Double Take: Figuring the Other and the Politics of Translation

Michael Cronin
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1 In examining the notion of the figurative in the present essay, it is as well to situate our approach from the outset in the field of translation studies itself. Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere are the two translation theorists most closely associated with what is referred to as the “cultural turn” in translation studies. The movement was partly one of reaction and partly one of anticipation. The reaction was to what was seen as the undue hegemony of linguistics in the study of translation activity and the excessive influence of comparative literature in the study of translations. If translation studies was to acquire any degree of disciplinary autonomy then it was necessary to distinguish itself from both comparative literature and applied linguistics. The anticipation was of the significant investment of translation in the 1990s by scholars working in fields as diverse as ethnography, postcolonial studies, feminism and deconstructionist philosophy. Central to thinking on translation in all of these disciplinary interventions were the notions of translatorial agency and the explicit situating of translation in historical and political contexts. Thus, translations were no longer to be seen as free-floating aesthetic artefacts generated by ahistorical figures in a timeless synchronicity of language but as works produced by historical figures in diachronic time.

2 In placing the essay within the general framework of the cultural turn, the intention is to show the validity of the approach for understanding the considerable anxieties which have arisen around figurative language in translation. It is these anxieties indeed, with the high political, cultural and social stakes that they imply, which account for the specific importance of the topic of the figurative in translation research. Our intention here is to demonstrate how responses to translation of figurative language and metaphor can be deeply informed by the political context of the period, in this case, Tudor and Elizabethan England and its violent and sustained engagement with Ireland.

3 In a way that is only apparently paradoxical, we must ask ourselves not only why so much gets translated, but also why so much does not get translated. In other words, a history of
translation that only looks at translations at some level misses the point. Just as a figure is defined by and necessitates a ground, so also the figure of translation demands the figure of non-translation, if we are to make any sense of the activity in our society and this holds as much for today as it did four hundred years ago. Therefore, we shall be asking ourselves the question as to why so much figurative language does not get translated in the situation we will be describing as well as why some of the language did. In this context, metaphor or more generally, figurative language, proves interesting not only because it is a recurrent fault line in situations of language contact where there is a marked asymmetry in the distribution of power but because it allows us to discern what might be the filtering mechanisms in a society and culture for the translation and non-translation of textual materials.

**Eloquence**

Civility was an essential concept for the revival of learning in fourteenth and fifteenth century Europe. In looking back to classical models, a primary source of inspiration, were conceptions of civility deemed to have been formulated and to have existed in antiquity. For the writers and philosophers of the Renaissance, the idea of civility, of how one should think and behave in a civilised polity, was bound up with the notion of communicatio. Language was to be the hallmark of the educated citizen but language of a particular kind, language as eloquence. It is eloquence which in a sense allows language to be something other than itself and by extension allows speakers to transcend themselves and their point of origin. As a result, eloquence will be central to the project of civility and to the transformative vision of the world that animates the astronomers, playwrights, explorers and military of the period. Eloquence was not simply an attribute of power. Eloquence was power.

Pier Paolo Vergerio, in one of the earlier and highly influential humanist educational treatises, *De Ingenius Moribus et Liberalibus Adulescentiae* (The Character and Studies Befitting a Free-Born Youth) (1402-1403) declared that no student could forgo the study of history and moral philosophy. To these two subjects he adds a third which in his view is essential to a properly humanist education. The subject is eloquence:

> Per philosophiam quidem possumus recte sentire quod est in omni re primum; per eloquentiam graviter ornatque dicere qua una re maxime conciliantur multitudinis animi.

Through philosophy we can acquire correct views, which is of first importance in everything; through eloquence we can speak with weight and polish, which is the one skill that most effectively wins over the minds of the masses. Vergerio makes explicit the link between language and command when he presents the primary contribution of eloquence to the education of a free-born youth as the imparting of a “skill that most effectively wins over the minds of the masses”. Vergerio is, of course, drawing on classical precedent in his argument. Cicero, for example, in his *De Inventione* conjures up a scene of primary colonisation which is a scene of exemplary instruction. The dutifully attendant savages are converted to civility through eloquence, their subjection sweetened by words that transform them into respectable citizens. In *De optimo genere oratorum* (46BC) Cicero underlines the connection between words, figures and influence:

> The supreme orator, then, is one whose speech instructs, delights and moves the minds of his audience. [...] For as eloquence consists of language and thought, we
must manage while keeping our diction faultless and pure—that is in good Latin—to achieve a choice of words both proper and figurative. Of ‘proper words’ we should choose the most elegant, and in the case of figurative language we should be modest in our use of metaphors and careful to avoid far-fetched comparisons.  

In the topical rhetoric beloved of Cicero and Ciceronians, the object in debate was to gain possession of the topos, the place of argument so that the other, the opponent was driven out. Thus, in the Western tradition from antiquity to the Renaissance and beyond, the figure of the eloquent orator becomes a talismanic promise of authority. By driving out enemies, winning over allies (“the minds of the masses”) and establishing a ready equation between civility and possession (the rightful topos of the well-spoken), eloquence is inherent to the construction of empire.

Quintillian is another tutelary figure from the classical world whose thinking on oratory and eloquence will shape Renaissance attitudes. More importantly, for the purposes of the present essay, Quintillian makes an explicit connection between translation, eloquence and the particular challenge of figurative speech. In his *Institutio Oratoria* (c.96AD) he explains why it is desirable for the Romans to translate from the Greek:

> For the Greek authors excel in copiousness of matter, and have introduced a vast deal of art into the study of eloquence; and, in translating them, we may use the very best words, for all that we use may be our own. As to [verbal] figures, by which language is principally ornamented we may be under the necessity of inventing a great number and variety of them, because the Roman tongue differs greatly from that of the Greeks.

For Quintillian translation not only brings the resources of Greek eloquence into the Latin language thus making Latin in both a literal and figurative sense more powerful but it is figurative language which demonstrates the generative potential of translation. Verbal figures in translation bring with them the necessity of invention so translation in a sense unleashes creative energies which further feed into the scope and prestige of the target language. If civility, eloquence and translation are linked in an epistemic charmed circle what happens when these notions are put to the test in a situation of bloody rivalry and exacerbated cultural conflict? To answer this question we will now turn our attention to the Tudor wars in sixteenth-century Ireland.

**Language and Conquest**

When the English Crown set about in earnest to reconquer Ireland from the 1530s onwards, it was faced with a country which was overwhelmingly Irish speaking. The English-speaking community which had been established on the foot of the Anglo-Norman invasion at the end of the twelfth century had been greatly diminished in the intervening centuries. There were a number of reasons for this. Many smaller tenants had returned to England in the thirteenth century, disappointed by the lack of success of their Irish ventures. The Black Death arrived in Ireland in the summer of 1348 and by Christmas had killed 14,000 people in Dublin alone. The plague epidemic mainly affected the English speakers in Ireland’s towns and cities, thus further reducing their numbers. The English Crown grappling with internal problems linked to dynastic succession in the Wars of the Roses and externally embroiled in continuous conflict with France was not disposed to show much interest in its Irish colony through the fourteenth and fifteenth century. When Henry VIII undertook the reconquest of Ireland, the enterprise was different in one important respect from the earlier Anglo-Norman invasion of the twelfth

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century. The Tudor campaign was not only military, it was cultural. Military or political submission was not enough, culture and language too would have to conform to the new order. The change in policy accorded with a new-found confidence in the English language and a belief that as demonstrated by Latin and the Romans, the expansion of English overseas territories would also imply the expansion of the English language. Fynes Moryson who was involved in the military campaigns of the period and who was an important propagandist for the English cause expresses this renewed belief in the English language even if his analogy betrays some lingering anxieties:

they are confuted who traduce the English tounge to be like a beggers patched Cloke, which they should rather compare to a Posey of sweetest flowers, because by the sayd meanes, it hath been in late ages excellently refyned and made perfitt for ready and brief delivery both in prose and verse.

A clue as to what made the English language “perfitt for ready and brief delivery both in prose and verse” is provided by another military adventurer in Ireland, Sir Humphrey Gilbert. Gilbert who displayed extraordinary savagery in quelling the Munster rebellion of 1579 published a work a year later where he stressed the importance of oratorical training and eloquence but stipulated that this training be provided not in Latin but in English. In Queen Elizabethes Academy, Gilbert argued for the establishment of a university in London. Crucial to the activities of instructors in this new university was translation. Each language teacher should “printe some Translation into the English tongue of some good worke every three years.” Translation would nourish the English language in the way that Quintillian saw Greek nurturing Latin. Furthermore, the more eloquent the English language, the better fitted it was to be the language of empire and the more flowers in the bouquet, the more becoming the conquest. Where were these flowers to come from if not like Quintillian’s verbal figures, from other languages through translation? As Patricia Palmer points out in Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland, “The fact that so many leading translators of the age—Bryskett, Fenton, Googe, Harrington—were also players in the conquest of Ireland confirms the uncanny incongruity between pushing back the frontiers of English and expanding the geopolitical boundaries in which it operated.”

For the purposes of our discussion, it is possible to argue that there are three aspects of the sixteenth century English translation enterprise which impact on the translation of the figurative. Firstly, there is the repeated belief that it is the density of figurative speech which defines the communicative eloquence of language. Secondly, there is a recognition of the absolute necessity of translation to the success of the project of figurative regeneration of the language. If Matthiessen will define translation as a quintessentially “Elizabethan Art” it is because for the Elizabethans the incorporation and appropriation of the foreign is fundamental to the construction of a robust national identity and an expansionist empire.

The conquest of foreign books is an indispensable preliminary to that shift from barbarity to civility, that eloquent metamorphosis which allows figures of speech to become keys to power. Thirdly, and conversely, it is figurative language in translation which becomes a site of recurrent cultural and political anxiety. It was not only the power of the words that would preoccupy the Elizabethans, it was their purity. The case of Edmund Spenser is instructive in this regard. In his work on Irish affairs, A View of the Present State of Ireland, Spenser has two characters, Irenius and Eudoxus, discuss the present condition of Ireland and offer suggestions about what might be done in the future to make the rebellious
island more amenable to the designs of the Crown. At one point in the dialogue, Irenius makes the following observation:

Yea, truly, I have caused diverse of them to be translated unto me, that I might understand them, and surely they savoured of good wit and invention, but skilled not of the goodly ornaments of poetry. Yet they were sprinkled with some pretty flowers of their own natural devise, which gave good grace and comeliness unto them, the which it is a great pity to see so abused to the gracing of wickedness and vice, which would with good usage serve to beautify and adorn virtue.  

Here it is the device of translation that makes particularly apparent the figurative potential of the language of the other—the “good wit”, “invention”, “pretty flowers”, “grace”, “comeliness” to which Spenser refers—but Irish is all the more dangerous because of that seductiveness. If these “pretty flowers” made their way into the English “Posey” then there was no telling what the consequences might be. Or rather there was and the example was close to hand. The Englishmen engaged in the Tudor reconquest of Ireland were greatly exercised by what had happened to those earlier Englishmen who had come to Ireland as a result of the Anglo-Norman invasion. The fact that large numbers of them had become acculturated to Gaelic language and society and remained on the whole faithful to Roman Catholicism was ritually presented as an eloquent example of the perils of colonisation. As John Davies noted in his Discovery of the True Causes why Ireland was never Entirely Subdued (1612), “Then the estate of things, like a Game at Irish, was so turned about, as the English, which hoped to make a perfect conquest of the Irish, were by them perfectly and absolutely conquered” (his emphasis). The cultural and linguistic fate of the “Old English” as they came to be known was seen to be a cautionary tale for the New English, their defection proof of the dangerous transformation or “alterage” which awaited those who agreed to play the “Game at Irish”. Ironically, it is a member of the Old English community who sees not the Old but the New English as being particularly susceptible to blandishments of the figurative. Richard Stanihurst claims that his translation of the first four books of Virgil shows the “riches of oure speeche” but in his De rebus in Hibernia gestis, he thunders against that “strange and florid English, currently fashionable which plunders from foreign languages” whereas the Old English in Ireland “preserve among them the pure and pristine tongue” of Chaucer.  

The ambivalence towards figurative language and its appropriation through translation is notably expressed in George Puttenham’s The Arte of English Poesie (1589). In this work, Puttenham advances two theses which are fundamental to his argument for the particular excellence of English as a vernacular language. Firstly, he argues that English is superior to the classical languages because it has retained the metaphoric speech and primitive poetry of its origins. Secondly, he applauds the Areopagites’ ban on “all manner of figurative speaches” and expresses his suspicion of all “forraine and coloured talke”. Thus, metaphor makes language but it is also metaphor that can unmake language if there are doubts about its origins. The threat to the English language and English nationalism at the moment of national formation and imperial expansion is the ever present danger of transgression through all “manner of figurative speaches”. Translation may indeed be the “Elizabethan Art” par excellence in the words of Matthiessen but the activity is also suspected by commentators like Puttenham to be the chief culprit in this figurative subversion and dangerous “othering” of the English language.
Metaphor and relational semantics

Eric Cheyfitz in his *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from ‘The Tempest’ to ‘Tarzan’* has the following to say about metaphor in the sixteenth century:

> for Europeans, metaphor occupies the place of both the foreign and the domestic, the savage and the civilized, it occupies the place of both nature and culture; it is, at once, the most natural of languages or language in its most natural state and the most cultivated or cultured. Metaphor is nature; metaphor translates nature into culture.\(^{15}\)

The fundamental problem however for Tudor cultural commentators is whether culture is somehow made “unnatural” by this translation of nature into culture. Even more alarming is the possible pairing of the “un-national” and “un-natural”—a recurrent trope in the demonology of cultural nationalism—in the Tudor rhetorical engagement with difference through translation. The danger is all the more real in that there is a decisive shift in thinking about language in the period from referential semantics to relational semantics. Pioneers in this paradigm shift in Renaissance linguistics were Lorenzo Valla and Juan Luis Vives. Valla in his study of the changes in Latin over time demonstrated that language was not an ahistorical object which emerged always already made but rather that it was basically the socio-historical creation of a speech community. Vives for his part demonstrated that words which were previously thought to be similar, such as *homo* and *anthropos*, meant in fact somewhat different things. The net effect of these demonstrable differences between the semantic fields of various words was to prove that no two languages operated in the same way.\(^{16}\) Thus, the work of these scholars and others initiated a fundamental semantic shift in the Renaissance from a view of language simply representing reality (referential semantics) to a view of language generating that selfsame reality (relational semantics). The shift carried with it implications for how translation might be conceptualised and also what its effects might be on cultural engagement.

In the first instance, relational semantics called into question more naïve or literalist notions of translation equivalence. If translation theoreticians from Cícero and Jerome onwards had cast doubts on the possibilities of one-to-one, referential equivalence, the findings of the language scholars appeared to justify their scepticism. In particular, the translation of figurative speech, long held to test the limits of the word-for-word fetishisation of fidelity, was an exemplary case of the inadequacy of referential semantics. Figurative language, as that which presented the particular genius of a language community in the eyes of Puttenham and others, was precisely that feature of language which the community had specifically created and which did not fit easily into the speech of other different and distinct language communities. A further consequence of the semantic shift for translation was what words, whether in the original or translation, could do to reality. If language is seen to create reality, what figurative language expresses in a particularly dramatic or heightened form is the ability of other languages to generate entirely different sets of meanings or ways of viewing the world. In the case of referential semantics, a belief in a common Adamic origin for language, where language was viewed as a somewhat elaborate pointing exercise to objects in the real world, provided a basis for a trust in the existence of universal meanings in the world. In other words, the objects pointed to by the words place their own limits on what differences might exist. With the advent of relational semantics, this was no longer the
case. To some extent, it is possible to argue that what William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* dramatises is precisely a world which must come to terms with the generative consequences of this new vision of semantics.

If the conventional relationship between words and reality is changed, then translation acquires wholly new powers. Now words in translation can shape our vision of the real and cause us to experience reality differently. If Caliban learns the language of his master Prospero, then in the changed universe of relational semantics, what he carries through from his mother tongue in his translated speech can alter the world as much as Prospero’s imaginative ruminations. So the translator as agent of metamorphosis may not only effect change but become himself or herself metamorphosised in the process. If metaphor, in particular, and figurative language generally is about the matching of the like and the unlike, the bringing together of the alien and the domestic, then it seems similarly true that translation is primarily a metaphorical operation in its bringing together of difference and that all metaphor is fundamentally a translational operation. If translation has a transformative power, which is allied to the metaphorical and the figurative, what are the consequences for how translators are viewed in a situation of violent cultural encounter?

Sir Henry Wotton, one of the foremost English diplomats of his age and himself a translator of some accomplishment, acted as secretary to the Earl of Essex in the latter’s negotiations with Hugh O’Neill, the leader of the Gaelic Irish. In a letter to his close friend, John Donne, Wotton expresses his exasperation with those responsible for the linguistic mediation between the Gaelic Irish and the New English, “Whatsoever we have done, or mean to do, we know what will become of it, when it comes among our worst enemies, which are interpreters. I would there were more O’Neales and Macguiers and O’Donnell and Mac-Mahons and fewer of them.” The interpreter is the unstable, uncertain figure passing between two languages, two cultures, two sets of political allegiances and no one is immune to the “alterage” such traffic brings. This much is suggested by Shakespeare’s *Henry VI Part 2*, where the Duke of York provides us with a potted biography of the rebel leader Jack Cade. After being informed of his exemplary courage in the field of battle, we then learn of Cade’s mission as a translator in the Anglo-Irish wars:

> Full often, like a shag-haired crafty kern,
> Hath he conversèd with the enemy,
> And undiscovered come to me again
> And given me notice of their villainies. (III, i, 367-370)

Cade’s doubleness is used by his masters in their strategic advance through Irish territory but it is precisely this dissembling duality which makes him a troublesome subject. Having served the Crown in Ireland he returns to England to take up arms against the Crown. So the transformers of speech, those dealing in language metamorphosis become themselves transformed by the activities. They become in a sense metaphors for the inherent instability and fraught nature of language and cultural contact in the war zone of territorial expansion. Translators as individuals who are subject to the continual effects of “alterage” alter cultures for better or for worse, depending on who is evaluating the outcomes and from what perspective. Nations and cultures in an expansionist phase both need and fear the good offices of translation. In particular, they go to translation to sustain the figurative resources of eloquence which ensures a cultural legitimacy for political acts of appropriation. The difficulty is one of openness and containment. In other words, how does the national or imperial language open up to other languages...
without being subtly undermined in the process, the figurative re-entry of the rejected or the repressed destabilising strategies of coercion and control? The sweetest flowers can adorn the triumphant nuptials between the different realms of the Crown but they can also be present at the burial of imperial ambition.

NOTES

ABSTRACTS

The article examines the question of figurative language in a political context. The Renaissance interest in the dual notions of civility and eloquence is discussed in relation to the connection between translation and eloquence that dates back to antiquity. The article examines the problem for the construction of nation and empire that is presented by figurative language. Figurative language is both an indispensable resource for the development of eloquence and a dangerous site of transgression. The case of English translation contact with Ireland in the sixteenth century is considered as symptomatic of the political and cultural anxieties centred around the translation of figurative language.

Cet article traite de la question de la figure de style dans un contexte politique. L’intérêt que les théoriciens de la Renaissance portaient au sujet de la civilité et de l’éloquence est examiné dans le cadre du lien étroit, qui existe depuis l’Antiquité, entre la traduction et l’éloquence. L’article aborde le défi que présente le langage figuré pour la construction de la nation et de l’empire. Le langage figuré est à la fois une ressource indispensable pour l’évolution de l’éloquence et un site néfaste de transgression potentielle. Le cas du contact culturel anglais avec l’Irlande par le biais de la traduction est présenté comme un symptôme des angoisses politico-linguistiques qui se cristallisent autour de la traduction du langage figuré.

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