with suspicion by many of the Irish Gaelic speakers as yet another colonialist move. In the North (Northern Ireland), the long history of repression has made the language a rallying point for nationalists. It is in this political minefield and threatened linguistic zone that both writer and translator must operate. Creative hybridity is revealed not as free of political enmeshments, but rather the reverse: the creative vitality of this particular bilingual writing zone (of both author and translator) results precisely from its highly pressurized milieu. This article argues that translations are served by the reflexive postcolonial understanding of the role of the translator and translation, as well as the original text, within the larger socio-political context.*

## 0. An introductory example

*“Go n’éirigh an bóthar leat!”*

This Irish Gaelic blessing is perhaps one of the most encountered Gaelic phrases. It helps fuel the tourist industry, and its associated industries in ‘authentic Irish products’, appearing on innumerable kitchen magnets, coffee mugs, wall hangings, and other knick-knacks, as well as in non-commercial settings such as e-mail lists, photocopied sheets, and more. It is nearly always accompanied with, or completely replaced by, the English version: “may the road rise up to greet you” – a pleasant-sounding if somewhat inscrutable sentence. Many times the English alone appears, as the ‘old Irish blessing’. Leaving the obvious problem of English ‘old Irish blessings’ aside, we may notice that the translation, while disseminated very widely, is not, in any sense of the term, a real translation of the Irish phrase. The difficulty swings mainly on the verb ‘éirigh’, which means ‘to succeed’. It has a more secondary meaning of ‘rising up’, as well, so that one can say ‘d’éirigh mé’ (*I arose*), or that so-and-so is rising up in/succeeding in their career. As with many Irish verbs, there is an inherent positionality and physicality backing the primary meanings. Again following the inherent positionality

and physicality, there is the word ‘leat’ in the blessing which means simply ‘with you’, but this is also the primary way of expressing ownership in Irish. Thus, ‘is leat an leabhar’ while transliterating as ‘the book is with you’ translates as ‘the book is yours’. Therefore, for a fluent Irish speaker, the blessing “go n’éirigh an bóthar leat” has absolutely nothing to do with rising roads greeting a person. The far more natural translation into English would be simply “may your path be successful”.

It is uncertain whether or not the more natural translation would have had the selling power of the mangled “may the road rise up to greet you”. The ‘mangled’ version seems to work well in presenting a picture of traditional Gaelic Ireland as given to inscrutability, couched in a cosy, quirky, but non-threatening exoticization. Those silly, strange Gaelic speakers, the sentence seems to say, regularly bless each other by invoking roads to rise up and greet someone. While still cheerful, the terse mundanity of “may your path be successful” may not fit the image that is regularly foisted upon the small, disenfranchised Gaelic world.

There are further indicative twists to this small example. Clearly, the phrase was not translated by a *Gaeilgeoir* (Irish-speaker), but rather by someone who had some limited knowledge of the language, and, seemingly with dictionary in hand, felt authorized to produce the English translation of the ‘old Irish blessing’. This underlines a fundamental process which is often elided within Ireland: very frequently, it is not the actual Gaelic speaker from the rural Gaeltacht who ‘speaks’ for the language, but rather someone – usually in the cities – who has a more partial, more academic knowledge of the language. Whatever the origin of the mangled and exoticized translation, the English version is so well-lodged in current touristic discourse that there is little hope that this will ever be corrected. While many Irish citizens view the Gaelic language as part of their heritage, only a very small number are fluent in the language, and an even smaller number use that fluency on a regular basis. For most Irish citizens, the language is encountered through English translations. This leads to the curious case that some Irish citizens are likely to believe that “go n’éirigh an mbothar leat” is accurately translated by the mangled version, and they themselves may believe that the ‘traditional’ Irish blessing involves rising roads greeting people. While this excessive (and curiously ‘internal’) exoticism (similar, but not quite the same, as Venuti’s “foreignization”) is perhaps undertaken with the best of intentions, it nonetheless reinforces colonial stereotypes of the Gaelic speakers (and, by extension, traditional Irish) as living in a whimsical, nearly nonsensical, mental realm, where magical blessings invite the most fantastic and absurd of scenarios. It also implicitly describes the Gaelic language as a very difficult language. How, for instance, does one derive the word ‘greet’ from the sentence? For the Irish with partial acquaintance with the language (i.e. for most), such well-accepted mistranslations only serve to add to their linguistic confusion. The English version is accepted and repeated, while the Irish version is at times kept alongside the English one as an incomprehensible totemistic reminder of alienated heritage.

## **1. Background and ethnographic setting**

This example serves to illustrate the larger contours of postcolonial translations in Ireland. Ireland has long been seen as a prime postcolonial site, even as its location within Europe has distanced it from many of the other areas more commonly studied within the postcolonial realm. It has frequently been termed ‘the first colony’, stemming originally from Henry II’s invasion in 1172. The descent into colonized status was greatly exacerbated by Cromwell’s ruthless excursions beginning in 1649. Ireland indeed experienced the full force of colonialism: its language, customs, and laws were outlawed and repressed, and the Irish were deemed innately ‘less evolved’ than their ‘superior’ English conquerors.

It is perhaps in the realm of language that postcolonial outlooks in Ireland achieve their greatest poignancy. After all, Ireland before the colonial encounter had a particularly long and illustrious heritage as a site of learning and literature. The early conversion into Christianity was accompanied by the entrance of written literature, although there remains a possibility of pre-Christian literature – according to Stevenson various lists indicate that the pre-Christian priests had been “experimenting with literature” for at least 200 years before the arrival of St. Patrick and Christianity (1995: 27). The conversion to Christianity in Ireland was accomplished in a much more peaceful fashion than in many parts of Europe, and, accordingly, preserved the previous sacred narratives much more effectively. During the Christian era, and especially following the fall of the Roman Empire, Ireland became an important European centre for higher learning.

The wealth of Irish ecclesiastical and vernacular lore (which often overlapped) cemented Ireland’s reputation as a place of excellent cultural and literary achievements throughout the Dark and Middle Ages. But colonial domination by England set the way for the decline of the Irish language, a decline that was exacerbated with each inroad into traditional Ireland. The subjugation and subsequent racialization and belittlement of Ireland reached peaks during the macabre scenario of the Great Irish Potato Famine of the mid 1800s. During this time period, Ireland lost approximately a fourth of its population through death or emigration, while food was being exported to England for the profit of English and Anglo-Irish landowners. This was a period of extreme actions and reactions, perhaps encapsulated most tellingly a bit earlier in Swift’s sarcastic “A Modest Proposal” (1729) which outlined a plan whereby Irish children would be chopped up to provide food for the pecuniary benefit of English (and Anglo-Irish) merchants. Even such savage sarcasm failed to dent the colonial outlook, which increasingly relied on racialized theories of innate Irish inadequacies in all areas of mental, cultural, and political functioning. All sorts of arguments from a variety of discourses coalesced to create an image that was soothing to the colonial conscience, and deadly to the survival of Irish traditions, including the Irish language.

Similar scenarios occurred throughout the world as other countries were subjugated to colonial rule. Ireland, as one of the first examples, experienced a striking crudeness of colonialist arguments and politics. For so long a bastion of literacy and scholarly ability in western Europe before (Stevenson 1995), but even more so after the fall of the Roman empire (a point detailed in Cahill's *How the Irish Saved Civilization* 1995), the Irish were now presented in the hegemonized discourse of the colonial realm as ignorant savages, their language good for little besides the most primitive of conversations.

## 2. Enter translations

In response to the English arguments for innate Irish inferiority, early patriotic Irish scholars were frequently involved in translations and linguistic work attempting to demonstrate their linguistic and cultural pedigree. These translations were not value-free: as Maria Tymoczko, reviewing the early translations of Old and Middle Irish material, has noted:

If nations are 'imagined communities', inevitably representations of nations will shift as they are constructed through translation by different groups with their own senses of identity, groups both internal and external to a nation. (1999b: 17-18)

Translation in the Irish context, thus, is not simply a locus of imperialism, but a site of resistance and nation building as well. (21)

Such resistance and nation-building, though, was largely accomplished by the highest and aristocratic echelons of Ireland, including the Anglo-Irish. This situation, together with the necessity for countering the racialized arguments emanating from England, resulted in what Michael Cronin called "proactive translations" (1996: 153), i.e. translations which whitewashed elements deemed 'unacceptable' and foisted a postcolonialist reinterpretation on native Irish literature and culture. Sexuality, in particular, was expunged, not translated, or purposively mis-translated in an effort to make the 'native Irish' more appealing to the colonialist worldview. Native culture was valorized but at the same time it was stripped of that which made it most unique.

The famous writers in the Irish literary renaissance who attempted to forge an 'Anglo-Irish' identity often relied on such translations of folklore for their inspirations. Michael Cronin examined this process in his *Translating Ireland*:

For Yeats, Synge, and others the translations were the beginnings of a new literature in English. For other writers such as Patrick Pearse, the translations pointed to the excellence of the original and were an incentive to rediscover the language and create a new literature in Irish. Thus, the two literatures of modern Ireland can be said to emerge from the translation movement in the nineteenth century. (1996: 138)

While no doubt true, Cronin's reference to the "two literatures of modern Ireland" elides the vast inequalities between the two languages. These inequalities became increasingly entrenched over time, alongside the continuing decline of Gaelic as a living language. This history of the language is deeply entwined with the political history of the island. With the success of the revolution and the establishment of the Irish Republic, independence and democratic self-governing was instituted in 26 of the 32 counties on the island. The other six became what is now known as 'Northern Ireland' which continued, and continues, to experience the more direct effects of colonialism, with all its attendant racism and hostility towards native traditions. The success of the revolution in the southern Republic was instrumental in establishing state support for the Gaelic language, but the state's stifling view of the language and associated heritage resulted in a rejection of the language by many Irish. In the North (at the time of this writing still controlled directly from London, without self-governance), the repression of the language became a rallying point for nationalists. Both of these aspects must be considered in light of the fact that very few Irish anywhere in Ireland continue to speak Irish fluently. The Irish postcolonial example has bifurcated between the now self-governing southern Republic, and the North (where the 'post' of postcolonial must still be qualified). This bifurcation is not total in that both areas are constructed with knowledge of, and in relation to, the other. The Republic itself can be examined in the split between the *Gaeltachts* (Gaelic-speaking areas) and *Galltachts* (English-speaking areas), which themselves break down somewhat under closer scrutiny – there are dedicated Gaelic speakers outside the Gaeltacht, and many residents within the Gaeltacht do not converse in Irish. Ireland demonstrates the complexities that postcolonial situations can exhibit.

### 3. Gaeltachts and Galltachts

The Gaeltachts were established as special areas early in the history of the Republic in order to minimize the loss of native-language speakers. This creation of 'heritage language zones' was a politically complicated scenario, one that has seen the Gaeltachts as serving the larger nation-state as 'heritage areas'. As in the opening example, those who speak *for* the language are often not native speakers born and raised in the Gaeltacht, but rather more connected with the national elite. These differences have occasionally burst into stark contrast – as was the case in the early standardization debates with the two famous opposing camps of those preferring to revive a literary but largely archaic form of the language, and those native speakers championing the *caint na ndaoine*, 'speech of the people'. The struggle can also be witnessed at the turn of the millenium in the struggle for a 'young and hip' approach of TG4, the Irish-language television station broadcast from the Gaeltacht. Its use of slang and English loanwords, as well as the cosmopolitan and modern slant of the programming, has come under fire not from the

members of the Gaeltacht, but from Irish-language purists from elsewhere in the country. Marcus Tanner described the scenario as a “typical culture clash, pitting language zealots from way out east against easy-going locals for whom Irish is not a ‘cause’ but a means of communication” (Tanner 2003: 5). In general, while the native speakers and the Gaeltacht have been selected as the primary sites of authenticity of the language, this move has been accompanied by an enshrinement of these areas as heritage sites for the vast majority of Irish nationals who do not use the language as a means of communication. As a result, ideas regarding tradition and heritage (including orthodox Catholicism) are often projected onto the Gaeltacht, and the people living there, and there is great pressure on the Gaeltachts to remain in ‘happy poverty’ in fulfilment of these romantic, nationalist projections. Unsurprisingly, many Gaelic speakers resent this state of affairs, yet efforts to achieve local control in the Gaeltacht have often been thwarted by the overwhelming dominance of the national government. As Akutagaw stated, in his review of the Irish linguistic minority:

The Gaeltacht is within the jurisdiction of its ‘own ethnic state’, whose major ‘project’ is the maintenance of Irish national identity. With its unitary state structure as well as this symbolism, the state’s approach became an imposition on the Gaeltacht of the specific function of contributing to the state in its cultural objective. Its logic simply denies a separate identity for the Gaeltacht. This characterised the central response to the demand for autonomy from the Gaeltacht and at the same time indirectly determines the Gaeltacht movement’s failure in mobilising collective identity. Even its distinct language with the official status turned out to be a double-edged weapon in this context. (1987: 125)

Akutagawa further noted that specific attempts at self-determination in the Gaeltachts were undermined by classic examples of ‘co-opting the opposition’. Such co-option and double-edged weapons nevertheless do have the result of garnering more official recognition and support of the language, through such means as radio and television broadcasts in the language, as well as support for produced literature and translation work. So, while subsidies do help the language reap benefits, they also continue to keep the linguistic minority in an unthreatening and subservient position. Akutagawa concluded his article by stating:

Our arguments have shown that, under this particular state-minority relationship, i.e., a linguistic minority within the jurisdiction of ‘its own ethnic state’ with such a state claiming the minority’s language as the national language, self-mobilisation of the minority is extremely difficult. This is especially so when the state has a centralised unitary structure and a strong nationalist basis, since the logic of the state’s ‘project’ does not facilitate but even denies a separate identity for the minority. (1987: 142-143)

This is an interesting twist on the more familiar situations of postcoloniality, in which Tymoczko observed that (for many minority language writers) “the

issue of a minority-culture language is a matter of cultural power: of resistance to foreign domination and foreign cultural assertion” (1999b: 17).

The Irish intranational example serves to remind us instead that when the colonial project has been sufficiently thorough, it erodes indigenous cultural and linguistic elements to the point that, even when the nations become ‘self-governing’ they do so as mirror images of the previous colonial masters. The elite are usually those most like, and most invested in, the previous colonial powers, and the same elite usually maintain their positions of dominance in the new state. Certainly this was the case in Ireland, where the language was exalted from a safe distance. Indeed, being a Gaelic speaker from the Gaeltacht actually meant one was a member of the poorer, disenfranchised class. The Gaeltacht has become a ‘living museum’ rather than a ‘useless survival’ but the net result is strikingly similar: the Gaelic speaker from the Gaeltacht is in a weakened position, held in this place by a much larger, unquestionably dominant, and largely ‘foreign’ people with specific and restrictive views as to the place of the linguistic minorities.

To quote Tymoczko once again:

Although the translations were instrumental in replacing colonial stereotypes of the Irish with new valorized images, those images also contributed to the construction of stifling and repressive social mores in post-independence Ireland [...] (2000: 134)

Such situations trouble the simplistic logic of ethno-nationalism, revealing the complex and pervasive results of colonialism. A small, but very real example, illustrates this: a friend of mine who was raised in the Gaeltacht, was living and attending college in Dublin. For a time he was sporting a stylish leather jacket, and on one occasion was stopped by a Dubliner who asked whether he wasn’t a native Gaelic speaker from the Gaeltacht? When my friend replied in the affirmative, the person let him know that he thought it was inappropriate for people from the Gaeltacht to be seen in such ‘modern’ clothing. Such is your everyday postcolonial encounter in Ireland.

This sort of ‘who’s who’ questioning is intensely important for the language and subsequent translation issues. The language in traditional areas tends to be seen as a vital element in maintaining the Gaeltacht culture. But it is not, at the national level, considered as the Irish speakers’ own culture – rather, it is seen to belong to a nation of Anglophones who lead lives that are, for the most part, disconnected from the Gaelic language and linguistic culture.

This slippage of labels makes analysis difficult. Breandán Ó Doibhlin states:

Hanging on by its fingernails to the last rocky outposts of the West European coastline and swamped from all directions by the tides of the vast anglophone world, Irish nevertheless still represents for many of us practically the only thing completely specific to us as a people, the only Ariadne’s thread guiding us through the labyrinth of our fifteen centuries of recorded history. (2000: 9)



One of the most difficult questions to arise from this compelling, albeit romantic, statement, is: who is the “us”? Is “us” the community of native speakers in the Gaeltacht, or the larger Irish nation with much more tenuous links to the language and associated cultural traditions?

#### 4. Translations and home-grown hegemonies

The hegemony of Anglo-Irish culture versus Gaelic-Irish literary culture is in part a result of mere statistical dominance: “[...] the market for Irish-language, or “Gaelic,” literature is confined to a minuscule audience of approximately 500 to 1,000 readers, who more often than not are themselves involved in the act of writing” (Oeser 2000: 31). But there is more to this than simple numbers can reveal. The Gaelic-Irish realms are also far from the centres of political, cultural, and economic power. It is only the importance of the Gaeltachts as ‘heritage’ for the Anglo-Irish world that allows the wide range of Irish language literature to be published at all, and the voices from this realm to be heard and appreciated by a wider audience. Very few people read Irish literature without relying on translations. As Ó Conchubhair stated, “Those who would dismiss Irish-language poetry in translation would equally dismiss it without translation” (2000: 110). In other words, while Irish writings (especially poetry) have enjoyed a recent renaissance in the national consciousness, they are almost always accessed through translations, translations into the language of the colonizer, and for the ‘linguistically colonized’ reader. Translations have increasingly come to represent the Gaelic world. But how effective are they?

Translations between Irish and English take place within a highly-charged historical and political milieu. Very few of the same issues would be raised, for instance, if translations from Irish into Japanese, Amharic, or Swedish were to be considered. The disenfranchisement of Gaelic was exacerbated by the rise of English as a globally dominant language, and as the primary language in several countries with great numbers of people of Irish descent, such as the United States and Australia. It is nonetheless the postcolonial situation involving England and the Anglo-Irish that shapes the current linguistic discourse in Ireland most emphatically; it is this same situation that prompts some writers to denounce translations into English. Bidy Jenkinson, for one, claims: “I prefer not to be translated into English in Ireland. It is a small rude gesture to those who think that everything can be harvested and stored without loss in an English-speaking Ireland” (1991: 34). There is a prevailing impression that translators view Gaelic linguistic production as a resource to be exploited, that the translations reduce the originals’ inherent cultural value, that they distort them, and remove any incentives to learn the language. One *Gaeilgeoir* once remarked to me: if everything written in Irish is always presented alongside an English translation, who will bother to learn the language? Why even bother to write in Irish? This is especially true given the bilingual situation of Irish writers and rea-



ders, and the uneasy relationship between those English speakers who view the Irish language in romantic terms as their heritage, and those for whom the Irish language is still a living tradition.

Non-Gaeltacht translators may therefore tend to be more in favour of translation. Michael Cronin, for example, not only lectures on translations at Dublin City University and is the author of some of the most widely-read works on translation in Ireland (i.e. Cronin 1996, 2000a, 2000b), he is also a founder and prominent member of the professional Irish Translators' Association, based in Dublin. It is perhaps not surprising that he champions translation and translators – although he does call for more reflexive awareness, he nonetheless writes of translation as giving birth to the two national languages (1996: 161), laying the cultural basis for the emergent nationhood (125), and rescuing Gaelic speakers from a “ghetto of linguistic isolationism” (175). I believe, however, that there is a danger in glorifying translation and translators, all the while describing the Gaelic world in terms of a ‘ghetto’ to be rescued by translations to and from English. Translation between Irish and other world languages could also prevent linguistic isolation: it is the translation between the colonial, dominant English and the struggling, marginalized Irish that is contested.

[...] writers in Irish, whatever evasions they may use to avoid becoming language activists, write always in the context of a linguistic community which may not survive. They know that, without a community underpinning it, new literature in Irish will be, at best, no more than an opportunity for linguistically gifted show-offs producing increasingly arcane matter for a diminishing band of cognoscenti and a small army of translators.

(Dawe & Póilín, 1996: xi-xii.)

Unreservedly pro-translation stances which neglect to consider the effects that translation may have on a threatened linguistic community are reckless in the sense that the linguistic community is the very fount from which their resource flows. Unless more steps are taken to bolster the Irish language and linguistic community, there will soon be no new works to consider for translation at all. Even sooner, the ‘small army’ of translators will outnumber the voices emanating from the ever-shrinking world of the native Gaelic speaker. I would argue, therefore, that being a ‘good translator’ requires more than simply being good at the work of translation, just like being a ‘good fisherman’ requires more than knowing how to bring in fish. Both industries must by necessity be concerned with and involved in the protection of the stocks on which they rely, even if this means taking extra cautionary steps, or even occasionally knowing when *not* to undertake the work.

This may seem to put undue weight on the translator, but this weight is surely to be shared by all those who have the survival and revival of the Irish language at heart. This survival and revival are obviously in the best interest of the translator and the translation industry as well. The realization of translations' inherent involvement with the issue of linguistic survival and revival opens up new opportunities for conceptualizing the translation pro-

ject as such. As this article demonstrates, the activity of translating does not take place outside the social, historical, and political environment. Translation is an integral part of the Irish situation, and becoming aware of this is an important step for translators towards producing responsible translations.

Translators should be aware of the importance of the Irish language for those who still speak it, use it, and live in the Gaeltacht world which is formed and shaped by this linguistic experience. The increased emphasis on the Irish language in many recent writings can be understood when viewed against this larger backdrop. The language is crucial to many of its speakers, many of whom have more or less dedicated their lives to its survival. Why else would anyone write in a language that is far from lucrative and is read by so few in its original form? It is the desire to pay homage to the language, to testify to the importance of the world view it offers, and the realization of the enormity of the potential loss, that create a situation where the language itself sometimes becomes the focus and *raison d'être* of so much of the writing.

## 5. Alternatives for translation

An insight into these issues may allow the translator to better appreciate the dynamics of the translation process, the often complex linguistic concerns of the writer, and the responsibility borne by the translator him/herself. What this does not yet tell him/her, however, is what is the best method for minimizing 'translational damage'. Or how to emphasize instead those aspects of the writing that are most faithful to the source text's worldview, and most supportive of the linguistic community in question.

One of the primary means of doing so may be by resisting the notion of equivalent worldviews, or of viewing the Gaeltacht world as something akin to a rude, deficient English pastoral. As Brian Ó Conchubhair writes: "The most striking aspect of translation practice in Ireland is the total absence of any foreignizing approach and utter compliance with strategies of fluency" (2000: 104). The author therefore calls on critics of Irish-English translation to "[...] better employ their time not only by producing translations which they themselves consider suitable, but also by adopting foreignizing strategies that subvert the threat of cultural domination" (104-105). The effect that the total absence of foreignizing strategies can have, is aptly demonstrated by the fate that has befallen the ancient, grand, and deeply significant concept of *sí* in Ireland, which is often (mis)translated by the English word 'fairy', a word that conveys none of the grandeur of the Irish word, nor its specific connections with the ancient megalithic sites. The *sí* tradition, perhaps the most central and awe-inspiring part of Irish traditional cosmology, is rendered by an English word denoting triviality, childishness, and even homosexuality (for a fuller account of this process, see Silver 1999).

In contrast to the common strategies of fluency, there is also what I have termed ‘exoticization’ (as in my opening example, and commonly found throughout the tourist realm). This in turn can be contrasted to foreignization, because foreignization seeks to remind the readers of the different worldview of the original language, whereas exoticization seeks to impose colonialist or romantic ideas of the Other onto the translation. For the translator to distinguish between the two may be problematic, because in order to ‘foreignize’ without ‘exoticizing’ a certain degree of reflexive awareness of one’s own positionality is required, as well as an in-depth understanding of the cultural background behind the original. The translator who might be up to this task, I would name the ‘anthropological translator’. As André Lefevere has stated: “It is obvious from the above that a huge investment in re-education/re-socialization is needed if we are ever to arrive at the goal of understanding other cultures ‘on their own terms’ [...]” (1999: 78). In fact, the goal remains ambitious, and we tend to agree with Tymoczko where she writes that “Often unfamiliar cultural information does not simply reside in lexical items, but is a more diffuse presence in a source text. A translator may be faced, for example, with a myth, custom, or economic condition presupposed by a text, but not located explicitly in it” (1999a: 27). This may be particularly true of Ireland, where the Gaeltacht and the Irish language are intricately bound in a strongly oral culture. Moreover, as Nualla Ní Dhomnaill, perhaps the most famous of the current Irish language poets, writes about the older residents of the Gaeltacht,

A line from a Fenian lay or an Old Irish saga was as apt to trip off their tongues as a remark about the difficulty of scuffling mangolds. (2000: 42)

For Ní Dhomnaill this background of folklore and mythology is one of the most important elements in understanding the very nature of modern Irish creative writing and she also believes that the fluidity of orality is one of its inspirational sources:

In Ireland, everything, including personal and collective history, gets subsumed into the mythological. Our unconscious is still by far our most creative side. (2000: 44)

Becoming aware of the ‘more diffuse’ sources of cultural information can be attempted by various means, including widening one’s understanding of the source culture and folklore. But, as any anthropologist would state, there is little substitute for engaging in the culture itself as a participant-observer. Seeking to understand the diffuse cultural meanings, and to relate them unabashedly even when they fail to convey the expected impressions, is the duty of the postcolonial, as opposed to the colonialist, translator. Far too often in Ireland translations still ‘soften’ elements that are sexual, pagan, cosmopolitan, or otherwise nonconforming to the expectations of the (linguistically) dominant target culture(s).

## 6. Conclusion

Irish is in a particularly dire position, surrounded as it is on all sides by dominant English-speaking areas (Britain, USA, and the vast majority of Ireland itself). There are very few, if any, monolingual Irish speakers left. Joined to the tiny but dedicated group of Irish-language writers is the ‘small army’ of translators, most of whom have the best interest of the language at heart. However, it remains to be seen whether a vibrant, living language community that maintains its unique linguistic outlook onto the world will be able to survive. The translation community has a large role to play in its uncertain future, as translation is the primary means for many people to become acquainted with other languages and cultures, and to perceive the beauty and worth of their unique linguistic world view. For its own sake as well as the sake of the Irish language, it is vital that translation play this role as best as it possibly can, and an increased awareness of the situation would seem to be an important beginning.

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