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TRANSLATING OLD IRISH: A PERSPECTIVE ON TRANSLATION THEORY

The translation of Old Irish poses several critical problems typifying the translation of dead languages–problems that should be accounted for in any adequate theory of translation.

Old Irish is the language spoken over a millennium ago in Ireland, the Isle of Man, and parts of what are now Scotland and Wales–as well as in continental monastic foundations begun by Iris missionaries. Classical Old Irish, which is found in its purest form in glosses in continental manuscripts, is date 700-850.

There is a voluminous body of literature in Old Irish. The literature is intrinsically interesting; it is extremely varied and at times breathtakingly beautiful. Because the literature faces both ways in time, it also offers important evidence for literary history. Its archaic features reflect the Indo-European heritage in an immediate way; Irish hero tale has more affinities to Sanskrit and Greek epic than to other medieval epic traditions. At the same time, Old Irish is a precursor of later literary developments. It best represents the substratum of Celtic narrative that surfaced in Arthurian Romances in the later Middle Ages. Old Irish voyage and vision literature also passed into continental tradition to find an ultimate outlet in Dante's *Divina Commedia*. Old Irish literature clearly merits translation.

All the customary problems of translation face a translator of Old Irish. The many poetic forms are intricate, and the sense of the poetry is inseparable from the form. The prose itself can be highly crafted with cadences and alliteration. There are several language varieties including legal language, liturgical language, the technical language of the professional poets (including special terms for aspects of their poetics), and so on. The language is highly idiomatic, and there are traditional formulas to transpose. The tone of the texts varies widely, and often several tones alternate in a single piece. Distinctive syntactical patterns give Old Irish a flavor which one hesitates to abandon. Finally, an archaic socio-legal-totally unfamiliar to modern readers–is cheerfully assumed in the literature.

All these problems, however, are familiar and considered frequently in the literature of translation theory. What is unusual in the translation of Old Irish is that the language itself

is a barrier to translation: it is often not at all clear what a text means. And it is on the process of determining meaning that I wish to focus.

Old Irish is not simply a difficult and complex language (though it *is* that). It is also a very dead language. The last native speakers have been dust for centuries. Though Old Irish has living descendants–Modern Irish, Scots Gaelic, and Manx–all of them represent the parent language in a considerably evolved form. Old Irish and Modern Irish are in many ways as different as Latin and French.

Moreover, unlike Classical Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, or Hebrew, for example, Old Irish has had no continuous tradition of usage, study, or interpretation to guide a literary translator. Though Classical Greek and Latin are dead, a continuous scholarly tradition link us to the era when those languages were spoken. Though their scholarly traditions have waxed and waned, aids like commentaries, glosses, word lists, and translations preserve a tradition of meaning for texts in those languages.

There is no equivalent tradition for Old Irish. There are, to be sure, a few glossaries in Old Irish itself, and a few more in Middle Irish or Modern Irish. Some texts do indeed have glosses. But by and large, most words and passages in Old Irish are without elucidation. There are few commentaries and virtually no early translations. What unbroken scholarly tradition did exist for Old Irish was extinguished by the political history of Ireland. In the seventeenth century the study of Old Irish ceased, to reawaken only two hundred years later.

The nature of the literary tradition in Ireland is another factor in the difficulty of understanding Old Irish texts. In the Middle Ages Ireland had an oral tradition of literature which has survived in an altered form to the present. Thus, many medieval Irish stories like *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 'The Cattle Raid of Cuailnge', or the tale of Deirdre and Noisin, have been told to the present day. However, Irish oral tradition passed these tales on as living literature. The stories were not "canonical" or memorized texts, but tales which evolved through continuous re-creation and adaptation to contemporary language and contemporary narrative standards. Thus, though the *Táin* has remained part of Irish literary tradition since the eighth century, unlike the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid* it was not treated in a way that is of great help to translators of Old Irish texts. The lack of a tradition of "canonical texts" means that

a modern Irish version is very different from the eighth or ninth-century text of the "same" story, a text generally preserved for us in a twelfth-century manuscript.

A simplified model of the process of translation imagines a translator who understands the meaning of a text and seeks to transpose that meaning into another (preferably his/her native) language. The process of understanding ideally occurs spontaneously in terms of the original language. Hence it is that we encourage students learning a language to "read, don't translate". This model clearly fails in relationship to a language like Old Irish. We cannot simply become proficient in Old Irish and understand it spontaneously. Even for an expert there are many passages that cannot be understood in terms of Old Irish alone. We have lost the meanings of many texts, and there is no pool of native speakers to enlighten us about those meanings within the framework of the language itself. Such texts have become inaccessible in a direct way. They are literally meaningless–practically, if not philosophically. Yet we manage to translate many of them nonetheless. How does this happen?

In treating a dead language like Old Irish the simple fact is that meaning is established initially with reference to other languages. In other words, translation itself is the mode of *understanding* Old Irish. This is literally the case with Old Irish grammars and dictionaries; all such apparatus for scholarship pertaining to Old Irish texts is in other languages or refers to other languages. Our dependence on other languages as an entryway to understanding Old Irish goes deeper than the editors' presentation language in scholarly apparatus, however. Dictionaries of a dead language like Old Irish are actually constructed using evidence from other languages: whether the meanings of Old Irish words are established with reference to Latin (e.g., on the basis of glosses in religious tracts), or with reference to Modern Irish (as a derivative language), or with reference to Welsh and other cognates, a form of translation is involved. Translation as a mode of understanding is immediately apparent in a brief perusal of the Royal Irish Academy dictionary of Old Irish.[1]

[1] This situation is, of course, not restricted to Old Irish; it is the norm where dead languages are concerned. EUGENE A. NIDA, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), p. 48, points out that almost all the knowledge that any English translator has of Greek of Hebrew comes through

The relation of translation to understanding in underscored when we move beyond the lexical level to the level of the text. If we consider modern languages alone, it is easy to think that translation is simply an exercise that enables us to share a text with those who do not understand the original language. It is clear in the case of Old Irish texts that translation is a beacon not just for those who do not know Old Irish and want a key to the literature, but it is essential also for those who "know" the language. There are many Old Irish texts that have never been fully translated. For the most difficult texts–like the 'Book of Leinster' *Aided Con Culainn*, 'The Death of CuChulainn'–the fact that they have not been frequently or fully translated implies that they have not been understood.[2] A translation of such a text is a guide to "readers" of Old Irish as much–if in a different way–as to readers who know no Irish at all. In relationship to Old Irish texts, then, the enterprise of translation is a foray of discovery, a foray into understanding. Translation is a question of wresting meaning out of the void.

Rather than discuss in theoretical terms how this epistemological problem can be solved, I would like to try to describe the process I use. I have learned much about the task from THOMAS KINSELLA, the most gifted translator of Old Irish in this century. His translation *The Táin*, (1969; rpt. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) of a collection of stories from the Ulster Cycle will probably be the standard English translation of these works for all but a few scholars for at least the next half-century.

Understanding Old Irish can be at times straightforward. In practice, a century of intense linguistic work has meant that large stretches of the prose are clear. The meanings of many of the words are so well established–from cognates or whatever–that one can read some passages of Old Irish as one might read any modern language. But where there are difficulties–rare words, ambiguous spellings, unusual or loose syntax, puns, jokes–the task is more difficult.

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dictionaries and grammars written in English.

[2] Despite its obvious importance for cultural and literary reasons, the first complete translation of *The Death of CuChulainn* appeared in my *Two Death Tales from the Ulster Cycle, "The Death of CuRoi" and "The Death of CuChulainn"* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1981).

What I have learned from KINSELLA is that the quest for understanding the language of an Old Irish text is inseparable from the quest for understanding the tale or the poem as literature. There is a cyclical process that is immensely fruitful in helping to translate passages which present linguistic difficulties. In the case of a narrative, for example, preliminary translation of the accessible parts of the text results in a preliminary understanding of the characters and their actions. By focusing on the characters, by steeping oneself in their situation and their actions, one arrives at a primelinary interpretation or set of alternative interpretations. These interpretations serve as guidelines for choosing between alternate translations where the syntax is ambiguous or where there are several meanings for a word. The textual choices that emerge in turn help to determine which interpretation of the text is more valid (e.g. which one generates a complete and consistent set of alternate readings), or they refine and elaborate a single interpretation. The refined interpretation can help resolve still other obscurities, and so it goes. Understanding leads to understanding. At each step of the way a translation evolves which is modified and shaped by the next round of work.

There seem to be a number of theoretical implications inherent in this process. At first glance the translation of Old Irish would appear to be an ideal subject for a thesis of indeterminacy of translation. With a language like Old Irish where many meanings are lost, one might think that any translation could be made acceptable, or that at least any alternatives which are internally consistent will be equally valid. How indeed can a criterion for determinacy be established?

Two factors lead to determinacy in the case of a dead language like Old Irish. The first is practical. Each time one resolves a translation crux, some possible interpretations of the text are eliminated. Generally, if a text is long enough, a sufficient number of problematic readings will eliminate competing literary interpretations in favor of a single interpretation that is consistent with all the cruxes. By analogy with many infinite series, we can say that there will be a convergence so that the interpretation has a clear limit.

On the theoretical level one should note that the process of translation I have outlined is based on interpretation, but the interpretations in question are not simply subjective, they

are also "scientific". The translator tests his/her intuitive, poetic, or psychological interpretations in light of what is known about Old Irish culture from such discipline as history, law, and archeology. The interpretations of individual texts are further tested with reference to what is known of Old Irish literary tradition: a specific literary corpus and sequence which are grounded in traditional forms. Because the translator's interpretations themselves are pegged to the socio-cultural framework and the literature of early Ireland, they are determinate. Indeterminacy does not obtain on a theoretical level because not any translation will suffice to meet the constraints suggested by culture and literary history.

A translation from a dead language like Old Irish will be as determinate as the scientific disciplines of knowledge and inquiry upon which the translation is based. To put it another way, the question of the indeterminacy of translation becomes simply a special case of the larger problem of the determinacy or indeterminacy of scientific knowledge in general.[3] If we do not find any special indeterminacy of translation with respect to a language like Old Irish, surely the thesis fails with respect to living languages where the socio-cultural grounding is even more determinable.

A second theoretical consideration emerges from a paradox. When the meanings of a language are lost and when there is no pool of native speakers to determine an acceptable range of meanings, translations become the guide to meaning. A pool of translators replaces the pool of native speakers; a pool of translations replaces a pool of variant utterances. This is an uncomfortable notion that does not fit easily into common translation theories.

With a dead language like Old Irish we see that in a strange way translation of a text precedes a full understanding of the text. Understanding emerges through translation. Translating a text of a dead language actually precedes reading that same text, both that reading with enjoyment that we call appreciation and that reading with discernment that we call literary criticism.

[3] My position on the QUINE-CHOMSKY debate on the indeterminacy of translation could be compared to that of CHOMSKY. CF. NOAM CHOMSKY, "Quine's Empirical Assumptions", *Synthese* 19 (1968-69), p. 61 ff. I am indebted to THOMAS TYMOCZKO for this reference.

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