

Translating between 'small' languages

A case of Celtic languages

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Is there a difference between translating from one major language to another and translating between minor languages, or between major and minor, or vice versa? I have translated to varying extents into Irish from French, Italian, Latin, Welsh, and occasionally English. That sounds like a lot of major-to-minor, not to mention the category 'ancient-to-modern', but I've had some minor-to-minor experience too, in my case with Welsh to Irish.

For a bit of background, Irish and Welsh are Celtic languages, and belong to a branch of Indo-European once widespread over huge swathes of western and central Europe and spoken as far south as Iberia and ancient Galatia in Asia Minor. But as Latin and the Germanic languages spread Celtic declined, and in modern times, despite official recognition for Irish and Welsh, community use of Celtic languages is confined to a few regions of Ireland, Britain, and Brittany in northwest France.

Celtic has two branches. Irish, Scottish Gaelic, and Manx (now being revived

on the Isle of Man, where they've recently translated *Casino Royale*) are closely related and termed Q-Celtic. Welsh, Breton, and Cornish (now being revived in Cornwall) form the P-Celtic group, being closely related to one another and more distantly related to the Q-Celtic group. 'Five' is *cúig* in Irish and *pump* in Welsh, for example.

Varying orthographies

Let me say at once that Irish and Welsh, though related, are far from being mutually intelligible. There is an underlying correspondence in syntax and grammatical features, but that's about it. Sentences begin with the verb, nouns have two genders, adjectives follow their nouns; there is no indefinite article; and both languages feature initial mutation, in roughly the same circumstances, but differently. Where written Irish keeps the original initial and shows the mutation as well, Welsh will show only the resultant mutated form. For example, if 'horse' is *capall* in Irish and *ceffyl* in Welsh, 'my horse' is *mo chapall* in Irish but *fy ngheffyl* in Welsh. Etymological connections can



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Máire Nic Mhaoláin
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be buried deep, and further obscured by two widely varying orthographies. Yes, *capall* is a bit like *ceffyl*, but only because they are both from Latin. The visual impact is very different too. The letters *w* and *y*, for instance, are not found in normal Irish but proliferate in Welsh, often side by side (as in *gwyrth*, *cywir*), and in the accented forms *wŷ* and *wy*.

A further refinement of Welsh spelling is the use of digraphs, whereby *ch*, *dd*, *ff*, *ng*, *ll*, *ph*, *rh*, *th* are considered single entities when determining word order in the dictionary. Initial *ch*, *ff*, *ll*, and *rh* have (or had in those days) separate sections in the dictionary from words beginning with simple *c*, *f*, *l*, or *r*. Add in possible initial mutations, and finding new words in the dictionary could be hell. I once met a scholar who had devised an algorithm to predict 'pretty accurately' the 'real initial' of Welsh words. I often wish I'd got his number.

Influence of English

Both Irish and Welsh are increasingly influenced by English vocabulary — Welsh more so, given its geographical position. (I once spent ages scouring

the dictionary for *o diar* before realising it was just 'Oh dear!').

Irish-language organisations and agencies have often looked to the achievements of the Welsh in preserving their linguistic heritage. I had studied the Celtic languages at university in Belfast, and later on, realising the particular dearth of reading material for teenagers in Irish, was moved to attempt translating something from Welsh. So, with little or no acquaintance with the Welsh literary scene, I chose a juvenile novel more or less at random, and set to work.

The essentially rural setting for my first novel was not very different from its Irish counterpart, and in those pre-digital days there wasn't much technology to be translated. Phones were answered in Welsh (or Irish) with 'Hello! Carnan 392.' I had decided to relocate the action of the story to Ireland, changing personal names and place names (invented) accordingly. I kept one Welsh name, however, for a visiting artist, turning him at once into an exotic Welshman.

Welsh has an informal (singular) and a formal (or plural) form for 'you'. My young Welsh characters used the plural pronoun to grown-ups, etc, and the singular to family and friends. Everybody uses the singular in Irish. (An old honorific plural is occasionally used when addressing a clergyman). In the Welsh, a new boyfriend was overheard arranging a date with the heroine, in the singular! Her uncle remarked that for two people who had allegedly just recently met they were very pally. The heroine rushed to claim (in the Irish) that nobody worried about 'things like that' any more. Irish readers may presume the uncle disapproved of the friendship, whereas in Welsh he was merely amused at the give-away use of the pronoun.

Welsh expletives, at least in print, seem rather mild. In informal Irish, on the other hand, one may freely invoke the deity or saints with a confident familiarity. At one point the heroine, fearing to be late home, exclaims in Irish 'Ó, a Mhaighdean Bheannaithe, caithfidh mé imeacht!' ('Oh, Blessed Virgin, I have to go!') Whatever she said in Welsh, that wasn't it.

Though not commissioned, that first translation won a small award and was accepted by the publishing house where I worked, finally appearing in 1989. Dizzy with success, I had meanwhile undertaken to translate a second novel by the same author, Mair Wynn Hughes. From a different publisher, this one actually appeared before the previous one, in 1986. I left the story in its original setting, where all the Welsh names and passing references to 'rugby' and 'open prison', added a degree of foreignness at the time to the Irish version.

Later on, I was invited to translate a little story by Bob Eynon, about a group of Welsh children on a school trip to Spain. That came out in 1994. Then I translated two short novels by the same author, featuring the detective Debra Craig fighting crime in Spain and California. These all had built-in foreignness, so no relocation was attempted. Published in 1994 and 1996, they were originally written for adult learners of Welsh, with simple language and grammar, which I tried to reflect in the Irish versions.

It is a while since I've translated any Welsh. Translations from Welsh to Irish do appear sporadically, but it remains the case that such translations at any level are rare indeed.