

LANGUAGE LOSS AND IMPERIALISM IN THE PLAY *TRANSLATIONS* BY BRIAN FRIEL

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Abstract

The play *Translations* explores the impact of British colonial rule on the Irish language and culture. The play is set in 19th-century Ireland, and it vividly depicts the struggles faced by a group of characters as they navigate the challenges of translating Irish place names into English, showcasing the complex dynamics between language, power, and identity. It seeks to provoke critical thinking, raise awareness, and advocate for the preservation of linguistic diversity, cultural identity, and the rights of indigenous communities affected by language loss and imperialism. This research uses a qualitative descriptive research method. The researchers collected the data from the script and interpreted it using discourse analysis. It is found that language loss in the context of imperialism is a consequence of the imposition of a dominant language and the devaluation of indigenous languages.

Keywords: *Language Loss, Imperialism, Play*

INTRODUCTION

Language loss refers to the gradual decline and eventual extinction of a language. It occurs when a language is no longer spoken or used by a community of speakers. Language loss can happen for various reasons, including cultural assimilation, political oppression, migration, and the dominance of a more widely spoken language. Language is not only an instrument for communication but is also related to a set of behavioral norms and cultural values of which one's self-identity is constructed. After learning a new language, one's perception of competence, communicative style, and value systems may undergo some changes. Tabouret-Keller (1997, cited in Kamwangamalu, 2007).

Language loss in sociolinguistics is examined within the broader context of language shift, which refers to the process of individuals or communities shifting from using one language or dialect to another. This shift can occur due to various social, political, economic, and cultural factors.

Sociolinguistic research on language loss provides insights into the complex relationship between language and society. It helps us understand how social, economic, and political factors influence language choices and how language loss affects individuals and communities.

In sociolinguistics, language loss is a phenomenon that is studied from the perspective of language variation and change within social groups. Sociolinguists investigate how and why certain languages or dialects decline or become extinct in specific communities. Language loss in the context of imperialism refers to the decline and potential extinction of indigenous or local languages as a result of imperialistic policies, practices, and power dynamics. When an imperial power establishes control over a territory or a group of people, it often imposes its language as the dominant language of administration, education, and communication, suppressing or devaluing local languages.

Colonial Europeans exploited the populations they encountered for many

reasons among them, land, resources, and freedom. Colonialism can be characterized by the societal structures through which it was implemented. As differentiated by Salikoko Mufwene, the three main forms of colonialism are settler colonization, extraction colonization (also referred to as trade colonization), and exploitation colonization (2008). All three forms have had distinct and profound effects on linguistic biodiversity loss. Settler colonization occurs when travelers explore an area with the intent of finding a new community.

Colonialism, nationalism, and globalism have greatly contributed to the rise in linguistic diversity loss. As could be expected, the vast majority of endangered languages are also indigenous languages. Colonialism began a massive shift towards colonizing such groups and their languages, which has sped up the rate of indigenous language loss. The other category of language endangerment causes is when speakers gradually shift to speaking other languages in place of their heritage languages. In this way, their heritage languages are no longer transmitted to children, ultimately leading to language death.

"Translation," a play written by Brian Friel, delves into the profound themes of language loss and imperialism. Set in 19th-century Ireland, the play explores the impact of British colonial rule on the Irish language and culture. It vividly depicts the struggles a group of characters faces as they navigate the challenges of translating Irish place names into English, showcasing the complex dynamics between language, power, and identity.

In the play, it was shown that there are four languages used, which consist of; English, Latin, Greek, and Irish purpose as the shadow language. However, only English is mostly used to communicate

between the Irish and English and Greek was the previous language that was taught in the play,

The play is set in a hedge school in the small town of Baile Beag (Ballybeg), part of Donegal, in 1833. The teacher, also the schoolmaster of this school, is named Hugh. Manus, Hugh's lame son, also helps his father in teaching. Owen, Hugh's other son, works as a translator for the British regiment, which has the mission of renaming the Irish places and making a new map for Ireland. The main figures of this regiment shown in the play are the cartographer and orthographer Captain Lancey and Lieutenant Yolland, who have been sent to Bailie Beag to remap Ireland and change place names into anglicized and standardized versions. What Friel shows hand in hand with the translation and transliteration process to highlight the cultural colonization is the education system. A new English-language system of National education is being applied to the place to replace the local Irish-speaking schools, including the hedge school the play is set in. In the hedge schools, Latin and Greek are considered beneficial and English language and English literary canon are unknown. At the end of the play, after the disappearance of Yolland, Lancey threatens to evict the town settlers unless the English soldier is found and it is here that the true aims of the English survey group become known to all the Irish inhabitants.

In this paper, the researchers are going to analyze Language Loss and Imperialism in the play Translation. The purpose of this research is to delve into the complex interplay between these two phenomena and to shed light on their profound implications and to deepen our understanding of the historical and cultural implications of these phenomena. It seeks to provoke critical thinking, raise awareness, and advocate for the preservation of

linguistic diversity, cultural identity, and the rights of indigenous communities affected by language loss and imperialism.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative descriptive research method. It is a method of research that is interpretive (uses findings and descriptions) and involves many methods in examining the research problem. The use of these various methods is often called triangulation, which is intended so that the researcher gains a comprehensive (holistic) understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Mulyana, 2018).

Descriptive research is a study that explains to understand the phenomenon of the subject research, behavior, perception, motivation, action, and the way of describing the result of words and sentences (Moleong, 2010). According to Punch (1998), qualitative research does not use numerical data. In this research, the researchers collected the data from the script and interpreted it using discourse analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

"Language loss" refers to the loss or attrition of skill in one's native language (LI) or a second or foreign language (LII).¹ The phenomenon can have both sociological and psychological forms. That is, language loss can be exhibited by a whole cultural or linguistic group or by an individual; it can be analyzed in terms of rate, sequence, linguistic components, or skill types.

There are several negative consequences associated with language loss. Firstly, when a language disappears, a rich cultural heritage and unique way of expressing ideas and concepts are lost. Language often connects deeply to a community's history, traditions, and identity. Additionally, language loss can lead to a loss of traditional knowledge, as many indigenous languages, for example, are closely tied to the understanding of local

environments, ecosystems, and medicinal practices.

Language loss can also have social and psychological effects. Communities that lose their language may experience a loss of self-esteem and identity. Language plays a crucial role in shaping individual and collective identities, and the loss of a language can lead to a sense of marginalization and disconnection from one's cultural roots.

As people become closer, they need to share their scientific, technological, and even socio-political outcomes. So, they need to speak the same language to solve the above-mentioned problems collectively and to be able to achieve their goals more successfully. Therefore, there is no doubt that in a global village, the need for a common language is unavoidable. An international language is the most acceptable reaction to the chaos created by the world's heavy load of information produced and communications established by the peoples all over the world.

Language loss in the context of imperialism refers to the decline and potential extinction of indigenous or local languages as a result of imperialistic policies, practices, and power dynamics. When an imperial power establishes control over a territory or a group of people, it often imposes its language as the dominant language of administration, education, and communication, suppressing or devaluing local languages.

In the beginning of the play, Owen came accompanied by some English soldiers, Lancey and Yolland, to their classroom in order to rewrite the map of Ireland into English pronounced words according to Lancey when he spoke to the whole class translated by Owen.

“LANCEY: I see. Yes. Very well. Perhaps you're right. Well. What we are doing is this. (He looks at OWEN. OWEN

nods reassuringly.) 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.”

Language Loss that can be found in the play *Translations* is that the set was supposed to be in Irish and to revitalize or even relive the occurrence of such Imperialism that caused the loss of the Irish language in the play but still failed to do so. This situation can be seen from the fact that Irish has never been used in the play, whereas English is used to replace the language. The audience is forced to imagine some scenes in which Owen seems to be translating for Lancey to the rest of the people in the room even though they are using the same language, which is English. The translating occurrence does not happen directly from Irish to English but rather from English to English, indicating the death of the Irish language itself.

“LANCEY: I'll say what I have to say, if I may, and as briefly as possible. Do they speak any English, Roland?”

OWEN: Don't worry. I'll translate.

LANCEY: I see. (He clears his throat. He speaks as if he were addressing children – a shade too loudly and enunciating excessively.) You may have seen me – seen me – working in this section – section? – working. We are here – here – in this place – you understand? – to make a map – a map – a map and –

JIMMY: Nonne Latine loquitur?

(HUGH holds up a restraining hand.)

HUGH: James.

LANCEY: (To JIMMY) I do not speak Gaelic, sir.

(He looks at OWEN.)

OWEN: Carry on.

LANCEY: A map is a representation on paper – a picture – you understand picture? – a paper picture – showing, representing this country – yes? – showing your country in miniature – a scaled drawing on paper of – of – of –

(Suddenly DOALTY sniggers. Then BRIDGET. Then SARAH. OWEN leaps in quickly.)

OWEN: It might be better if you assume they understand you –

LANCEY: Yes?”

In the play, Friel depicts the efforts of British cartographers who arrive in a rural Irish-speaking community to anglicize the local place names. As the British colonial forces rename the landmarks and replace Irish names with English equivalents, the play portrays the erosion of the Irish language and the cultural identity tied to it.

This occurrence can also be found when Yolland and Maire are spending time together, they seem to have a language barrier shown as they cannot communicate well in the play but in all truthfulness they are speaking the same language shown in the play *Translations* really proving Irish is a shadow language since this does not happen only once.

“(Pause. Slightly further apart.)

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

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

(Another pause. Another few paces apart. They are now a long distance from one another.)

YOLLAND: (Indicating himself) George.

(MAIRE nods: Yes-yes. Then: –)

MAIRE: Lieutenant George.

YOLLAND: Don't call me that. I never think of myself as Lieutenant.

MAIRE: What-what?

YOLLAND: Sorry-sorry? (He points to himself again.) George.

(MAIRE nods: Yes-yes. Then points to herself.)

MAIRE: Maire.

YOLLAND: Yes, I know you're Maire. Of course I know you're Maire. I mean I've been watching you night and day for the past –

MAIRE: (Eagerly) What-what?

YOLLAND: (Points) Maire. (Points.) George. (Points both.) Maire and George.

(MAIRE nods: Yes-yes-yes.)

I – I – I – MAIRE: Say anything at all. I love the sound of your speech.

YOLLAND: (Eagerly) Sorry-sorry?

(In acute frustration he looks around, hoping for some inspiration that will provide him with communicative means. Now he has a thought: he tries raising his voice and articulating in a staccato style and with equal and absurd emphasis on each word.)”

From the interaction, we assume that they are speaking in two different languages as the set up is in Irish and English but evidently, only English is used in the conversation above. Irish is not used by Maire even though she herself is an Irish person, and she will show interest in learning the English language for the purpose of conversing with Yolland and to better her life in the United States.

Because language is inextricable from culture and carries with it such a sense of history, its destruction is a concerted effort by the British to bring the Irish into submission. It is no coincidence that the new national schools being installed across the country will teach only in English. This can prove the fact that English is slowly but surely starting to replace the Irish language also added that even Maire wants to learn English to pursue a better career in the United States as she sees her current work dissatisfactory.

Irish functions as a shadow language throughout the play to make you think of the language but is still unheard. Even in the play, Irish not being used confirms that Irish truly has been a lost language. The imperialism of the English people caused such circumstances for Irish people to gradually forget their language and replace their native language with the new one in such a short span of time. It can be assumed that even Friel had the attention for his audience to speak English since very few people could speak Irish at the time the play was out. Even the people in Ireland hardly spoke Irish.

Colonialism, it is implied, functions not only by violence but also by forcing the colonized to turn towards the culture of the colonizers to find success. As such, Friel touches upon the opportunity inherent to learning English. The new English-speaking school represents the fact that Irish nationalists will ultimately be left behind by the inevitable.

Imperialism and colonialism both caused such incidents to happen in the play when Englishmen came there for the purpose of changing the names for their English map that inevitably caused the shift in the language. Changing the name may cause a custom pattern of pronouncing the region of Ireland for even locals and the people who use the English map.

Through his portrayal of language loss, Friel explores the broader themes of colonialism, cultural identity, and the impact of linguistic imperialism. The diminishing use of the Irish language and the renaming of Irish places contribute to a sense of cultural disconnection and the loss of Irish heritage.

CONCLUSION

In summary, language loss in the context of imperialism is a consequence of the imposition of a dominant language and the devaluation of indigenous languages.

Imperialism was the cause of the language loss in the play that people are forgetting their native language with the arrival of English people.

Language loss in Brian Friel's "Translations" acts as a metaphor for the larger socio-political setting of Irish history, investigating the consequences of colonialism and cultural assimilation on language and identity. Friel's work emphasizes the importance of language in shaping and sustaining cultural heritage, as well as the challenges and implications of language loss in the face of imperialism.

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