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“LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN BRIAN FRIEL’S
TRANSLATIONS AND DANCING AT LUGHNASA”

OLIVIA DANS CASTRO

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1. Foreword

Since the late 19th century, Irish theatre has been one of the most significant literary vehicles for the transmission of ideas and ideology. In the 1960s the outstanding figure of Brian Friel emerged, and his quality as a playwright was rapidly acknowledged by both audience and critics. His dramatic production revolves around the relationship between language, identity, politics, history and religion, all inside the Irish cultural sphere. His concern with the conflicts surrounding the limits of language and the causes for the lack of communication, both between individuals and between cultures has been constant throughout his career. Therefore, this study will explore Friel’s reflection of these conflicts in two of his most acclaimed plays: *Translations* (1980) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). The analysis of these two works will provide us with a representation of Friel’s theories and ideas regarding, on the one hand, the impossibility of translation and communication between different cultures in the colonial Ireland of 1833, and on the other hand, the alternatives to the restrictions of verbal communication. Given Friel’s preoccupation about language and communication, this work will be focused on this particular topic, which is essential for understanding both the playwright’s production and his place in the history of Irish literature.
2. Introduction

Speaking of Brian Friel (Omagh, Northern Ireland, 1929) is speaking of one of the most influential Irish authors of the second half of the 20th century. He is regarded as one of the most exceptional living playwrights writing in English by many critics and scholars, and he has been widely acclaimed all over the world. Among his most renowned plays we can find Philadelphia, Here I Come! (1964), The Freedom of the City (1973), Living Quarters (1977), Faith Healer (1979), Aristocrats (1979), Translations (1980), Making History (1988) and Dancing at Lughnasa (1990).

His contribution to the history of Irish literature, however, goes beyond the undeniable quality of his plays: in 1980, together with actor Stephen Rea, he founded the Field Day Theatre Company, to which such notable figures of the Irish literary panorama as Seamus Deane, Seamus Heaney, Thomas Kilroy and Tom Paulin joined during the decade. Based in Derry, the town in which Friel grew up, the Field Day became the natural successor of William B. Yeats and Lady Gregory’s Abbey Theatre (set in Dublin), although tinged with the additional and inevitable political load associated to any project related to Northern Ireland. Nowadays, the Field Day constitutes the core of the dramatic activity of the North, and it is also one of the most important theatres in the British Isles. The cultural dimension of the Field Day is characterized by a preoccupation with “the relationship between myth and present-day perception, history and politics.” (Richtarik 10) This is a concern that Brian Friel himself has continuously reflected in his works, especially in relation to the construction of Irish identity and language.

Language is, in fact, almost an obsession for Friel. His career has been marked by a deep interest in the role of language as an active agent in the building of our personal and social identities, as well as in the creation of cultural-national narratives. Hence, in this study I am going to explore and analyse how Brian Friel represents the political, cultural, social and personal implications and limitations of language and communication, both verbal and non-verbal, in two of his plays: Translations and Dancing at Lughnasa.

I am aware of the fact that limiting the scope of this study to such a small selection implies excluding many other plays that also deal with this topic (although references to them will be made if necessary); however, I believe that an analysis on these two works in particular can offer us a very clear depiction of Friel’s considerations about the act of
communicating. On the one hand, *Translations* has to do with language and, as suggested by the title, translation itself; the play presents a crisis “of both language and civilization” (Deane 21), portrayed through the linguistic invasion of English and the connections between language and politics. On the other hand, *Dancing at Lughnasa* constitutes the representation of Friel’s search for alternatives to written and spoken language. *Dancing at Lughnasa* is a play in which communication belongs to the non-verbal realm; a piece of literature in which dance plays a role words cannot play. For this reason, I considered these two plays the most adequate examples in order to accomplish the objective described above.

It is also important to point out that this work will not consist of comparing both plays. Although the two of them share the topics this study deals with, *Translations* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* will be analysed separately. This type of distribution will allow me to limit my scope to one play each time, and in doing so, I will be able to offer a broader and, at the same time, more exhaustive analysis of both plays. However, this does not mean that both works will be treated as isolated blocks either. There is, after all, a reason why I chose these two plays in particular and not others, as I have explained above. So, of course, the similarities between them will be commented upon as well. My aim is, then, to elaborate a work that will be as balanced as possible between the individual and the comparative dimensions of the analysis.

The progression of this study goes from an introductory section devoted to briefly presenting the historical and literary background in which Brian Friel operates. Although his production is limited to the second half of the 20th century, neither Friel nor any author in the history of literature has emerged from a vacuum – all writers and literary trends are born mainly as a continuation of or a reaction to former trends, and Friel is no exception. Moreover, Friel’s settings, plots, characters and themes are deeply related to Ireland, so it would be both absurd and impossible to separate him from the Irish literary tradition I will describe at the beginning of this piece of work.

After this introduction, the separate study of both plays will be developed. The method of analysis for both plays is mostly the same: I will focus on the most representative elements of Friel’s ideas regarding language and communication in his texts, linking them directly to the most theoretical aspects of the topic. Numerous passages and excerpts from the plays, as well as references and quotes from other scholars’ works, dealing with the same subject, will be provided. Lastly, a final section will summarise the main points I have dealt with.
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throughout this piece of work, and it will present the conclusions I have reached after the production of this analysis.

In order to elaborate this study, I have gathered several relevant bibliographical sources (mainly books and academic articles, essays and papers) that dealt with either the same or a similar topic as the one I have chosen for my study. Of course, not all the material was so specific (and I did not intend to or expected it to be), so I also sought for more general sources of information that could offer me new and, if possible, different perspectives on this subject. Thanks to these references I was able to acquire both a broad vision of my field of study and a precise focus on very specific and crucial details that would help to give some depth to my analysis. Time-consuming as it was, this process has proved quite fruitful, and it has allowed me to obtain the knowledge that I hope I will be able to demonstrate over the course of this piece of work.

Finally, I would like to devote a few lines to a brief description of my motivations for choosing this topic in particular and this area of literature in a broader sense. I have been interested in Irish culture for a long time: in its landscape, in its culture and, of course, in its literary tradition as well. However, my actual knowledge of it was rather superficial, and it was not until I took the subject of Irish Literature imparted in this university that I became acquainted with the great importance of theatre, especially in the 20th century. Since I was particularly interested in dealing with a relatively recent author, selecting Brian Friel’s dramatic production (given its enormous importance during the second half of the century) as the object of my study seemed the most obvious choice. Moreover, Friel’s tendency to reflect the great importance he gives to the topic of language and communication in his plays was also another specific reason for choosing him as the subject for this study, since I personally share his concerns and agree with him in most points of his thesis.

To conclude with this introductory section, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my tutor in this project, José Miguel Alonso Giráldez, not only for guiding me in the selection process described above, but also for his continuous assistance during the elaboration of this piece of work. Needless to say, the production of this study would have been impossible without his invaluable support.
3. Author and historical background

It is a well-known fact that Ireland has a powerful literary tradition. From medieval times, Irish myths and tales were adapted into poetry, and even at this early stage in history, the first texts in prose (traditional epic sagas, namely the Ulster Cycle) started to appear as well. Although prose continued to be a popular means of transmitting the legends and tales of the pre-colonised Ireland, poetry has been the favoured vehicle of expression throughout the centuries, and it is still in contemporary Irish literature.

However, it would be unfair to limit the value of this country’s literary tradition only to poetry. The Irish Literary Revival (late 19th century – early 20th century) marked a turning point in the way of understanding the relationship between Irish culture, literature and identity. Literature became one of the most important means of recovering Irish identity after centuries of British colonisation, as it was regarded as a sort of ‘bridge’ between common people and the elevated thoughts and ideas of scholars and intellectuals that sought to return Ireland the great cultural force it had lost as a result of foreign hegemony.

At some point, though, these intellectuals (among whom the figure of William Butler Yeats was prominent) realised that poetry was not the best medium of transmitting their ideas to the general public – regardless of its quality, the intrinsic difficulty associated to its form implied that it would only reach a relatively small group of people. It was time, then, to find a safer, more solid bridge, and drama proved to be the perfect agent to play this role.

The foundation of the Abbey Theatre (also known as the National Theatre of Ireland) in 1904 by William B. Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory and Edward Martyn practically meant the birth of Irish drama. Until that time, the few existing plays written by local playwrights were performed by English actors, and they could hardly be considered as Irish theatre. With the establishment of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, drama in Ireland experienced a great blossoming, being the core of the theatrical production of the whole country, to the point that it is said that the history of theatre in Ireland is nothing but the history of the Abbey Theatre. Apart from being the place where renowned playwrights such as John Millington Synge or Sean O’Casey (among others) staged their plays, the Abbey Theatre managed to accomplish Yeats’s project of bringing the ideals behind the Irish Literary Renaissance closer to people through drama.
Even though the golden age of the Abbey Theatre ended around the middle of the 20th century, the path for the future of Irish theatre had already been established, and the dramatic tradition of the country kept on growing throughout the following decades. A good number of authors contributed to this, including Samuel Beckett, George Bernard Shaw, Brendan Behan, Thomas Kilroy, Frank McGuinness or John B. Keane. Among these playwrights that took over Synge and O’Casey’s task and continued to enrich Irish drama, the name of Brian Friel resounds with special intensity.

Brian Friel was born in Derry, a small village in Northern Ireland very close to the border with the Republic, in 1929. He belongs to the Catholic minority of the country, which suffered the chronic hardship of economic depression and high rates of unemployment even more acutely than the rest of the population (who did not live much better anyway). During his childhood and adolescence, Friel would spend his holidays in the town of Donegal, which belongs to the territory of the Republic, and where his mother’s family originally came from. This movement, small in terms of distance but quite significant in terms of implications, made Friel aware from at a very early age of the remarkable differences between Northern Ireland and what was known as the Irish Free State. This would later result in the development of the ambivalent attitude towards both realities, which is present in his works.

These biographical data are relevant not only in order to achieve a better understanding of Friel’s background, but also because many of his plays are imbued with the author’s experience in these conflicting (and conflictive) realities. The predominant apathy of Derry contrasts with the beautiful landscape of Donegal, but Friel knew both places well enough not to consider the latter some sort of bucolic paradise in comparison to the grey atmosphere of the former. Instead, he blended both influences in the literary creation of the town of Ballybeg, the fictitious recurring setting of some of his plays. Ballybeg constitutes, in sum, the rural environment (inspired by the natural scenery of Donegal) in which the social and political conflict of Derry takes place.

Through this first mention of politics I am naming one of the major themes in Brian Friel’s dramatic production. When writing about Ireland (especially the North), avoiding the political dimension of the country as a colonised territory in perpetual struggle for independence (and all its connotations) seems something futile. Indeed, Ireland’s most recent history is that of a long, rough and bloody socio-political struggle that Friel has never been able or willing to disregard. In his plays, he depicts the ways in which these complex political
circumstances affect his characters, and themes such as exile, nostalgia, violence, disappointment or social decay are habitual in his works.

However, despite Friel’s drama is mostly political, however we shouldn’t neglect many other relevant elements which play a fundamental role in his literary production. Among them, the preoccupation about language and communication is one of his main literary motifs and obsessions. Seamus Deane points out that “brilliance in the theatre has, for Irish dramatists, been linguistic” (12), and Brian Friel not only perpetuates this ‘tradition’, but also adds a new series of topics and ways of interpreting the place of language in Irish drama, culture and identity, as well as the conflicts attached to it. The two plays that will be the object of analysis in this piece of work reproduce and examine this theme to a great extent, and therefore studying them will surely shed some light on the artistic representations of the author’s thoughts and ideas concerning it.

4. Translations

Translations is widely recognized as Brian Friel’s masterpiece. Its première, which took place on September 23rd 1980, was not only a brilliant success that put Friel’s name in the mouths of critics from all over the globe; it was also a landmark in the history of Irish drama. The reception of both public and experts was very positive, to the point that some scholars do not hesitate to refer to it as “the instant classic of his (Friel’s) canon” (McGrath, Brian Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama 2), or, in a broader sense, as “the most significant Irish play of the second half of the twentieth century.” (Boltwood 151) Although all of Friel’s plays are deeply connected with Ireland and represent this bond between the playwright and the country in one way or another, all the topics dealt with in Translations make this play especially significant in Friel’s production, and also in the whole panorama of Irish drama in the 20th century.

Translations is set in the aforementioned town of Baile Beag (the Gaelic for ‘Ballybeg’), County Donegal, in 1833. One of the main characters, Hugh O’Donnell, is the master of the hedge-school where most of the action takes place. Hugh has two sons: Manus, who is also a teacher at the hedge-school, and Owen, who returns to Baile Beag from England as a member of one of the groups in charge of carrying out the Ordnance Survey: a re-mapping of Ireland replacing the local place-names by their anglicised form. Friel makes use
of this historic event to recreate the dreadful attack that the Ordnance Survey represented for the Irish language, and also to dramatise a number of issues directly linked to the loss of a language and its consequences.

Officially, the British Government spoke of the Ordnance Survey as a project aimed to obtain accurate topographic information about Ireland, so as to take a precise and updated measurement of the land and know what exactly belonged to whom, etc. It was, above everything else, a means of establishing an ordered system of taxation that had been difficult to organise until then as a result of both the inaccuracy of the English knowledge of the territory and the uncertain boundaries between one place and another. However, in order to do so, the British needed, first and foremost, to be able to understand the names that designated the places they were going to examine, which of course, were in Irish. Being this language substantially different from English and utterly incomprehensible for them, the problem that this fact posed was solved by the Government through the process that is depicted in Translations: anglicising these place names, either by translating the meaning or by creating an English version of it through phonetic similarity.

One of the survey’s directors, Lt-Colonel Thomas F. Colby, is represented in the play through the character of Captain Lancey, who announces the details of the enterprise in Act I. First, Lancey describes the survey as “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.” (Friel, Plays One 406) According to him, its objective is that “military authorities will be equipped with up-to-date and accurate information on every corner of this part of the Empire.” (406) Finally, regarding the issue of taxation, Lancey quotes a brief extract from the governing charter, which says: “the present survey has for its object the relief which can be afforded to the proprietors and occupiers of land from unequal taxation.” (406) Although Lancey’s explanation has already been quite euphemistic considering the enterprise’s real nature, Owen’s translation of his words to the non-English speaking audience constitutes a clear softening of them, to the point that it could be seen as an actual distortion of their meaning.

Before starting the analysis of the linguistic implications of this scene, it is also necessary to comment upon the nature of the hedge-schools themselves. To begin with, what kind of places were hedge-schools and what kind of education did they offer? Hedge-schools were an exclusively Irish ‘phenomenon’. They were schools that dated back to the 18th
century, created and run in a clandestine way during the times in which the Catholic population of Ireland saw their civil rights severely spurned by the Penal Laws\textsuperscript{1}. These laws banned the presence of Catholics in any activity related to education, so hedge-schools became the vehicle of transmission of knowledge among the members of this community. In *The Story of the Irish Race*, Seumas MacManus offers the following description of hedge-schools:

Throughout those dark days the hunted schoolmaster, with price upon his head, was hidden from house to house. And in the summer time he gathered his little class, hungering and thirsting for knowledge, behind a hedge in remote mountain glen – where, while in turn each tattered lad kept watch from the hilltop for the British soldiers, he fed to his eager pupils the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge.

Latin and Greek were taught to ragged hunted ones under shelter of the hedges – whence these teachers were known as "hedge schoolmasters." (461)

Although written from a Catholic point of view and reflecting a moderately different reality from the one portrayed in *Translations*, MacManus’s depiction of the hedge-schools provides the reader with an account of the main characteristics of this peculiar educational system.

The period in which *Translations* takes place is essential for the development of its action, not only because of the Ordnance Survey, but also because it is the time when the new national school system was about to be established. The importance of this fact lies mainly in these two points: this system would make the hedge-schools disappear and it was meant to provide education exclusively in English. Thus, that the play begins in a hedge-school and that two of the main characters (Hugh and Manus) are part of this system is anything but arbitrary. The hedge-school (together with Manus’s attachment to it) appears as a symbol of the *status quo* that many Irish did not wish to change, as well as an icon of ‘Irishness’. As I said before, hedge-schools were a genuinely Irish occurrence, and their relationship with one of the cruellest parts of Irish history is deep. Therefore, the introduction of a new educational system created by the British according only to their interests was obviously perceived by the local population as another threat to their culture and language.

\textsuperscript{1}The Penal Laws were a series of legislation introduced by the British Government in Ireland since the late 17\textsuperscript{th} century. Their aim was to forbid Catholics from taking part in any social activity, among many other heavy restrictions. They lasted until the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.
It is true that the instruction provided by some hedge-schools probably did not reach the desirable quality, and we must also take into consideration the ideological dimension of this type of schooling: as F. C. McGrath points out, “the schools taught in Gaelic also taught the Gaelic version of Irish history and preserved and fanned the traditional historical prejudices against the British.” (Brian Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama 179) However, what was about to happen through the introduction of the new system was essentially the same, but simply adopting the perspective of the British: from then on, Irish children would learn the history of the British, from the approach of the British and the language of the British. McGrath weighs up the impact of this program by considering that the new schools “were about to accomplish what the notorious Penal Laws had failed to accomplish – the eradication of Gaelic Ireland.” (179) Although it is hard to ascertain the accuracy of this statement, most historians agree that the number of English speakers in Ireland increased significantly during this period and from then onwards.

This is, in summary, the historical background behind Translations. Although Brian Friel did not write it with the purpose of creating a play based in historical facts, and history is definitely not the play’s main theme, the period in which Translations is set is, as we have seen, fundamental for the historical development of Ireland, as well as for Translations’ plot and characters.

4.1 Friel and Steiner

The decade of the 1970s was a period of great importance in Brian Friel’s literary career. The strong political dimension that marked the first stage of his production seemed to naturally run out by itself, and Friel progressively became more and more interested in the linguistic scope of art and, indeed, politics. It was during this time that he read George Steiner’s After Babel (first published in 1975), a comprehensive study of topics related to language and translation. Friel came in contact with this book as part of his project of translating Anton Chekhov’s Three Sisters into Irish English, but its influence went far beyond this task. Eventually, many of the main ideas developed in After Babel were directly introduced in Translations, which “has been regarded as a dramatisation of Steiner’s After Babel.” (Pine 7) That this play is, without any doubt and to a great extent, the artistic expression of Steiner’s thesis is a fact that virtually all critics agree with, and the aim of this
section will be to expose the main and most concrete displays of *After Babel*’s influence in *Translations*.

Firstly, though, it is necessary to note that *Translations* is, by no means, a literary adaptation of *After Babel*. It is known that, when Friel read Steiner’s book, the ideas for what would later on become the play titled *Translations* were already in his mind. As Helen Lojek expresses it, “Steiner’s work caught Friel’s imagination in large part because it explored aspects of language and meaning that had concerned the playwright for some time.” (90) *After Babel*’s influence must be seen, then, not as a source of inspiration, but as an agent that helped Friel to find answers for many of his doubts and concerns, and also to give shape to his thoughts and ideas regarding language.

Both the preface of *After Babel* and the programme for the first staging of *Translations* (which was the inaugural performance of the Field Day) include the following excerpt from the German philosopher Martin Heidegger: “Man acts as though he were the master of language, while it is language which remains mistress of men. When this relation of domination is inverted, man succumbs to strange contrivances.” (qtd. in Pine 8) This postmodernist view of language is shared by both Steiner and Friel, and its implications are omnipresent in *Translations*.

In a broad sense, the postmodernist theory of language (developed after Heidegger by philosophers and linguists such as Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault, among others) is based on some premises that are certainly an essential part of *Translations*’s plot and intellectual background. The first of these premises is that humans think in language – indeed, thoughts are configured through language. A very simple proof of this statement is that, when we are told to think about something, anything at all, we think in sentences, independently from the sense they would make when said aloud or from their correctness or lack thereof according to the grammar rules that codify our language.

A second premise describes the nature of human language as chaotic, even as arbitrary. Contrarily to mathematics, where 2 + 2 always have and always will equal 4, language is constantly changing. As Hugh says to Yolland, “words are signals, counters. They are not immortal.” (Friel, *Plays One* 419) Rules of complete and eternal certainty are not applicable to language in the same way they are applied to some fields of science and other disciplines of study, for they change both in form and meaning through time. Furthermore, within the same period in history, even within the same year, month or day, and even at the same moment,
words expressing the same meaning in two different places can be (and in most cases are) completely unalike. In fact, it can happen that the same meaning is expressed by a single word in one place and by a chain of words elsewhere, and there are also cases that show that some languages still do not have a signifier corresponding a certain signified. For instance, the famous example of Eskimo languages having a wide variety of words to designate different types of snow (whereas English and practically all European languages only have but a few) proves the third of the main premises of postmodernist linguistic theory: that language has an extraordinarily strong connection with culture. Many experts actually have few reservations when stating that language is culture. All languages are originated and developed within a particular culture, as vehicles of transmission of meanings, thoughts, feelings and, definitely, ideologies. Language never occurs in a vacuum, and this implies that it is never devoid of the cultural load of the civilisation in which it was generated.

These premises can lead to multiple conclusions, and one of the most obvious is that humans, their minds and, in great part, their personalities, are shaped by culture and language. Language is a crucial part of the cultural imprint of all civilisations, and as such, its value as an enriching agent for our social and individual development is incalculable. However, Hugh’s previous quotation about words continues: “And it can happen (…) that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of… fact.” (Friel, Plays One 419) This quote is one of the most noticeable examples of the influence of After Babel in Translations, and this is the corresponding excerpt in Steiner’s book:

*Languages are wholly arbitrary sets of signals and conventionalized counters*… In certain civilisations, there come epochs in which syntax stiffens, in which the available resources of live perception and restatement wither. Words seem to go dead under the weight of sanctified usage; the frequency and sclerotic force of clichés, of unexamined similes, of worn tropes increases. Instead of acting as a living membrane, grammar and vocabulary become a barrier to new feeling. *A civilisation is imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches, or matches only at certain ritual, arbitrary points, the landscape of fact…* ‘Words, those guardians of meaning, are not immortal, they are not invulnerable’, wrote Adamov. (21-22, my emphasis)

Hugh’s words are especially interesting because, as McGrath points out, they can be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, it is possible to read this passage from the perspective that the Anglicised names are the ones that do not match the landscape of the
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present Gaelic Ireland. On the other hand, the other possible interpretation involves considering their landscape not the one of the Gaelic Ireland, but of an already Anglicised Ireland. This version (which I believe to be the one Friel wanted to transmit) leads to considering that this Gaelic Ireland is the idealisation that does not match the real landscape (*Brian Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama* 191). Although his passage, considered by Tony Corbett as “the core of the play” (29) definitely requires a further analysis that will be carried out later on, for now it can be regarded as one of the clearest references to *After Babel* in *Translations*.

Another important aspect of Steiner’s thesis that Friel adopted and included in *Translations* is the notion of language’s power not only to communicate, but also to conceal meaning or even to deceive the others. According to Steiner, “only a small portion of human discourse is nakedly veracious or informative in any monovalent, unqualified sense.” (240) Certainly, our very experience as human beings shows us that lying is an inalienable part of our speech. There are many different reasons for lying, for hiding certain things or for transmitting our thoughts or other people’s words in a deliberately inaccurate way. Moreover, it must be taken into account that concealing and dissimulating meaning is not necessarily negative; in fact, Steiner considers that this dimension of language is fundamental for human speech, saying that “the human capacity to utter falsehood, to lie, to negate what is the case, stands at the heart of speech and of the reciprocities between words and world. It may be that ‘truth’ is the more limited, the more special of the two conditions.” (224) Steiner also uses the expression “to ‘un-say’ the world” (228) in order to portray the power of human speech to know the truth of the world, face it and change it through language.

Again, *Translations* offers several references to Steiner’s ideas, and lies, falsehood and disinformation are present at several stages of the play. To begin with, Owen’s deliberate mistranslation of Lancey’s words about the Ordnance Survey in Act I is one of its most explicit representations. After this scene, Manus reproaches his brother for his deception:

MANUS: What sort of translation was that, Owen?
OWEN: Did I make a mess of it?
MANUS: You weren’t saying what Lancey was saying!
OWEN: ‘Uncertainty in meaning is incipient poetry’ – who said that?
MANUS: There was nothing uncertain about what Lancey said: it’s a bloody military operation, Owen! (Friel, *Plays One* 408)
Owen’s humorous response to his brother’s accusations is part of the creation of this character as a cheerful, carefree and witty one. At this early stage of the plot, Owen still does not realise the disastrous implications of the Enterprise in which he is involved, but his mistranslation shows that he was aware of the negative effect Lancey’s words would have on his audience. His linguistic deceit, then, appears as a means of avoiding what he considered unnecessary trouble, and it was a result of his good intentions towards his family and countrymen.

Other references to lies and falsehood in the play include, for instance, the name of Hugh’s favourite pub: Anna na mBreag’s, which is the Gaelic for “Anna of the Lies”. Furthermore, McGrath also makes reference to Jimmy Jack’s escape into the classical world of Homer’s epic as a representation of the “capacity of language to construct a world out of words.” (Brian Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama 43) Jimmy Jack, who is in his sixties, has spent so much time absorbed in a world of goddesses and heroes that he no longer seems to be part of the real world, to the point that, at the end of the play, he declares that he is betrothed to Pallas Athene. McGrath considers that, following Steiner’s study, “Jimmy Jack’s privatization of Homer is not an aberration of language but an exercise of its most ennobling power.” (43) A quote from After Babel follows and confirms this statement: “At every level, from brute camouflage to poetic vision, the linguistic capacity to conceal, misinform, leave ambiguous, hypothesize, invent is indispensable to the equilibrium of human consciousness and to the development of man in society.” (qtd. in McGrath 43) Self-deception is regarded here as a means of mental protection from the violent changes that especially colonial situations bring to people’s realities. Hence, Jimmy Jack’s escapism to the Homeric world is indeed a proof of the power of language to construct new worlds and realities.

Apart from Jimmy Jack, the character that is generally read as the embodiment of Steiner’s theory in Translations is Hugh. The hedge-schoolmaster who initially appears as a drunk, paltry old man is in fact one of the most articulate characters of the play. From the beginning, Hugh is painfully aware of the reality of the linguistic condition of Ireland in 1833. About Gaelic, he tells Yolland: “Yes, it is a rich language, Lieutenant, full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception – a syntax opulent with tomorrows. It is our response to mud cabins and a diet of potatoes; our only method of replying to… inevitabilities.” (Friel, Plays One 418-19) Hugh is probably the character who is most conscious of the reality that constitutes the obvious decay and close death of the Irish language, and he knows that blindly
clinging to it while either fighting or ignoring the inevitable linguistic changes brought by English (as his son Manus does, for instance) would only result in a language of myths, images and lies. Only a few lines before the fragment I have just quoted, Hugh says, also to Yolland: “You’ll find, sir, that certain cultures expend on their vocabularies and syntax acquisitive energies and ostentations entirely lacking on their material lives. I suppose you could call us a spiritual people.” (Friel, Plays One 419) These words (literally taken from Steiner) restate my previous statement – the “lacking on material lives” refers quite clearly to the mismatch produced when a language (in this case Gaelic) is no longer able to fulfil its communicative role.

The last of the essential ideas from After Babel that Friel dramatised in Translations is, precisely, that of translation. McGrath points out that “Steiner provided Friel with a thorough and contemporary theory of translation.” (Language, Myth and History 538) Helen Lojek goes further and writes that “For Steiner, as for Friel, ‘translation’ involves more than movement from one language to the other.” (85) This point of view is shared by virtually all the scholars who have analysed this play, as it is definitely one of the main ideas Friel tried to convey through it. A simple reading of the title will most likely lead to the creation of a link between it and the linguistic, factual translation of the place-names that occurs as a result of the Ordnance Survey. Indeed, this process provides the most obvious example of a translation in the play, but it is absolutely not the only one. The Ordnance Survey is but a metaphor for all the translations in the play that go beyond the linguistic dimension – these are of course linguistic, but also geographical, cultural, historical, communicative and even personal.

Helping Friel to add all those meanings to the idea of translation was probably the most perceptible trait of Steiner’s influence in the creation of this play. Nevertheless, we have seen that both Translations and Brian Friel himself owe much to the American critic and philosopher. It is not an exaggeration to assume that there would not have been a Translations without an After Babel, and if there were, it would have been, without a doubt, substantially different from the play the world knows and acclaims today.

4.2 Translating the Irish

The sappers have already mapped most of the area. Yolland’s official task, which Owen is now doing, is to take each of the Gaelic names – every hill, stream, rock, even every patch of ground which possessed its own distinctive Irish name –
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...and Anglicize it, either by changing it into its approximate English sound or by translating it into English words. For example, a Gaelic name like Cnoc Ban could become Knockban or – directly translated – Fair Hill. These standardized names were entered into the Name-Book, and when the new maps appeared they contained all these new Anglicized names. (Friel, Plays One 409)

The fragment quoted belongs to Friel’s annotations to the very beginning of Act II, where the actual remapping starts to be carried out by Owen and Yolland. It has already been mentioned that the Ordnance Survey, the pillar that supports Translations’ storyline, is but a metaphor of the cultural and linguistic invasion of the British in 19th century Ireland, with the subsequent decline of the Irish language. This section will focus on exploring the play’s representation of the process and the consequences of this incursion in both the linguistic and the socio-cultural dimensions from a postcolonial point of view.

In the first place, I believe a complementary description of the methods used to rename the country (apart from the one provided above) will be helpful in order to understand this process. Fortunately, Friel included such a scene in Translations:

YOLLAND: Bun na hAbbhann.
OWEN: That’s better. Bun is the Irish word for bottom. And Abha means river. So it’s literally the mouth of the river.
YOLLAND: Let’s leave it alone. There’s no English equivalent for a sound like that.
OWEN: What is it called in the church registry? (…)
YOLLAND: Let’s see… Banowen.
OWEN: That’s wrong. (Consults text.) The list of freeholders calls it Owenmore – that’s completely wrong: Owenmore’s the big river at the west end of the parish. (…) I suppose we could Anglicize it to Bunowen; but somehow that’s neither fish nor flesh. (…)
YOLLAND: I give up.
OWEN: (At map) Back to the principles. What are we trying to do?
YOLLAND: Good question.
OWEN: We are trying to denominate and at the same time describe that tiny area of soggy, rocky, sandy ground where that little stream enters the sea, an area known locally as Bun na hAbbhann… Burnfoot! What about Burnfoot?
YOLLAND: (Indifferently) Good, Roland, Burnfoot’s good. (…)
OWEN: Are you happy with that?
YOLLAND: Yes.
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OWEN: Burnfoot it is then. (*He makes the entry into the Name-Book.*) Bun na hAbbann – B-u-r-n- (*Plays One 410*)

Although we must always take into account that *Translations* is not a history play (and therefore that historical inaccuracies and artistic licenses are not uncommon), this scene between Owen and Yolland is should be regarded as a quite accurate depiction of how the Ordnance Survey was carried out. Owen’s selection of a new name for Bun na hAbbann follows the description of the process that both Friel’s annotations and historical sources offer, but still, some critics do not hesitate to consider this method as “arbitrary” (McGrath, *Brian Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama* 189). What this scene proves is, above anything else, that the new place-names could not expect to be good substitutes for the ones they were replacing: sometimes their meaning was totally changed, many times they carried a different sound and they always failed to preserve their original significance.

Again, an especially appropriate quotation from *After Babel* sheds light on this topic. Speaking of metaphors (such as the one the Ordnance Survey is), Steiner says that they “are new mappings of the world, they reorganize our habitation in reality.” (23) McGrath agrees with this statement, and adds: “In *Translations* the remapping of Ireland amounts to nothing less than a reorganization of reality for the Irish.” (*Brian Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama* 189) Another scene from the play portrays this in a very precise way:

OWEN: Do you know where the priest lives?
HUGH: At Lis na Muc, over near…
OWEN: No, he doesn’t. Lis na Muc, the Fort of Pigs, has become Swinefort. (*Now turning the pages of the Name-Book – a page per name.*) And to get to Swinefort you pass through Greencastle and Fair Head and Strandhill and Gort and Whiteplains. And the new school isn’t at Poll na gCaorach – it’s at Sheepsrock. Will you be able to find your way? (*Friel, Plays One 418*)

What has happened here is not a simple change in the names. Owen’s “no, he doesn’t” is more than a way of correcting his father – or rather, of forcing him to become acquainted with their new landscape – it implies that, in fact, the priest *no longer* lives in Lis na Muc, because that place no longer exists. The same happens with the location of the new school: it is not at Poll na gCaorach, now it is at a place called Sheepsrock. With changes such as these being made throughout the whole country, it is easy to understand how Steiner and McGrath
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refer to the metaphors and, more specifically, to the Ordnance Survey as a means of reorganising reality.

Going back to Owen and Yolland’s scene, it also provides us with one of Brian Friel’s main concerns regarding language, which constitutes one of the main themes of this play: the impossibility of translation. Apart from its extralinguistic connotations, the term “translation” seems to be difficult to describe, even from a purely linguistic perspective. What does it mean exactly to translate? I believe it is safe to assume that Friel interprets the term beyond the classical definition of ‘expressing the same in another language’, and referring to this process as “interpretation within a single language, and ultimately to communication and the shaping of meaning in general” (Lojek 85) probably gets us closer to Friel’s understanding of it. Clarkson Holstein offers a similar reading of the term, and notes that “translating is not merely substituting one term for another.” (6) Seamus Deane indicates that “translation is interpretation.” (qtd. in Clarkson Holstein 6) and Jacques Derrida goes further on the topic, pointing out that “for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of transformation… We will never have, and in fact never had, any ‘transfer’ of pure signified – from one language to another, or within one language.” (qtd. in Clarkson Holstein 6) It could be said, then, that the act of translation always implies a movement – not a physical one, indeed, but one that reflects on the physical dimension, as it happened with the place-names that had already been translated by Owen and the British: they ceased to exist in one place and were moved elsewhere.

However, as I have already mentioned, translations are not limited to the realm of the linguistic, and Friel’s play offers a perfect portrayal of the so-called extralinguistic implications of translating a whole country. A few pages back, in the brief explanation I gave about the real Ordnance Survey, I said that this enterprise was only the first step in the British Government’s plan of organising its control over Ireland, and that they needed this massive renaming in order to understand the names of the places of which they were going to be in charge. As the Ordnance Survey itself, this first movement was anything but harmless: as Clarkson Holstein states: “Mapping any territory lays claim to it, stamps it as one’s own. The occupiers must know the land they occupy, and they know it by ‘translating’ it (…) from the unfamiliar to the familiar… It is not simply different words: the words redefine, re-limit the landscape.” (1-2) The goal of the Ordnance Survey was, precisely, to redefine the landscape according to the perspective and the needs of the British Government.
What this remapping implies and what Lancey’s euphemistic explanation of the Survey hardly manages to hide is a crystal clear process of colonialism. Ireland had been struggling against foreign rule since the arrival of the Normans in the 12th century, and since then, the history of the country has been one of continuous fight for independence and violent repression on the part of the colonisers. Even nowadays, the situation of the country is still highly controversial: from the time in which the Anglo-Irish Treaty\(^2\) was signed (1921), Northern Ireland (where Friel was born) has been marked by constant episodes of violence that have made the territory deeply unstable. On the other hand, the rest of Ireland did not become a fully independent country until 1949. Thus, in 1833, when *Translations* takes place, Ireland was still part of the United Kingdom; its situation was that of a colony, and this fact must be taken into consideration when analyzing the play not only as a historical background, but also as one of the main pillars that support the construction of the plot.

While George Steiner’s approach was crucial in order to understand the linguistic component of the notion of translation, Homi Bhabha’s theories on postcolonialism can complete the significance of the term in the extralinguistic dimension. As in Steiner’s linguistics, the idea of translation is central in Bhabha’s postcolonial theory. His work revolves around the concept of ‘hybridity’, referring to the inevitable degree of fusion that takes place in colonial situations between the culture of the invader and that of the invaded. “For Bhabha”, says McGrath “performative hybrid enunciations from the margins of colonial cultures are acts of translation, particularly translations of a native past into a cosmopolitan present and translations between cultures.” (*Brian Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama* 182) This is precisely the other half of the meaning of this play’s title: translations do not occur exclusively in language, but also between individuals and cultures, and the dramatic action in *Translations* deals with both types of translations equally.

Furthermore, Bhabha is also aware of the impossibility of translation that Friel represents in this play, both linguistic and cultural. According to him, it is not only that cultures are doomed to systematically misunderstand (or rather mistranslate) each other, but

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\(^2\) The Anglo-Irish Treaty put an end to the Irish War of Independence between the United Kingdom and Ireland (1919-1921). It was signed on 6 December 1921 by representatives of the two factions. The conditions of the treaty included that the six provinces of the North-East of Ireland (also known as the Ulster) would have the option to decide whether they wanted to become part of the Republic or continue to belong to the United Kingdom, and in December 1922, it was decided that Northern Ireland would be part of the latter. This decision was the starting point of a bloody conflict between the inhabitants of the provinces (some of whom, namely the Catholic minority, wanted to join the Free State) that lasted throughout the whole 20th century and that still remains in present day.
also that there will always be untranslatable residues in all their acts of communication (McGrath, Brian Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama 183). Although this futility is constantly present throughout the play, it finds its most eloquent representation in the character of Yolland, the British Hibernophile who wants to learn Irish and stay in the country forever. In spite of his good intentions and his genuine love for Ireland, he is constantly rejected by the people of Baile Beag, and his awareness of the invisible wall that separates his world from theirs is expressed in many occasions. For instance, when he is working with Owen in the selection of new place-names, he says: “Even if I did speak Irish, I’d always be an outsider here, wouldn’t I? I may learn the password but the language of the tribe will always elude me, won’t it? The private core will always be… hermetic, won’t it?” (Friel, Plays One 416)

What Yolland is expressing at this point and in just a few words is exactly what Bhabha and Friel mean when they consider that full cultural translation is impossible. If Yolland had been able to master Irish and spend the rest of his life in Baile Beag, living and working like any of the natives, it is hard to believe that the whole village would have accepted him. They might have got used to his presence (in fact, some of the citizens already assume his presence there at the time of the play and are not hostile towards him), but the distance between getting used to him and accepting or, even more, assimilating him in the community, is vast. His disappearance and presumable murder at the end of the play constitute a sad proof of this hypothesis.

Yolland’s impossibility of ‘translating himself’ into Ireland is, in summary, one of the most explicit representations of Friel’s thoughts on translation between cultures. The untranslatable residue Bhabha speaks of comes to live in Yolland’s awareness of himself as an eternal outsider and, from the linguistic perspective, in his “there’s no English equivalent for a sound like that.” (Friel, Plays One 410) The lack of equivalence in both linguistic and cultural terms is the main obstacle for the creation of “cross-cultural identities” (McGrath, Brian Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama 187), as well as the principal reason for the unavoidable cultural clash between civilisations in all colonial situations. Being language such an essential part of people’s individual and social identities, it seems impossible indeed to get rid of the totality of the cultural input and, as a result, translate oneself into another culture.

Another representation of the colonial background of Translations lies in the duality expressed by Yolland and Lancey. To a certain extent, both characters are stereotypical: as I said before, Yolland is the foreign Hibernophile who holds a highly idealized view of Ireland...
as a bucolic paradise. When discussing the possibility of settling in the country with Owen, saying that “it’s really heavenly” (Friel, *Plays One* 414), his colleague responds with annoyance: “For God’s sake! The first hot summer in fifty years and you think it’s Eden. Don’t be such a bloody romantic.” (414) Yolland’s romanticised perspective is the complete opposite of Lancey’s. He is not only “the Englishman who expects all foreigners to speak English” (Corbett 24), but also the personification of the civiliser, paternalistic attitude that was adopted by many coloniser enterprises in order to hide and justify (to the world and maybe to themselves as well) their true purposes. His first attempt to communicate with his Irish audience at the hedge-school is quite illustrative:

LANCEY: (...) 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 – (...)

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 – (Friel, *Plays One* 405-6)

The high levels of comicality of this scene must not be regarded as an attempt on the part of the playwright to mitigate the insulting effect of Lancey’s attitude, but actually as a means of drawing even more attention to it. This humorous exaggeration of the clichéd character Lancey is constitutes, as a matter of fact, a very accurate depiction of what colonialism as a whole is about: considering the invaded as ignorant, underdeveloped, rustic people that need to be civilised. This scene from *Translations* shows that Lancey quickly goes from trying to make his speech understandable to a group of people (that cover a wide range of ages) who do not share his language to subconsciously thinking of them as uneducated peasants who do not even know what a map is.

Ironically enough, Captain Lancey, who “speaks – to his own admission – only English” and “voiced some surprise that we did not speak his language” (Friel, *Plays One* 399) suffers from the cultural limitations of considering “all foreign languages equal and by definition inferior.” (Clarkson Holstein 5) Whereas he takes pride in speaking only English
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and looks down on the rustic population of Baile Beag, these people are actually able to speak more languages apart from theirs: some of them know English, such as Hugh or Manus, and the students of the hedge-school are being taught Latin and Greek as well.

When creating such a stereotypical character, Friel’s intention may have been making the features and attitudes regarding colonialism as explicit as possible. Apart from Lancey’s, another relatively clichéd position is that of Manus. When he says to Yolland: “I understand the Lanceys perfectly but people like you puzzle me.” (Friel, Plays One 412), he is clearly embodying the traditional perspective of the subaltern: regarding all the members of the invading power as equally threatening to their culture, and subsequently adopting harshness as the base attitude for dealing with them. As Scott Boltwood puts it, Yolland represents “the challenge to Irish society posed by benevolent Englishness.” (165) A challenge is precisely what Yolland represents for Manus: his kindness and deep respect for his country and culture force him to reconsider one of the pillars that sustain his view of reality, in spite of his general reluctance towards any kind of change.

Yolland, Lancey and Manus are, then, the three main personifications of any process of colonisation. However, apart from the previously mentioned symbol of the impossibility of cultural translation, Yolland’s disappearance can also be interpreted as a metaphor of the traditional result of these processes. Boltwood indicates that “Friel’s play cannot accommodate a benevolent Englishman” (166) – not only Translations, but also colonial and, more specifically, Irish history has proved that the Yollands (if any) are more often than not overwhelmed by the Lanceys, and Friel’s play dramatises this tendency. From this point of view, Translations could be read as a quite realistic allegory of the dreadful social and linguistic consequences of colonialism.

4.2.1 Language and politics

At the time Translations was produced, Friel wrote: “The play has to do with language and only with language. And if it becomes overwhelmed by that political element… it is lost.” (qtd. in Corbett 20) However, using this statement as a starting point, it is necessary to wonder to what extent it is possible to write a play about the death of a language in a colony such as this one while completely avoiding the political dimension. Friel’s words are most likely a response to the readings critics were making of his play: directly after it was staged
and published, the critics focused almost exclusively on exploring the political implications of the story, considering the linguistic element secondary or even ignoring it altogether. Of course, studies such as these could not possibly be expected to offer an in-depth analysis of the play, lacking any reference to its actual main theme, but at the same time, *Translations* cannot be considered an exclusively linguistic play either.

This is mainly because, as it was explained in the section dealing with the influence of Steiner in this production, the postmodernist view of language that Friel adopted for the creation of this play involves considering language not just as a part of culture, but as real culture. The language produced by a concrete civilisation cannot be separated from its social, historical and ideological or political circumstances, and *Translations* provides a flawless representation of this. Moreover, Corbett indicates that “he (Friel) echoes many writers on post-colonialism who see language as a means of both colonisation and subjugation.” (22) This is definitely true, as *Translations* is a play that clearly depicts this main feature of all colonial processes: the power of a linguistic invasion.

The history of colonisation in Ireland was, as I previously mentioned, an extremely long one, and of course, the linguistic consequences of several centuries of foreign hegemony were disastrous. From the 14th century onwards, the British Government started to pass regular legislation against the use of Irish – in 1366, the Statutes of Kilkenny forbade the English settlers to marry Irish people or use their language; during the reign of King James I a large number of English landowners was sent to Ireland, which led to the consideration of English as a language of power, whereas Gaelic belonged to the peasants who worked for them. In the 17th century, the introduction of the Penal Laws (which were briefly described some pages back) also had a deeply negative effect on the status and public presence of Irish. Although the laws were essentially against Catholics, most of them were Irish-speakers, so banning them from any public and educational activity indirectly meant doing the same to the Irish language (Corbett 21). These are only some examples of the British Government’s ultimate aim over the course of the centuries: separating the language of the Irish from the political power, that their language, English, would hold. The result of these centuries of linguistic imposition is sadly well-known by all of us: the precarious, near-death state of Irish in present days.

The year 1833 is both the result of such inheritance and another symbol of the linguistic domination of the British: it is the time in which the new educational system was to
be introduced, and of course, the year of the beginning of the Ordnance Survey. *Translations’*
setting is, then, a highly important one from the political and postcolonial point of view. Helen Lojek describes the Survey as “part of a deliberate effort to wipe out Irish culture (and therefore Irish cohesiveness and power) by wiping out the Irish language.” (84) For the English, it was, as a matter of fact, another way of increasing their cultural and military power in Ireland through the appropriation of one of the last vestiges of the lost glory of their language: their place-names.

### 4.2.2 Names

One of the main premises of language according to postmodernism described the notion that human thought is completely codified by language (or simply that it *is* language), and Heidegger’s quote in the programme of the first staging of *Translations* suggested that it is not humans who speak language, but the opposite. These two elements are but a means of exemplifying what our experience eventually reveals to every single one of us: that language has a crucial role in the development of both our individual and cultural identities. In fact, implying that language is part of our identity is not quite accurate; the relationship is most likely reciprocal: language helps us to construct our identity, and we do it through language. Linguistic and also psychological studies carried out through time have proved that language is in the roots of our personality and omnipresent in all its stages of development through our lives – language is, in conclusion, an inseparable part of ourselves.

One of the most determining ways in which language affects our development as individuals is through names. The power that a name has over a person is very similar to the power of language itself: from the very moment someone is born, their name constitutes one of the first (if not the first) signs of their identity. Names become our most important means of identification, especially during the first years of life, when the whole sense of identity and of consciousness of the ‘self’ starts to develop. At the same time, names also play a big part in how we project ourselves to the others; they are like labels that other people use to identify us.

A brief reference to Brian Friel’s biographical data will probably justify at least part of his interest in names and their role in the creation of identity. He was born in 1929, but the exact date is hard to determine: some administrative agencies have listed January 9 as the day of his birth, whereas others register the date of his baptism, January 10. Apart from his birth
date, his name is also an object of confusion: the General Register Office in Belfast, following the Protestant Bureaucracy’s discouragement of registering ‘Gaelic’ names at the time of Friel’s birth, listed him as Bernard Patrick Friel, whereas in the parish registry his name appears as Brian Patrick O’Friel. (McGrath, Brian Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama 14-15) In the end, the playwright opted for a hybrid version of both names. This decision may be interpreted as an attempt to come to terms with both sides of his identity, which was split into two pieces from the very moment he was born by a bureaucratic system controlled by political forces.

Clarkson Holstein indicates that the power of naming is tantamount to “the entitlement to identify and designate ourselves and that which we believe belongs to us.” (1) As we have seen, Brian Friel himself is a living example of how names can shape anybody’s existence. Therefore, Owen’s “Owen – Roland – what the hell. It’s only a name. It’s the same me, isn’t it?” (Friel, Plays One 408) should be read as a clear underestimation the power of names in the creation of identity. The same happens with the Ordnance Survey: his whole attitude towards it until the very end of the play corresponds with what can be perceived from the following scene:

YOLLAND: He [Hugh] knows what’s happening.  
OWEN: What is happening?  
YOLLAND: I’m not sure. But I’m concerned about my part in it. It’s an eviction of sorts.  
OWEN: We’re making a six-inch map of the country. Is there something sinister in that?  
YOLLAND: Not in –  
OWEN: And we’re taking place-names that are riddled with confusion and –  
YOLLAND: Who’s confused? Are the people confused?  
OWEN: – and we’re standardizing those names as accurately and as sensitively as we can. (Friel, Plays One 419)

Owen’s interaction with Yolland (who, in contrast, from the beginning is especially conscious about the task they are carrying out) shows the former’s naïveté concerning the Survey – either he fails to see the real (and rather obvious) purpose behind it or he does see it but decides to overlook it altogether. When Yolland says that “you cannot rename a whole country overnight” (Friel, Plays One 411) he is not only referring to the haste that Lancey is expecting from them, but more importantly, to the fact that all names hold a unique value. As
such, it cannot be expected to change them massively in such a short period of time and believe that nothing is going to be affected as a result.

However, something is indeed affected. Corbett writes that “in *Translations*, the country is renamed in English, inserting a discourse of difference between the people and their localities.” (19) Richard Pine refers to “a ‘lost centre’ – a place where man was once at home, in and with language, but from which he has become displaced.” (183, my emphasis) The term ‘displacement’ is essential for understanding the personal and social consequences that the Ordnance Survey (as a metaphor of any process of colonisation through linguistic imposition) has in the inhabitants of Baile Beag. The effect of such projects, that Kenyan writer and essayist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’ has called “cultural bomb”, is described by him as it follows: “The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.” (qtd. in Clarkson Holstein 5) Effectively, the cultural bomb known as the Ordnance Survey aims directly to the destruction of names, and indirectly to the rest of the elements mentioned by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’.

The quotation that was previously used to illustrate the additional changes in the reality of the Irish produced by the remapping of the country is quite enlightening at this point as well. The house of the priest was no longer where Hugh thought it was, because that place has been erased – or rather displaced – by the translation of the place-names. In the case of the Ordnance Survey, changing the names of the places implies remodelling and reorganising their whole existence to the extent that people will no longer be able to understand them. Being unable to understand the name of the place where you live, how can you expect to consider it the part of yourself it used to be? A situation such as this equals to being thrown into a new, unknown and hostile world in which you are forced to reconstruct your whole identity.

### 4.2.3 Place and memory

At the end of *Translations*, Hugh says this to Owen: “it is not the literal past, the ‘facts of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language (…). We must never cease renewing those images; because once we do, we fossilize.” (Friel, *Plays One* 445) According to F. C. McGrath, the playwright “dissolves the traditional distinction between fact
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and fiction. For Friel, facts themselves are factitious.” (Brian Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama 38) He is aware of the implications of the factual inaccuracy of memory (38), individual or collective, and although he acknowledges the creative power of fiction and lies (as it was explained in previous sections), he is also conscious of the dangers of idolising those fictions. In fact, it may well be that he is wary of building absolute truths from fictions precisely because he is deeply aware of its risks in the long run.

Friel’s thesis directly implies that collective, national memory can become a slave of those old stories. In Translations, this memory is represented by the local place-names. Although they are of course a cultural symbol of Baile Beag, Clarkson Holstein reminds us that “they have not existed forever.” (4) Paradoxically, Yolland’s impulse to protect them from being anglicised relates more to that of the villagers than to Owen’s or Hugh’s. Owen, however, considers that his colleague is, again, idealising the place, and decides to explain him the origin of one of the names they are standardising:

OWEN: (…) And we call this crossroads Tobair Vree. And why do we call it Tobair Vree? I’ll tell you why. Tobair means a well. But what does Vree mean? It’s a corruption of Brian – (Gaelic pronunciation) Brian – an erosion of Tobair Bhriain. Because a hundred-and-fifty years ago there used to be a well there, not at the crossroads, mind you – that would be too simple – but in a field close to the crossroads. And an old man called Brian, whose face was disfigured by an enormous growth, got it into his head that the water in the well was blessed; and every day for seven months he went there and bathed his face in it. But the growth didn’t go away; and one morning Brian was found drowned in that well. And ever since that the crossroads is known as Tobair Vree – even though the well has long since dried up.” (Friel, Plays One 420)

As with Lancey’s comical way of communicating with the people at the hedge-school, the absurdity behind the story of the name Tobair Vree works as a means of amplifying the effect of the scene. This shows that place-names not only have not existed forever, but also that some of them are actually rather arbitrary, even ridiculous. However, there is absolutely nothing wrong with this place-name in itself: it fulfils its role of signalling a particular place and the people of Baile Beag recognise it perfectly.

The problem arises when this (or any other) name is sort of sanctified, elevated to the category of ‘symbol of our ancient national memory’. A direct consequence of this outlook is
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exactly what Friel wants to express when he makes Hugh say: “it can happen than a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of… fact.” (Friel, *Plays One* 419) Even given the case that the physical landscape had not changed at all through time, society and civilisation definitely have, and so has the “landscape of fact”. What Friel is trying to reflect through Hugh’s words is the above-mentioned danger of blindly clinging to the old in such a tight way that it becomes a hindrance for the natural advance of society.

Nevertheless, it is very important to note that this quote does not imply that Brian Friel believes that the Irish should surrender to the British and let them anglicise their place-names as a symbol of progress. This is definitely not the case, because colonialism can never be labelled as “natural advance of society”. The Ordnance Survey involves a linguistic and military invasion, and *Translations*’ message is clearly of condemnation towards this enterprise. At the beginning of the play, Maire, quoting Daniel O’Connell³, says: “The old language is a barrier to modern progress.” (Friel, *Plays One* 400) This quotation must be read with certain scepticism: whereas Friel is against the idea of a culture constantly looking back towards their past and refusing to evolve, he can never justify the act of renouncing to the cultural background for the sake of ‘progress’. In an interview, he said that he had “no nostalgia for that time” (qtd. in Corbett 30), referring to the alleged “pre-British Eden” Ireland constituted for some groups of people. He also added that “one should look back on the process of history with some kind of coolness.” (30). Hence, in this play Friel tries to achieve a balanced position between the two extremes described above. For him, closing our eyes to the past is as harmful as closing them to the future.

In terms of the relationship between place and memory, fact and fiction and past and present in *Translations*, Scott Boltwood makes a reference to “readings that treat Baile Beag prior to the arrival of English as ‘a linguistic Eden’.” (154) According to him, “Friel represents a vestigial Gaelic culture which has effectively died well before the English invasion we witness in the drama.” (155) Although this topic may be regarded as slightly controversial, Boltwood’s theory finds an important support in the following excerpt from the play:

³ Daniel O’Connell (1775-1847) was an Irish politician who defended the rights of Catholics. He campaigned for the repeal of the Act of Union, a law passed by the British Government which involved the merging of the Parliaments of the United Kingdom and Ireland. He is considered as one of the most important figures in the long fight for Irish independence and popularly known as ‘The Liberator’.
Grania (or Gráinne) is a mythological figure, the daughter of a High King of Ireland, who appears in the legends of the Fenian Cycle. Diarmuid (Diarmuid Ua Duibhne) is the Fianna warrior with whom she eloped after being betrothed to a great military leader against her will. Both Grania and Diarmuid are very well-known characters of the Irish mythological tradition, the tradition that Manus is so keen on protecting against any foreign influence. However, his oblique “ah” to Jimmy Jack’s reference shows that he does not know who Grania is, that he does not really care and that he probably thinks that the old man is talking his usual nonsense again.

This quote is, of course, merely anecdotic, but it reflects the paradox that I have just mentioned: if not even Manus, an educated man, a teacher and a fierce defender of Irish culture, knows nothing about (and seems uninterested in) the country’s extremely rich literary tradition, then who should be expected to preserve it? Furthermore, Boltwood also points that knowing who Grania is only implies “a superficial familiarity with Irish folklore.” (157), and in fact, Grania was not a goddess, as Jimmy Jack says: she was always portrayed and described as a human.

This has led Boltwood and other scholars to consider that the Gaelic tradition was not abandoned “through foreign compulsion, but through native indifference.” (158) The origin of this ‘indifference’ may not necessarily be a chronic disinterest in the country’s folklore, but simply another sign of the advance of civilisation through time. Grania and Diarmuid have belonged to the memory of the country for centuries, and by mentioning them and making Manus disregard their reference, Friel is, again, presenting the core of the conflict between moving back or forward: would Manus be ‘more Irish’ if he knew about Grania? Would that make him more appropriate for standing against the British invasion? Should he only speak Irish and take pride on it like Lancey does with English? In Translations, Friel does not provide answers to these hypothetical questions because, as I said before, he knows well that

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4 The Fenian Cycle is a compilation of myths and legends that narrate the life and deeds of the hero Fionn mac Cumhaill, leader of the Fianna warriors. It is one of the main mythological cycles in Irish literature.
living in the memory of the place and separating place and memory are equally threatening for the individual and the collective culture.

4.2.4 The three Irelands

A few pages back, Lancey and Yolland were interpreted as stereotypes, or rather as personifications of the most common forces acting in colonial processes. Similarly, I believe that an analogous reading of Hugh and his two sons, Manus and Owen, as symbols of Ireland is not only possible, but also appropriate for a deeper understanding of these characters and also of *Translations* as a whole. They embody the three main ways of interpreting the position of Ireland in the colonial conflict, and their attitudes and actions during the play are very much linked to these possible perspectives.

Firstly, Manus is an icon of the Gaelic, pre-British Ireland. Although most characterological analyses such as this one tend to focus solely on Hugh and Owen, Manus is easily identifiable as a third image of Ireland – the one that corresponds to the local vision of any interference from the outside (particularly from the United Kingdom) as a threat to the perfect *status quo* of the country. Manus is portrayed as Owen’s antithesis, and McGrath sees this opposition reflected in their different translations of Lancey’s speech about the Ordnance Survey. For him, Manus reads the Captain’s words “in light of Ireland’s past experience with England perceived from the Gaelic point of view.” (*Brian Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama* 184) Manus is the stereotype of colonised native who knows how to deal with ‘the Lanceys’ but not with ‘the Yollands’, and his deliberate rudeness towards the latter is a result of his experience with probably too many ‘Lanceys’.

Richard Pine’s interpretation of the hedge-school system can provide another reading of Manus in relation not to the Ordnance Survey, but to the new school system that is about to be introduced. He writes that “the hedge-school in itself is symbolic of a flight from normality, a culture sheltering out of doors from everything which would allow it to be ‘civilised’.” (189) In this sense, Manus says that he will not apply for the position of a teacher in the new schools in order not to compete with his father. However, it can also be implied that, apart from that reason (which is not necessarily a lie), he does not apply for the post simply because he does not want to do it. He was born into a family of hedge-schoolmasters and does not
wish to be dragged out of the world he is familiar with and become part of the system implanted by the country he loathes.

At the end of the play, fearing that he will be accused of Yolland’s disappearance, Manus leaves Baile Beag with the intention of maintaining his way of life. In other words, Manus prioritises the act of carrying on with the life that he already knows over the attachment to the town in which he was born and bred. This decision can be interpreted as a representation of the Ireland that rejects any kind of change, especially if brought from the outside, and obviously if it is part of a clear cultural invasion such as the one that is being carried out at Baile Beag. Manus is, using my previous metaphor, the one who looks back to the past while closing his eyes to the future.

Owen, Manus’s younger brother, returns to Baile Beag after six years working for the British. Declan Kiberd describes Owen as “by far the most complex character onstage” (qtd. in Boltwood 152), and Seamus Deane considers him as an avatar of “the new Ireland.” (qtd. in Boltwood 152) If we consider that Manus represents ‘the old Ireland’, Owen definitely represents ‘the new’. His statement: “My job is to translate the quaint, archaic tongue you people persist in speaking into the King’s good English” (Friel, Plays One 404) is a crystal clear demonstration of his attitude towards Irish and the old world as a whole – rejection, disdain and frustration.

From the beginning, Owens fails to understand the implications of the Ordnance Survey, which is depicted in almost all his interactions with Yolland. The Lieutenant’s bucolic vision of Ireland is the complete opposite of Owen’s; the latter accuses the former more than once of being a romantic and constantly tries to demythologise his perspective. For instance, Owen’s explanation of the triviality of the story behind the name ‘Tobair Vree’ has already been mentioned. He also indicates him that living in Baile Beag is much harder than he imagines: “You wouldn’t survive a mild winter here” (Friel, Plays One 414), and reminds him that it is highly possible that the villagers will never accept him.

Paradoxically, while Owen keeps reprimanding Yolland for being too idealistic, his own naïveté is pointed out by most critics. Remarks such as “uncertainty in meaning is incipient poetry” or “it’s only a name” (Friel, Plays One 414) show that he is incapable of imagining both the real intentions behind his job and its consequences. He believes he is actually doing the people of Baile Beag a favour by standardising their place-names and
making them less confusing, when in fact, they are not confusing for anyone, as Yolland reminds him.

Eventually, however, Lancey’s threats about what will happen to Baile Beag if Yolland is not found makes him realise the true nature of what he has been doing all along, and as Boltwood writes, he “unwittingly becomes ‘most fully the victim’ of cultural forces beyond his control or his ken.” (153) Following this interpretation of the character, Pine considers Owen as “the instrument of his own tribe’s destruction, working through the medium of linguistic distortion.” (226) His ‘moment of recognition’ is represented in the following scene:


(OWEN snatches the book from HUGH.)

OWEN: I’ll take that. (In apology.) It’s only a catalogue of names.

HUGH: I know what it is.

OWEN: A mistake – my mistake – nothing to do with us. (Friel, Plays One 444)

By calling the Name-Book he has been working in ‘a mistake’, Owen has become fully aware of the reality of his enterprise. His categorical “I know where I live” (Friel, Plays One 445) before going to Doalty’s (with the implied idea of joining the resistance against the British) is a proof of his final resolution: protecting his culture against the invaders.

In the end, his conclusion is not all that different from his brother’s: both of them oppose the coloniser, although in different ways and for different reasons. Nevertheless, Owen is still essentially dissimilar from Manus in the sense that he does not reject progress. His decision to fight the British does not change the fact that he wishes his country to move on – he is still the ‘new Ireland’, but an Ireland powerful enough to decide on its own path without the intervention of the United Kingdom.

Finally, Hugh, the hedge-schoolmaster, is often regarded as the play’s greatest representative of Friel’s views of language, as well as his “most articulate spokesman for Steiner’s insights.” (McGrath, Brian Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama 43) His speech is characterised by either paraphrasing or literally quoting lines and fragments from After Babel. He is also widely read as a flexible, tolerant and ambivalent character that “skillfully transcends the cultural limitations of both his sons.” (Boltwood 153) Indeed, Hugh’s most
important personal trait is his ability to accept both the past and the future, and he tries to accommodate the two into his vital and cultural experience.

Another important element regarding Hugh is his position as a hedge-schoolmaster and what he teaches. I am referring particularly to Latin and Greek, two languages in which he is fluent and that he insists on transmitting to his students. Although any kind of linguistic knowledge is always a sign of cultural enrichment (as it was stated when opposing Lacey’s pride of speaking only English with the people from Baile Beag, who spoke more than one language), Corbett indicates that “the Greek and Latin in the play are not just an indication of the level of learning of the inhabitants of Ballybeg (...). They are also dead languages.” Ironically, Hugh “denigrates English as the language of commerce, ignoring the fact that his Latin and Greek are almost useless for communication with the living.” (30) Moreover, Boltwood considers that “Latin and Greek are learned to the exclusion of Irish” (156), since Hugh constantly introduces words from these languages in his speech instead of using the Gaelic ones, and his interest in etymology is aimed at achieving a deeper knowledge of Latin, not of Irish. Maire’s eager “I don’t want Latin. I don’t want Greek. I want English.” (Friel, Plays One 400) shows her frustration for being taught languages that, pragmatically speaking, will never be useful to her, whereas her master initially refuses to provide her with the key to her desired new, better life in America: English.

Hugh embodies, to some extent, the conflict of an Ireland that was stripped of its cultural identity by centuries of foreign rule – now this Ireland can hardly recognise itself in the old Celtic tradition, and obviously rejects becoming part of the British one. Feeling culturally empty, Ireland decided to adopt Latin and Greek, symbols of the two main origins of European civilisation, as its own. At some point, Hugh says to Yolland: “Wordsworth?... No. I’m afraid we’re not familiar with your literature, Lieutenant. We feel closer to the warm Mediterranean. We tend to overlook your island.” (Friel, Plays One 417) With these words, Hugh is basically implying that he (and the Ireland he represents) prefers to master long-dead languages to be acquainted with the civilisation of the British.

However, as the action of the play advances, Hugh starts to realise that the English invasion is inevitable, and instead of running away like Manus, or violently opposing to it like Owen, he decides that “accepting the need for new place-names, for a new way of seeing the familiar” (Pine 227) is the wisest possible strategy. Hugh, like Friel, does not show nostalgia for the old tradition, nor does he share Manus’s attachment to the hedge-school, and although
he looks down on English, he does not fight against it like Owen, but instead accepts the establishment of the new school system and applies for joining it. As he says to his younger son: “To remember everything is a form of madness.” (Friel, *Plays One* 445) – being unable to allow change, whether we like it or not, can be more harmful for oneself than for anyone else.

This attitude may indeed make Hugh be read as a volatile character, but Richard Pine prefers to interpret the old hedge-schoolmaster as a “divided being”. Speaking of him and Owen, Pine says that they “stand as figures representative of their cultures, on the eve of irreversible change in their societies (...). Each in his own way discovers the truth and the danger of standing at the threshold, in the gap, and what it means to become a divided being.” (191) Like Friel, he is divided between conflicting cultural discourses, and his attitude towards this fact also mirrors that of the playwright. At the end of the play, Hugh finally accepts to teach Maire English, and in 1980, Friel said, about the growing presence of English in Irish education: “There is no possibility of escaping from this. We must accept this.” (qtd. in McGrath, *Brain Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama* 194). This fatalistic vision of the future of Irish Friel and Hugh share dominates the whole body of *Translations*, and its ending, full of uncertainty and hopelessness for the Irish, serves as a representation of what the dramatist expected from his country in 1980.

4.3 Communication

The concept of communication is essential for understanding Brian Friel’s work. Corbett considers that “communication in all forms is a fundamental theme in Friel… Communication – between individuals, between cultures, between past and present, or between the self and external reality – is a concern in all of Friel’s plays.” (35) Friel is especially concerned not only with acts of communication themselves, but also with their limits, particularly in verbal communication. Both *Translations* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* constitute two of the best representations of the playwright’s ideas and preoccupations concerning the expression (or the impossibility of expressing) meanings, thoughts and feelings.

In *Translations*, the character of Sarah has been the object of multiple studies. She is a young woman with an unidentified speech disorder that has caused her severe difficulties to
communicate with others, and she only expresses herself through noises and gestures. The 
play opens with Manus working with her so that she manages to pronounce her name:

\begin{quote}
MANUS holds SARAH’s hands in his and he articulates 
slowly and distinctly into her face.
\end{quote}

MANUS: We’re doing very well. And we’re going to try it once 
more – just once more. Now – relax and breathe in… deep… and 
out… in… and out…

\textit{(SARAH shakes her head vigorously and stubbornly.)}

MANUS: Come on, Sarah. This is our secret.

\textit{(Again vigorous and stubborn shaking of SARAH’s head.)}

MANUS: Nobody’s listening. Nobody hears you.

\textit{(…)}

MANUS: Get your tongue and your lips working. ‘My name –’

\textit{Come on. One more try. ‘My name is –’ Good girl.}

SARAH: My…

MANUS: Great. ‘My name –’

SARAH: My… my…

MANUS: Raise your head. Shout it out. Nobody’s listening.

\textit{(…)}

MANUS: Once more – just once more – ‘My name –’ Good girl.

\textit{Come on now. Head up. Mouth open.}

SARAH: My…

MANUS: Good.

SARAH: My…

MANUS: Great.

SARAH: My name…

MANUS: Yes?

SARAH: My name is…

MANUS: Yes?

\textit{(SARAH pauses. Then in a rush.)}

SARAH: My name is Sarah.

MANUS: Marvellous! Bloody marvellous! (Friel, \textit{Plays One} 384)

Sarah’s speech impairment is, of course, a metaphor: she represents the silence of the 
oppressed. Lojek describes Sarah’s silence as “the ultimate protection of privacy” (87) She 
can only perform the quoted statement because she trusts (and probably likes) Manus, which 
is proved by Manus’s “nobody hears you, nobody’s listening.” Only he is listening, so she 
understands that she can express herself freely and without the fear of being pressured or 
laughed at (most likely the reactions she has had to face over the course of her life). At the 
end of the play and in front of Captain Lancey, however, Sarah is unable to speak again:
LANCEY: (Pointing to SARAH.) Who are you? Name!
(SARAH’s mouth opens and shuts, opens and shuts. Her face
becomes contorted.)
What’s your name?
(Again SARAH tries frantically.)
OWEN: Go on, Sarah. You can tell him.
(But SARAH cannot. And she knows she cannot. She closes her
mouth. Her head goes down.) (Friel, Plays One 440)

Sarah is aware of the threat posed by Lancey, not only for herself, but for her culture
and her home. Lancey is the oppressor and she is the oppressed; he is a threat that she cannot
let into her world, and therefore she instinctively refuses to communicate with him as she did
with Manus or other people whom she knew.

The metaphor represented by Sarah also finds its source in Steiner’s After Babel.
Steiner states: “The patronized and the oppressed have endured behind their silences” (34).
“In the event of autism the speech-battle between child and master can reach a grim fatality.
Surrounded by incomprehensible or hostile reality, the autistic child breaks off verbal contact.
He seems to choose silence to shield his identity.” (36) Although it is unlikely that Sarah is
autistic, the example provided by Steiner is perfectly applicable to her: she is certainly
surrounded by the hostile reality described by him, a reality in which there is a clear enemy
threatening her way of life. Silence becomes, then, a means of protecting herself: by not
letting the enemy know anything about herself (starting by her name, which is, as I explained
earlier, the most powerful sign of her identity) she is shielding any possible attack he may
carry out on her.

As I said before, many critics have studied the character of Sarah and its possible
connotations. For instance, Seamus Heaney has considered Sarah as an allegory of Ireland,
saying that: “It is as if some symbolic figure of Ireland from an eighteenth-century vision
poem, the one who confidently called herself Cathleen Ni Houlihan, has been struck dumb by
the shock of modernity.” (qtd. in McGrath, Brian Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama 192) Taking
both Steiner’s and Heaney’s approaches, McGrath infers that “perhaps Sarah’s problem
suggests the ‘hidden Ireland’ that in 1833 had begun to emerge after a century of oppression
by the penal laws only to be devastated in the next decade by the famine years.” (Brian
Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama 192) This point of view seems quite accurate if we look at
Sarah’s trajectory through the play: she goes from silence to speech (or from the Penal Laws
to their repeal), and then from speech to silence again (or from an attempt of revival to the tragedy of the Famine).

Furthermore, Sarah’s silence may also be motivated by her awareness of the dangers of speech: she was the one who told Manus about Maire and Yolland, which led him not only to feel rage and sadness, but also to escape from Baile Beag in fear that he would be blamed for Yolland’s disappearance. Sarah realises that language can be a double-edged sword, capable of transmitting the most beautiful and also the most dreadful meanings. Once she realises the heavy responsibility communication involves, she decides to lapse into her protective, harmless silence once again.

Another totally different type of communication represented in *Translations* is the one depicted in Maire and Yolland’s love scene. Until now, this work has explored the different ways in which Friel represented the impossibility and futility of linguistic and cultural translation, but this scene offers a different perspective on the topic. Clarkson Holstein describes it as “translation in its finest, most beneficial sense” (6), and it is common against critics to regard this peculiar conversation as an extremely interesting act of communication.

After leaving the dance, Maire and Yolland, who do not speak each other’s language, try to express their love to each other. Since there is not a single trace of linguistic understanding between them, what this scene represents is communication in the boundary between verbal and non-verbal: they do express their feelings through words, and although the meaning of those utterances do not reach each other, the feelings contained in them do. They are “forced to communicate across the barriers of language” (Lojek 85), and as a matter of fact, they do manage to do it to a great extent. Even though she does not understand anything of what Yolland is saying, Maire tells him: “Don’t stop – I know what you’re saying.” (Friel, *Plays One* 429) She may not comprehend Yolland’s English speech, but she does know what he is saying, in the sense that she can perceive the expression of his love for her from other non-verbal sources, such as his body language, his intonation, etc. Corbett writes that “Maire and Yolland move beyond language, speaking only in signifiers, without recourse to a signified.” (48) This phenomenon may be the reason behind the famous statement that the language of love is universal.

However, when translation between signifiers also fails, not even the alleged universal language of love seems capable of unblocking the path of communication. The only thing that Maire and Yolland manage to communicate to each other is their affection, which does not
belong to the realm of language, but any attempt of communication beyond the sheer feeling would eventually fail. “Communication”, says Richard Pine “depends on shared meaning, and between languages there must be a common code. In Translations we see that in language (...) this commonality cannot be found, because the symbolic points of contact represent different cultures, different ways of looking at the world. (225-26). Belonging to two different, even opposing cultures, Maire and Yolland cannot find a common point of shared meaning between their discourses, and this failure is reflected in an almost tragicomic way:

MAIRE: The grass must be wet. My feet are soaking.
YOLLAND: Your feet must be wet. The grass is soaking. (Friel, Plays One 426)

As trivial as it may seem, this chiasmus implies that the lovers build their sentences in an inverse way, and following the postmodernist premise that language is a direct representation of thought, this linguistic opposition can be seen as a proof that they perceive the world in different ways. In fact, part of what they tell each other is related to their desires: Yolland tells Maire that he wants to stay in Baile Beag with her always; Maire tells Yolland that she wants him to take her away from Ireland, and then be with him anywhere, always. Both characters’ passionate repetition of the word “always”, referring to opposite desires, represents the tragic climax of the scene, which can easily lead to the conclusion that “perhaps they can fall in love with each other only because they do not speak the same language.” (Clarkson Holstein 7). Ultimately, this scene can be regarded as a representation of the “implicit but ill-fated ideal of the play” (McGrath, Brian Friel’s (Post) Colonial Drama 186): the ideal that translation between two cultures is, after all, impossible.

5. Dancing at Lughnasa

If Translations constitutes Friel’s way of proving that intercultural communication is futile, Dancing at Lughnasa became a turning point not only in his career, but also in his thoughts and views on language. In the scientific world, when an experiment fails, the scientist is presented with two choices: either accepting that what lies at the end of his path is plainly impossible to be achieved, or else, looking for alternatives. After Translations, the
playwright encountered the same two choices, and *Dancing at Lughnasa* is the living proof of Brian Friel’s refusal to accept the inevitability of failure in all attempts of communication.

*Dancing at Lughnasa* was first staged at the Abbey Theatre on April 24th 1990, and the ten years that separate it from *Translations* are noticeable for several reasons. Except from the common theme that constitutes the *raison d’être* of this study, both plays have a number of differences in terms of the topics they deal with. As we have seen, *Translations* is essentially a play about Friel’s ideas regarding language and its relationship with history, politics and identity, whereas *Dancing at Lughnasa* is a history play with a certain autobiographical flavour (the “five brave Glenties women” to whom it is dedicated were Friel’s aunts). In this drama, the focus is not so much on politics or linguistic identity as it is on memory, cultural and religious repression (especially on women) and conflicting identities as a result of historical circumstances.

However, language is undoubtedly one of the most significant topics in *Dancing at Lughnasa*; it may not be the foundation for the whole play, but it is definitely a very important part of it. Leaving the concepts of translation and intercultural communication in 1980, in this play Friel explores the theme of language from the perspective of its limitations when trying to express our most inner thoughts and feelings (whereas in *Translations* he put the emphasis not on the transmission of feelings, but in the transmission of meaning). If the conclusion he reached in *Translations* reflected the impossibility of any type of translation and the unbreakable limits of verbal communication, *Dancing at Lughnasa* could be considered as the result of the playwright’s search for alternatives to it, which he seemingly found in the communicative power of music and, above all, dance.

The action in *Dancing at Lughnasa* takes place a century after *Translations’, specifically in 1936, and although they have the same setting, this time it is referred to as ‘Ballybeg’ and not ‘Baile Beag’. This change may well be read as the eventual success of the Ordnance Survey that was not actually confirmed in *Translations*, though it was implicit to some extent. Another similarity between the two plays is that both Hugh and Manus in *Translations* and Kate in *Dancing at Lughnasa* are teachers, but whereas the former were still part of the hedge-school tradition, the latter works in the fully institutionalised British school. However, the style Friel chose for presenting the action in this play is substantially different from *Translations’. *Dancing at Lughnasa* can be interpreted as a flash-back narrative: the narrator, Michael Evans, probably around his forties or fifties, remembers certain events that
took place on the summer of 1936, when he was seven years old, events which constitute the action of the play. The plot focuses on a series of disruptive elements introduced in the lives of the five Mundy sisters during that summer, as well as on how the characters cope with them and on how these disturbances are going to change their lives forever.

5.1 Conflicting identities and communication

*Dancing at Lughnasa* begins with adult Michael relating the two major changes that occurred in his family’s life during that summer of 1936. Chronologically, the first one was the return from Africa of his Uncle Jack, who had spent twenty five years in a leper colony in a village called Ryanga, Uganda. Three weeks later, the family acquired their first radio, over which Michael says everyone is obsessed. The importance that Friel attributed to place-names, so crucial for an in-depth understanding of *Translations*, is also present (although to a much lesser extent) in *Dancing at Lughnasa* in relation to this wireless set: his Aunt Maggie initially wanted to call it Lugh, the name of an old Celtic god, but his Aunt Kate, “a very proper woman” said “it would be sinful to christen an inanimate object with any kind of name, not to talk of a pagan god.” (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 1) Hence, they decided to call it Marconi, which was the name that was on its carcass.

As trivial as this scene may appear, it actually introduces two of the main elements that lead the plot of the play: paganism and the figure of Aunt Kate as a repressive force. The “robustly pagan Irishness” (Boltwood 176) of the play can be appreciated from its very title: ‘Lughnasa’, the festival to which the sisters want to go (and which takes place on August 1st), has its origin in a celebration in honour of the above-mentioned Lugh, an ancient Celtic god of the harvest. During the festival, people enjoy the music, dance, drink and even jump over bonfires. It is, in summary, an essentially pagan festivity, in total opposition to Kate’s idea of what a religious celebration should be. Kate’s most important feature as a character is her stern Catholic morality, which often contrasts with her sisters’ more relaxed ideas about religion (particularly Maggie’s). Therefore, the sheer suggestion of attending the Lughnasa festival scandalises her, since, in her opinion, the people who participate in it are “savages – that’s what they are! And what pagan practices they have are no concern of ours – none whatever! It’s a sorry day to hear talk like that in a Christian home, a Catholic home!” (Friel,
Much to the sisters’ disappointment, they eventually renounce to dance at Lughnasa.

As it happened with *Translations*’ characters, the Mundy sisters are also the personification of metaphors related to the conflict of identity in 20th century Ireland. Whereas *Translations* depicted a struggle between the Irish and the British focused on language and culture, *Dancing at Lughnasa* explores the identity conflict from the perspective of the influence of religion in the population, as the fight for the preservation of the Irish language and the cultural load attached to it appears to have been lost already. In 1936, the strict Catholicism that still characterises Irish society nowadays coexisted with some remnants of the ancient pagan tradition of the pre-Christian Celtic times, mostly in the shape of holidays and particular celebrations such as Lughnasa. *Dancing at Lughnasa* portrays an implicit struggle between cultural identities, as well as a “tension in the communication cord between the past and the present, between the inside and the outside” (Corbett 67) that is embodied in the contrasting personalities of Kate and her sisters.

When discussing the possibility of going to the festival of Lughnasa and have fun there, Maggie’s suggestion of doing so is welcomed with great enthusiasm by her younger sisters (Agnes, Rose and Christina). When Kate starts to show some opposition to the idea, Agnes replies: “How many years has it been since we were at the harvest dance? – at any dance? (…) I want to dance, Kate. It’s the Festival of Lughnasa. I’m only thirty-five. I want to dance.” (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 13) However, Kate remains steadfast: “Look at yourselves, will you! Just look at yourselves! Dancing at our time of day? That’s for young people with no duties and no responsibilities and nothing in their heads but pleasure.” (13) Whereas Agnes complains that she is “only thirty-five”, Kate considers that they are too old to dance (although the youngest of the sisters, Christina, is only twenty-six), hence judging that dancing and having fun are activities limited to young people.

Catholic values are deeply rooted in Kate’s personality and her perception of the world, and her repressive nature can be read under the same light as Manus’s fierce opposition to any kind of change in his life. While Manus was deliberately rude to Lieutenant Yolland because of what he believed he represented, Kate “insists that the sisters behave properly” (Corbett 67), ‘properly’ meaning ‘respecting the Catholic teachings of respectability for women’, according to which dancing at a pagan festival would be a personal and social scandal.
Furthermore, Corbett also points out that Christina and her sisters’ “discussion on lipstick, hair-colour and dresses can only take place when Kate is not present.” (67):

CHRIS: D’you know what I think I might do? I think I just might start wearing lipstick.
AGNES: Do you hear this, Maggie?
MAGGIE: Steady on, girl. Today it’s lipstick; tomorrow it’s the gin bottle.
CHRIS: I think I just might.
AGNES: As long as Kate’s not around. ‘Do you want to make a pagan of yourself?’

(CHRIS puts her face up close to the mirror and feels it.)
CHRIS: Far too pale. And the aul mousey hair. Need a bit of colour.
AGNES: What for?
CHRIS: What indeed. (She shrugs and goes back to her ironing. She holds up a surplice.) Make a nice dress that, wouldn’t it?... God forgive me… (Friel, Dancing at Lughnasa 3)

Even though Chris is, as I said, only twenty-six, the Catholic system of morality zealously upheld by Kate has repressed the construction of her identity in a modern world to the point of making her convince herself of the futility of taking care of her image. Her “what indeed” shows that she is aware of the uselessness of wearing make-up or a beautiful dress when her whole life is limited to the domestic sphere, as it should be for any respectable woman. Moreover, taking into account that Chris had a love child at the age of nineteen, she should be especially wary of maintaining the little integrity Kate believes she has now to the eyes of society.

This problematic relationship between the sisters creates and, at the same time, is a result of the lack of communication. The theory about the impossibility of communication even between individuals who speak the same language presented in Translations is also displayed in Dancing at Lughnasa, where the Mundy sisters are unable to transmit their thoughts and emotions verbally among them. Martine Pontellier offers a reading of the house of the Mundy sisters as “a point of contact, or at least an intermediate space, between civilians and barbarians, town and country, Christianity and paganism.” (qtd. In Pine 277) From this perspective, the Mundy’s home could be interpreted in a similar way to the colonial Baile Beag of Translations: a space in which conflicting cultures and identities fail to coexist, and clash as a consequence of the lack of communication between them.
At a certain point, Kate’s repression moves to the linguistic dimension. After discussing whether attending the festival of Lughnasa or not, she says: “And there’ll be no more discussion about it. The matter’s over. I don’t want it mentioned again.” (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 13-14) By not allowing the matter to be mentioned again, Kate is also restricting her sisters’ speech. However, the issue goes beyond the fact of simply uttering words about the topic or not: limiting someone’s speech (in relation to this matter or any other) involves a repression of that person’s thoughts and their communication as well, because, as we saw, language and thoughts operate at the same level. Hence, Kate’s both religious and linguistic oppression leads to the limitation of communication among her sisters, and on a personal level, it also creates an invisible divide between them and her.

Nevertheless, Kate and her sisters are, as I said before, personified representations of the forces that create the conflicts of identity depicted in the play, and as such, the character of Kate should not be interpreted as a negative one only because she does not allow the family to have fun at the pagan dance or wear lipstick. In spite of the shame she thinks Michael brought to the household, according to her religious beliefs, she deeply loves him and cares for him as if he were her own child, and even buys him toys against his mother’s will. Furthermore, she is the only economic support of the family, and her repressive attitude towards her sisters is but her way of demonstrating that she cares for all of them and that she wishes what she believes is the best for the family. Around the end of Act I, as she realises that the balance she had worked so hard to achieve for her home was crumbling down as a result of the disturbances that took place during that summer, Kate expresses her regret:

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**KATE:** You work hard at your job. You try to keep the home together. You perform your duties as best as you can – because you believe in responsibilities and obligations and good order. And then suddenly, suddenly you realize that hair cracks are appearing everywhere; that control is slipping away; that the whole thing is so fragile it can’t be held together much longer. It’s all about to collapse, Maggie. (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 35)

These lines reflect Kate’s genuine good intentions regarding her attitude: she has not tried to impose a certain way of life to her sisters because that was the right thing to do, but because she believed it was the best for everyone. She is not simply the “damned righteous
bitch” (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 34) Agnes angrily calls her, but a woman who wants to support her family the best she can.

Thus, like in *Translations*, in *Dancing at Lughnasa* Friel presents a conflict between cultural forces in which he does not take sides. Both of them are right and wrong for different reasons, and Kate’s strong sense of orthodoxy is not portrayed under a negative light in the play in contrast to her sisters’ more carefree and modern attitude. At the end of the play, all sisters must reconcile their different identities to the demands of the harsh reality in which they live: Kate loses her job at the school and has to become a private tutor; Maggie continues with her regular tasks trying to pretend that anything had happened; Agnes and Rose leave Ballybeg after losing their jobs in search of a better life in London, but eventually die in poverty and tragic conditions, and Chris works at the knitting factory for the rest of her life “and hated every day of it.” (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 70) This bitter ending works in a similar way to *Translations*: in the end, none of the characters, or their ideologies, triumphs over the others, and they are all overwhelmed by a stronger force.

### 5.2 Father Jack’s ‘confusion’

Until now, the analysis of *Dancing at Lughnasa* has focused on the five Mundy sisters, limiting the scope of the study of communication to the conflicts between them. However, there is another character in the play that represents better than anyone else the restrictions that spoken language places upon people’s identities and their means of communication. This character is Father Jack, the eldest brother of the family who spent almost half of his life as a missionary in Africa. For twenty-five years he lived in a village called Ryanga, speaking Swahili, participating in the place’s traditional ceremonies and merging with the people and their way of life. When the action of *Dancing at Lughnasa* takes place, Father Jack has only been in Ballybeg for a couple of weeks, and Friel portrays the cultural and linguistic shock this character has to go through during the early stages of his process of re-adaptation to life in Ireland.

Contrarily to the sisters and especially young Michael’s expectations, Father Jack’s return to Ballybeg is anything but triumphant. Looking older than his fifty-three years and suffering from malaria, Jack is depicted as a physically and mentally weak man who is constantly disorientated in the reality that surrounds him. He often confuses his sisters’ names,
constantly expresses how much Ireland’s cold weather upsets him and is sometimes unable to remember the distribution of the house: “I don’t remember the – the architecture? – the planning? – what’s the word? – the lay-out! I don’t recollect the lay-out of this home… scarcely. That is strange, isn’t it? I thought the front door was there.” (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 17) Of course, after not being at that house in twenty-five years, it may not be that strange that Jack does not remember its exact distribution, but this quotation shows that his difficulties go beyond the recognition of the architecture.

Effectively, Father Jack’s problems of adaptation to his old and at the same time new reality are especially perceptible in language. As Kate explains to her sisters: “And on top of that Swahili has been his language for twenty-five years; so that it’s not that his mind is confused – it’s just that he has difficulty finding the English words for what he wants to say.” (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 11) Even though English is Jack’s mother tongue, for more than two decades he spoke and thought in Swahili, and as a result, his reality has become that of a Ryangan, not of an Irish.

Again, the postmodernist theories on language, culture and the psyche re-emerge in *Dancing at Lughnasa* – Jack adapted his both his mindset and his speech to the culture of Ryanga and finds it very difficult to be Irish again, a difficulty that is represented by his problems finding the English words to name objects or people or to express his thoughts and ideas. Going back to the example of the Eskimo languages and the words referring to snow that I used to illustrate this same notion in a previous section, if an Eskimo were sent to Ireland (in 1936 or in present time) he would most likely be unable to name many objects that are part of an Irish person’s daily life. In the same way, if an Irish were sent to an Eskimo village in Canada, for instance, he would find that both his vocabulary and his vital experience lack the knowledge of objects or many phenomena that occur daily in that place. Therefore, Father Jack’s linguistic difficulties might have to be attributed to something beyond a temporary state of confusion: they correspond to an abrupt cultural change.

Moreover, as Corbett indicates: “the language difficulty is not, despite what Kate says, ‘on top of’ other difficulties, but is the cause of them.” (134) This is definitely an essential reading for understanding not only Father Jack’s problem, but also Friel’s ideas on language. He believes that words have an enormous influence in our way of both perceiving and building reality, and Jack embodies the consequences of a sudden shift between two different worlds such as the one he experiences. (Corbett 135) In a couple of days, he is forced to
abandon what has been his reality for twenty-five years, with its heat, its exotic pagan ceremonies, his home with his house boy Okawa, etc. and return to the cold and deeply Catholic Ireland, where he is expected to feel at home by his sisters, but he cannot. In fact, the expression ‘return to Ireland’ does not really apply to Father Jack’s journey: for him, he was at home in Ryanga, and it is Ireland what has become a new, strange world.

There are many times in the play when Friel shows that the few weeks that Jack has been in Ballybeg have not been enough time to leave Africa behind. In conversation with his sisters, he constantly compares what they are talking about with how that was in Ryanga, and he also makes numerous references to particular events that took place during his life there. Much to Kate’s despair, religion and ceremonies are probably the most recurrent topic of these cross-cultural parallelisms between Uganda and Ireland:

KATE: All gathered together for Mass?
JACK: Maybe. Or maybe to offer sacrifices to Obi, our Great Goddess of the Earth, so that the crops will flourish. Or maybe to get in touch with our departed fathers for their advice and wisdom. Or maybe to thank the spirits of our tribe, if they have been good to us; or to appease them if they’re angry. I complain to Okawa that our calendar of ceremonies gets fuller every year. Now at this time of tear over there – at the Ugandan harvest time – we have two very wonderful ceremonies: the Festival of the New Yam and the Festival of the Sweet Cassava; and they’re both dedicated to our Great Goddess, Obi –

KATE: But these aren’t Christian ceremonies, Jack, are they?
JACK: Oh, no. The Ryangans have always been faithful to their own beliefs – like these two Festivals I’m telling you about; and they are very special, really magnificent ceremonies. (Friel, Dancing at Lughnasa 47)

An especially eloquent linguistic feature of Father Jack’s words in this passage is the repeated use of the possessive pronoun “our” when referring to the Great Goddess Obi, the spirits of the tribe or the calendar of ceremonies. Even though physically he is now in Ballybeg, his mind and subconscious still remain in Africa. Furthermore, this “our” serves as another proof of what has been explored in this subsection: Father Jack’s complete adaptation to the Ryangan costumes and way of life. For twenty-five years he was an active part of the village’s society, and at some point its gods, departed fathers and rituals became his as well.

Another important interpretation that can be deduced from this excerpt (as a representation of Jack’s whole way of thinking throughout the play) is that “what has
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happened to Father Jack’s language has also happened to his religion.” (Lojek 89) It is rather noticeable that, whereas he does not show rejection against Kate’s insistence on his saying Mass again as soon as possible, he does tend to avoid the matter, as his whole idea of ‘Mass’ has changed significantly. The Catholic tradition no longer holds a particularly sacred significance in his spiritual mindset, and while he has difficulties with recovering his former linguistic identity, the same happens to his religious one:

KATE: What do you think?  
MAGGIE: He’s not back a month yet.  
KATE: Yesterday I heard about their medicine man who brought back a woman back from death –  
MAGGIE: He needs more time.  
KATE: And this morning it was ‘the spirits of the tribe’! And when I mentioned Mass to him you saw how he dodged about.  
MAGGIE: He said he’d say Mass next Monday, Kate.  
KATE: No, he won’t. You know he won’t. He’s changed, Maggie.  
MAGGIE: In another month, he’ll be –  
KATE: Completely changed. He’s not our Jack at all. (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 49)

Father Jack has certainly changed, and his Catholicism “is now inextricably intertwined with African pagan ritual.” (Lojek 89) At the end of the play, adult Michael’s narration confirms that “he didn’t say Mass next Monday. In fact he never said Mass again (…). But he never lost his determination to return to Uganda and he still talked passionately about his life with the lepers there.” (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 60) Eventually, as time passed, Kate realised that trying to deny the reality of her brother’s change was in vain, and she used to tell herself that Jack had now “his own distinctive spiritual speech.” (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 60) According to Michael, this theory helped her find some mental comfort.

For Lojek, Kate’s statement constitutes “a hint to us that perhaps the form of the ritual and its words are not so important as the quest it embodies.” (89) Effectively, a certain way of understanding religion involves separating the ceremony (Mass, the ritual, the words) from the inner and personal, more spiritual belief. This interpretation of religion illustrates Father Jack’s spiritual circumstances to a certain extent: the pagan ceremonies in which he participated in Ryanga were much more ‘physical’ than verbal – spiritualism was experienced
through symbolic actions, movements or dances, whereas the importance of Catholic Mass as a ceremony lies on the figure of the priest and his verbal speech.

The implications of these two different ways of experiencing religion and spiritualism can be linked with Friel’s most prominent achievement regarding language and communication in *Dancing at Lughnasa*: the use of dance as a metaphor of the power of non-verbal communication.

### 5.3 From words to music and dance: non-verbal communication

Both in the whole section devoted to *Translations* and in what has been analysed of *Dancing at Lughnasa* until now, this study has focused on exploring Friel’s ways of dramatising the limits of communication through words. The final message of *Translations* can only be read as a pessimistic one, as the play shows that all attempts of translation (both linguistic and extralinguistic) fail, and that communication is doomed to be blocked by the walls that are inherent to human speech. However, as I said at the very beginning of this section, Friel did not simply accept the futility of trying to communicate, and *Dancing at Lughnasa* constitutes, above all, the representation of the alternative the dramatist proposes as an attempt to climb the aforementioned walls and take a step further towards successful intercourse: communicating through the non-verbal.

It has been proved that the most significant impediment posed by words lies in the transmission of the most abstract and personal scope of our utterances. Verbal communication is enough when the meaning that we are trying to express belongs to the realm of the concrete, of the common, of the knowledge of the world we share with our conversation partners. Yet, as soon as we move to a dimension in which the signified does not belong to any of the aforementioned categories, signifiers inevitably lose their effectiveness.

As Friel has proved throughout his dramatic production, there are many situations in which words become “inadequate counters or gatekeepers to understanding” (Pine 268), namely acts of communication involving emotions such as the scene between Maire and Yolland in *Translations*, and also the Mundy sisters’ troubles for expressing their inner thoughts to the others. Maire and Yolland could not possibly understand what the other was saying, and the tragic reality of their opposite desires and aspirations was concealed behind
their mutual linguistic incomprehension; the Mundy household is filled with tension as a result of their failure to express their hidden and repressed emotions.

Nevertheless, Friel also proves that, in both cases, characters do manage to communicate. Maire and Yolland may be unable to understand the other’s language, but they succeed at transmitting their feelings to each other, and the Mundy sisters experience an exuberant moment of harmony when they dance together on an impulse. This scene occurs suddenly and unexpectedly: after Maggie’s sad remembrance of the happy times of her youth, Kate asks Chris to turn on the radio in order to change the tense atmosphere, and as soon as the music starts to sound, the five sisters, one after another, engage in a dance that “breaks out with pagan exuberance.” (Corbett 68) The very long stage directions Friel writes for this scene focus precisely on depicting a dance filled with a pagan charm that works as a radical shift between the sisters’ rigid daily life and this momentary but ebullient communion with their restricted emotions: “With this too loud music, this pounding beat, this shouting – calling – singing, this parodic reel, there is a sense of order being consciously subverted, of the women consciously and crudely caricaturing themselves, indeed of near-hysteria being induced.” (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 22) With even the ‘proper’ Kate surrounding to this frenzy, the five sisters can enjoy a moment of real union for the first and last time in their lives.

At the beginning of the play, before the action actually starts, adult Michael mentions that he “had witnessed Marconi’s voodoo derange those kind, sensible women and transform them into shrieking strangers.” (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 2) The vocabulary he uses to describe this change in his mother and aunts probably reflects the impression this dance made on his seven-year-old self – the young boy, who had spent his whole life under the oppressive respectability imposed by his Aunt Kate, must have been extremely shocked by the view of the sisters dancing, shouting and laughing with no restraint.

This dance scene represents a sub-version that replaces “that everyday decorum and respectability by the surrender to things beyond definition.” (Pine 274) Freed from the necessity of having to put their thoughts and feelings into words in order to make them comprehensible to the others, the Mundys find a new form of expression that allows them to put their inner selves in touch to their sisters’ – they are “put in touch with their deeper emotions” and “subsequently unable to deny those emotions.” (Pine 277) Indeed, this dance not only helps the five women to finally find a common ground in which their identities are
accepted by the others, but also to face and accept themselves individually. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, “dance is a repeated metaphor for the true understanding which is linked to silent communication” (Lojek 88), and this scene constitutes the most patent example of wordless communication in its purest sense.

Another important dance in the play is the one that takes place between Chris and Gerry, Michael’s father. Gerry Evans is a carefree and charming Englishman (although he actually seems to be Welsh) who rarely visits Chris (around once a year) and who has only seen his son in few occasions. He does not seem to have a fixed residence, and he changes his occupation often: at the time of the play he sells gramophones, he is about to travel to Spain in order to participate in the Civil War, and the last time Chris had heard about him he gave dancing lessons in Dublin. Despite these peculiar circumstances, Chris welcomes him every time he visits her, and although she is realistic enough to know that his marriage proposals are empty, she is still in love with him. As for Michael, at first he is shy around his father, but later on becomes closer to him after his promise of buying him a bicycle, which, of course, he never does.

Many scholars have read Gerry and Michael as representations of England and Ireland, respectively. Although Gerry is Michael’s father, nothing indicates that he really cares about him, and I have already mentioned that he has only seen his son around once a year – considering that in 1936 Michael is seven years old, Gerry has seen him six or seven times at most. He makes Michael promises that he never keeps, stops visiting him and Chris in 1939 and finally, adult Michael tells us that he received a letter in the 1950s from a young man from Wales also called Michael Evans, informing him that Gerry had recently died at his family’s home. This revelation is especially eloquent: Gerry’s multiple families can be compared to England as a colonial power, for which neither Ireland nor Wales hold a special importance beyond their value as parts of the Empire. Similarly, although Gerry showed some sort of affection towards Michael, he did not think of him and his mother as his family (and most likely the same can be said of the Michael Evans from Wales), which would explain why he scarcely visited them.

Gerry is, in summary, one of the main disruptive elements that the Mundy household faces in the summer of 1936. However, whereas Kate does not even want to hear about him and categorically refuses to let him inside the house, Chris cheerfully talks to him and, more importantly, dances with him. For Chris, Gerry is indeed a disturbing element, but she sees
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him under a positive light: his playfulness and the obviously exaggerated stories he tells Chris to make her laugh help her to escape momentarily from Kate’s oppression, and her dance with him constitutes one of the most explicit examples of wordless communication in *Dancing at Lughnasa*:

GERRY: Do you know the words?
CHRIS: I never know any words.
GERRY: Neither do I. Doesn’t matter. This is more important.
(Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 33)

While they are dancing, words are unnecessary between them. This scene works similarly to Maire and Yolland’s in *Translations*: the (dysfunctional) lovers who cannot or do not want to communicate through words achieve a deeper level of understanding through gestures, voice nuances and meaningless utterances, as in Maire and Yolland’s case, or through a simple, trivial dance, as Gerry and Chris do.

Finally, in relation to dance, Friel presents another vehicle for non-verbal communication: music. The playwright himself has said, about the importance of music in his career: “Since words do not seem to be up to the job it was necessary to supply the characters with a new language. And that is what music can provide in the theatre: another way of talking, a language without words.” (qtd. in Praga-Terente 86) In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, music is obviously related to Marconi, the wireless set the Mundys obtain during that summer. The radio is “the agent of progression beyond words and into music” (Corbett 66), another means of leaving language behind and communicating with both others and oneself at a completely different level.

Towards the end of the play, Kate complains about Marconi: “D’you know what that thing has done? Killed all Christian conversation in this country.” (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 66) This statement offers an indirect interpretation of the role of music in this play. Kate is, as we saw, the character that tries to maintain the Catholic values in her home, and as a result, acts as an agent of oppression for her sisters. What Marconi and its music have brought to the house is precisely something that causes the opposite effect: it has brought pagan joy, dance and a means of expression of the inner, repressed emotions the Mundy sisters have been keeping to themselves for years. It is through the radio that “music arrives and makes them dance until they are exasperated and the domestic orgy that ensues is echoed in the licentiousness of the dance at Lughnasa.” (Praga-Terente 86) That Kate herself also
participates in the frenetic dance, as we have analysed, is nothing but a symbol of the expressive power of music: it shows that, in a world without religious dogmas and rules of social respectability associated to femininity, Kate is essentially like her sisters and shares their most inner needs. In a wordless world, Kate would also dance, and Marconi allows her to do so even in a world shaped by language and its constraints.

In conclusion, in *Dancing at Lughnasa* Friel elevates the significance of music and dance to the category of vehicles of communication, putting them at the same level as language – or actually giving them the role that languages are unable to fulfil: the expression of concepts that belong to a domain in which words are useless. The play ends with adult Michael summarising the most powerful impressions of his memories from the summer of 1936:

 Michele: When I remember it, I think of it as dancing. Dancing with eyes half closed because to open them would break the spell. Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement – as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness. Dancing as if the very heart of life and all its hopes might be found in those assuaging notes and those hushed rhythms and in those silent and hypnotic movements. Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary… (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* 71)

This conclusion, full of lyricism and the vocabulary of the sacred, provides a vision of the ultimate communion between dance and expression, with both of them operating in a dimension that is totally alien to verbal communication. Lojek considers that “one of the recurring painful ironies in Friel’s work is that we often come closer to the Word when we abandon words.” (90) Father Jack’s new own religious identity, Chris and Gerry’s dance without knowing the words because they are not important and the five sisters’ hectic dance that transcends all conflicts and boundaries and puts them in touch with their deepest emotions are all proofs of the realm of expressive possibilities that lies beyond the limits of language. After all, in the world of dance words are no longer necessary.
6. Conclusions

The main purpose of this work has been to explore the boundaries of language and communication in Brian Friel’s literary production, limiting its scope to the plays *Translations* (1980) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). In spite of dealing with the same theme (although to different extents in both cases, as it is much more prominent in *Translations* than it is in *Dancing at Lughnasa*), each play focuses on particular elements inside this topic, offering complementary representations of it.

*Translations*, considered Friel’s masterpiece, was in fact created with the intention of being an exclusively linguistic play, as Friel’s quote indicated. In this drama, language is an omnipresent force that absolutely rules the plot – there is virtually nothing in the play that is not related to language. However, language, as an essentially social phenomenon, can never be completely separated from the cultural and political background of a certain civilisation. Moreover, the setting and plot of the play depict the colonial struggle between England and Ireland. This fact helps to create a vivid representation of a deep linguistic conflict, but at the same time it highlights the unavoidable political dimension of the historical circumstances dramatised in the play. Therefore, even though Friel’s intention was the one described above, *Translations* is also an intensely political play, but one in which language is definitely the indisputable protagonist.

The influence of George Steiner’s *After Babel* has been thoroughly analysed, since it constitutes one of the pillars that sustained the creation of *Translations*. Steiner’s book provided Friel with a theoretical framework for his own ideas on language and translation, and it is a matter of fact that *Translations* owes much to *After Babel*. Steiner’s thesis regarding the power of language both to transmit and to conceal meaning, the postmodernist view of language that Friel shares and, especially, the ideas about translation developed in *After Babel* were essential for the creation of *Translations*.

These ideas are very much linked to Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial theory: while Steiner made Friel even more aware than he already was of the limits of verbal communication, Bhabha’s input in relation to the impossibility of full translation between two different cultures gave shape to the action in Friel’s play. Using the Ordnance Survey as a metaphor for linguistic invasion, Friel also managed to spread the conflict beyond the remapping of the territory and towards all levels of Irish society. The disturbances created by
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dthis enterprise are perceptible in Translations in the relationships between language and politics, names and landscape, place and memory, and also among characters. The three protagonists, Hugh, Owen and Manus, portray the different attitudes towards the process of colonisation, and clashes both among them and with external circumstances are presented in the play. The character of Yolland is also of great importance not only as an embodiment of the bucolic view of Ireland held by some foreigners, but also because of his failed attempt of communicating anything beyond his love to Maire.

Maire and Yolland constitute the most explicit image of the final message of Translations: the impossibility of both intercultural communication and the transmission of feelings through words. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted among scholars that the couple does achieve a certain level of mutual understanding thanks to the non-verbal dimension of their act of communication, and this is what Friel explored ten years later in Dancing at Lughnasa.

Dancing at Lughnasa can be read of the representation of the playwright’s search for alternatives to the limits of verbal communication that he acknowledged through Translations. Firstly, Father Jack appears as a symbol of another way of interpreting the power of language, in particular its ability to shape reality. After spending twenty-five years speaking Swahili, Father Jack has great difficulties finding the English words for what he wants to say. However, the problem goes beyond that: having become part of the Ryangan society and way of life, he is unable to re-adapt to the Irish one. Hence, his problem with English is that it no longer matches his mindset, which has been shaped by Swahili for more than two decades. Friel uses Father Jack for representing once again the limits of spoken language, this time through a character for whom English fails to express his inner self, which is now Swahili.

In Dancing at Lughnasa, Friel focuses more on the difficulties to communicate the private sphere than in the collective realm, as he had done in Translations. The five Mundy sisters, who have always lived in a world in which the Celtic pagan and the Catholic religious tradition coexisted, struggle between these two cultural identities. In a more personal level, the stern Catholic rule upheld in the household by Kate severely limits the sisters’ means of communication, forcing them to systematically hide and restrain their emotions. It is not until their spontaneous and frenetic dance breaks out that the five of them can finally communicate with the others not through words, but through the magic contained in the simple but powerful act of dancing.
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In *Dancing at Lughnasa* music and dance are the alternatives that Friel provides in order to cross the boundaries of verbal communication and all its intrinsic restrictions for the transmission of both meanings and emotions. In this play, Friel presents dance as a metaphor of the power of non-verbal communication – it is only through dances that the characters manage to put themselves in touch with others, and it is only when they abandon words that they become closer to the essence of other people’s and also their own inner selves.

These have been, in summary, the conclusions of the textual analysis of these two plays. The process of elaboration of this work has been equally tough and enriching, and the reason behind the choice of these adjectives is the same: there was so much material to cover, so many passages to analyse, so many scholars offering very insightful commentaries, etc. that the task of delimiting the sections and subsections that conform it and organising all the information proved quite arduous indeed. However, all the hard work found its most positive counterpart in the opportunity of immersing into the always intellectually rewarding world that is Brian Friel’s production. After studying it, it is easy to understand why *Translations* is considered as his masterpiece by so many critics, and although the analysis of *Dancing at Lughnasa* was limited to the linguistic element (therefore leaving aside the many other interesting topics that it deals with), it is undoubtedly a play worthy of all the attention that has been paid to it.

Apart from the conclusions extracted from the study of these two particular dramas, the elaboration of this analysis has also proved me why Brian Friel is considered arguably the most significant Irish playwright of the second half of the 20th century. *Translations* seems to effortlessly achieve a perfect balance between language, politics and an extraordinary comicality; *Dancing at Lughnasa* offers the magic of wordless communication through several dances that charm the audience with the mysterious expressive power of the language without words.

Personally, I believe that what has been the object of this work is to a great extent what makes Friel an essential figure in the history of Irish literature. In these two plays (and in many others), he depicts the “ancient and current debate in Ireland”, providing “images and vocabulary for discussing the connections between linguistic translation, historical understanding, colonialism and nationalism, and religion.” (Lojek 97) From my point of view, Friel’s mastery as an artist lies in his ability to present both his audience and his readership with apparently simple facts, many times covered with a highly satirical humour (as in
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Translations), behind which the most conflictive points of the Irish national history, and even universal issues such as the lack of communication, are hidden. His plays are equally enjoyable and complex, two traits that have made them extremely successful both among the general public and the critic.

In conclusion, Translations and Dancing at Lughnasa offer an accurate representation of Brian Friel’s extraordinary sensibility and deep knowledge of the theme of language and communication. His whole dramatic production is concerned with this topic in relation to Ireland, its history and its present, and his unequalled insightfulness, together with an artistic proficiency available to a very few, make of Brian Friel’s theatre an indispensable piece in the puzzle of Irish literature.
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7. Works Cited


Further Reading

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