

# What's in a name?

## Indirect translation

Nayara Güércio

If something is lost in translation, then something is doubly lost in indirect translation. This seems to be the general assumption. But what is indirect translation (ITr) exactly? In a broad sense, it is the process of translating translations. One might go on to ask whether ITr is the same as relay or pivot translation. Authors such as Assis Rosa, Pięta and Bueno Maia would argue that indirect translation is a better term than relay or pivot, not only because it has a straightforward antonym (direct translation), but also because it is a convenient umbrella term to encompass several hyponyms. However, there is little consensus among researchers. Cay Dollerup, for instance, suggests that relay and indirect translations mean two different things. For him, relayed texts are intermediary realizations rendered for the public, whereas indirect texts are not made for any audience other than the subsequent translator. I am, however, tempted to question whether this distinction would have any real consequence for a translator's work. Would they shift their translation strategy if they knew beforehand that their texts were only meant to be steppingstones between the source and the ultimate target text?

Twenty-two years have passed since Dollerup made this distinction between the terms *relay* and *indirect* and yet, there is still no general agreement as to what terminology best describes the phenomenon. Terminology is always an important issue when doing research, but it does not seem to have much effect on ITr as a practice. *Relay* seems to be the preferred term for interpreters, whereas subtitlers tend to use *pivot*. Other terms such as *double*, *eclectic*, *intermediate*, *mediated* and even *second hand* have been used interchangeably with indirect translation in various contexts.

**“Indirect translations are seldom identified as such”**

As well as the previously mentioned authors, others have tried to differentiate *indirect translation* from other terms. Yves Gambier, for instance, distinguishes *indirect translation* from *back translation* and *retranslation*. Geraldine Brodie puts forward the term *literal translation*

when detailing the process of translating indirectly for the stage.

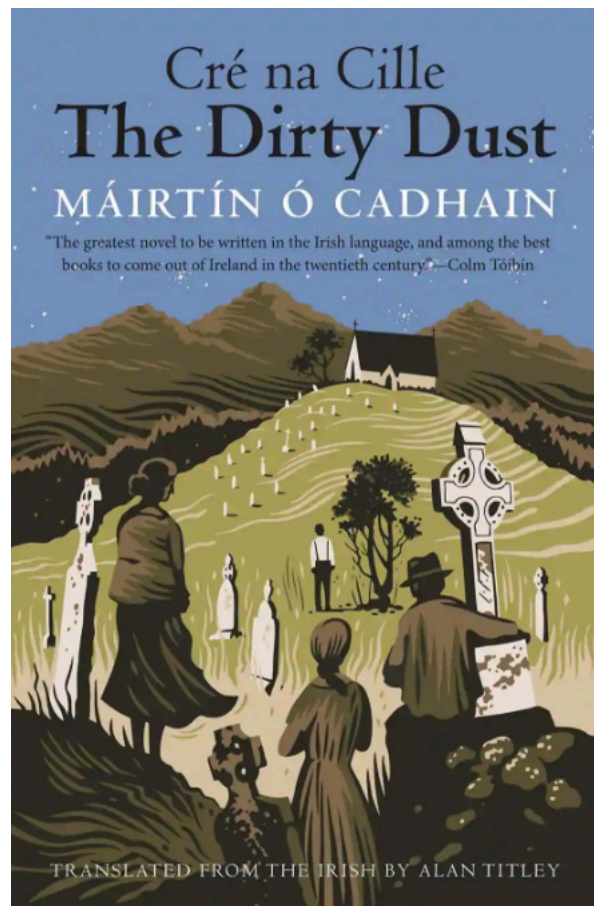
Terminological discussions aside, it is fair to assume that indirect translation comes with particular challenges and, thus, requires specific competences according to Ester Torres-Simón. When two languages or cultures come into contact, indirect translation can be one of the means by which they communicate, adds Laura Ivaska. In contexts like these, it is easy to predict that details may be lost. In some countries, policy makers can actively discourage indirect translation, by not providing grants for such translation, a subject covered by the Swedish academic, Cecilia Alvstad. Possibly as a consequence, indirect translations are seldom identified as such.

### Challenges and gains

Historically, indirect translation has been a common practice in film, TV, science, the news and especially in the literary world. One exceptionally famous indirect translation, in particular, stands out as having been exceedingly popular for centuries: the Bible.

Originally written in Aramaic, Greek and Hebrew, the Bible was translated into Latin from which it has been translated into multiple other languages. As explained by Torres-Simón, the indirect route was the standard procedure for Bible translation until the early twentieth century. Even though indirect translation was common practice in this context, questions about Bible translations and their faithfulness have always been around. Alongside the challenges, there are also some gains.

It is, for instance, worth remembering that without indirect translation, Google Translate as we know it would be substantially more limited. There is simply not enough data for the software to perform direct translations from every language into every other language. In practice, Google Translate tends to translate the so-called minor languages into more major languages, and from there, translate them again into other minor languages. Since we entered the digital age, it has become almost impossible to envisage travelling in interlingual contexts without being able to resort to Google Translate, should the need arise.



*Máirtín Ó Cadhain's The Dirty Dust (Cré na Cille) translated by Alan Titley  
Cover: Yale University Press*



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**Photo: Cristina Barroso**

Also worthy of note is that without indirect translation there would be far fewer translations of work by authors in arguably peripheral languages like Irish. A good example is Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille* (*The Dirty Dust*; 1949), which is considered by many to be one of the best Irish-language books ever written. It has been translated into over fourteen languages to date, including Greek, Tamil and Turkish, though almost all appeared after the publication of two English translations in 2016, on which most subsequent translations have been based. One could argue that these translations would have come into existence eventually – but the fact is that *Cré na Cille* waited over half a century.

### Can we afford to keep waiting?

Not waiting gave us Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in Hebrew after having gone through German and Russian. Brazilians were able to read Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, after its indirect translation from Russian into French and then from French into Portuguese. The *Arabian Nights* made its way to Russian readers through its French translation.

Indirect translation is, in essence, a way of granting people access to culture, history and entertainment that would otherwise remain beyond their reach. The real question is if we would have been culturally richer had we avoided indirect translation and accepted the wait instead. I am not sure.