

# **The Impact of ' English' on Post-colonial Identity**

## **Brian Friel as an Example**

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The individual is identified with the language that he/she speaks. For that reason, to try to free someone from his language is to try to alter his identity that can lead to deep and probably harmful results. Since language is the integrated element that constitutes the individuality and identity of a person, it has been used as a key weapon in the political arena. Sharon Millar, commenting on the domineering influence of language, observes: " ... among the most powerful linguistic weapons of dominance must be included language standardization and the maintenance and propagation of standard norms." (1994, 301) Again, Clayton Collins points to this same political and social power yielded by language. Collins says: "Language has been equated with cultural clout - ... " (Online) On the other hand, imperialists argue that the language of identity impedes one's ability to use his power of judgment outside his own ordinary categorical social limits. In this respect, a recurrent question is raised: " .... It is really possible to belong to two language groups simultaneously? " as Karmela Liebkind asks. Liebkind's answer elaborates on this issue of bilingual identity:

**My answer is usually that if a child can manage to have two parents, he or she also manages to have two mother tongues. If a child can love two parents, he or she can love two languages , provided that the two**

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**language groups (or the two parents) are not in conflict with each other! .... (Online)**

in its deeper meaning, bilingualism turns to become a sign of difference and nonconformity.

This paper is essentially concerned with the influence of 'English' on postcolonial identity in an attempt to bring to light the political implications of language. By such study of bilingual identity, the purpose is to find out consequences of being different. I would also like to examine the contributions of Brian Friel in postcolonial literature.

Although 'English' never becomes the world's native tongue, a value system on multicultural constituency is imposed via this language. 'English' appeals to a large number of people all over the world; it also teaches different values at home and abroad. Furthermore, people quickly learn English, not because they are obliged to, but because it allows them to get ahead in different fields of life. Brian Paltridge presents multifarious facets of 'English':

**It is the language of the international business, the language of international conferences, the language of international education and research, the language of the international communications network, the language of international popular music and the language of international travellers. A Thai asking directions in Malaysia will probably make his or her first attempt at communication in English .... (Online).**

In general, English is used as a common language to accelerate the assimilation of individuals into other different systems. Therefore, English could be transferred to the level of technical language that is completely divested of its artistic or critical level. Stephen Baker and Sandra Dallas regard English as the established lingua franca of world economy. They write:

**Now , the currencies are joining into one, the same cellular phones work from Lisbon to Helsinki, and Europeans are spanning their borders by jumping onto the Web . Virtually everyone who's plugged into this Europewide economy speaks English. It is Europe's language. (Baker and Dallas Online)**

Students study English to gain access to computers, react in response to instructions or send out messages. So, English is not simply a national language but a transnational one. Hence, English becomes the means by which a human being acquires the culture of another society ; it allows individuals to exchange roles in their own community and in the wider social context around. That being so, acculturation leads the minority group to pass through a period of transformation by thinking in the dominant language.

Since language and thinking are inseparably joined in close association , standardization of English might be an instance of a political and hostile attitude towards individuals. English stands for a whole range of interests , thoughts or attitudes. As a result , it completely disregards the minority's supposed characteristics. Thus , when members of minority groups reach a certain level of development , they have to make their own independent choice in life . On the other hand , the dominant society's increasing employment of power could be a decisive element in the disintegration of social unity. Sjaak Kroon underlines the same precept : " .... **An important factor in the dissolution of ethnic cohesion is the ( indirect ) pressure exerted by the dominant society ....**" ( Online ) Consequently, an emphasis ought to be placed on the relation between language, especially ' English ' , and colonialism .

With the end of World War II, a sense of national consciousness was reawakened. More nations became independent and, accordingly, witnessed a rebirth in their literary works. Naturally, colonial interests clashed with inherited

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national thoughts to generate the ' postcolonial ' work. This post colonial work then emerges from a strongly artistic power which underlines a variety of different expressions ranging from simple remarks of protest to strong feelings of patriotism. Hugh Webb offers explanatory notes on the term 'postcolonial': **"....What has occurred is that the 'postcolonial' is no longer a term operating in the classificatory spaces of a literary history . It is now functioning something like a genre – a genre not only of texts but of peoples , of cultures ...."** ( 1996 , 198 ) Conversely, in Satchidanandan's view, **" Post – colonialism can be neo - colonialism with or without a hyphen, the empire assigning a role to former colonies and commanding them once again to speak its language."** (1996 , 5 )

Seen in this light, minorities' demands of their linguistic rights are a clear manifestation of an adherence to cultural origins. Par excellence, in Hong Kong, the number of schools that teach English is decreased by the government. The local Cantonese is used instead. Besides, the Dublin, Ireland-Based European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages aims at maintaining minority cultures and languages. Collins elucidates this fact more:

**Western Europe enjoys relative stability – its hard-core separatist movements are limited to the Basques in Spain, who use their own language, and republicans in Northern Ireland, who sometimes use Gaelic as a kind of phonetic demarcation from their English-speaking rulers.**  
(Online)

As a matter of fact, Irish literature has always been identified as essentially anti - colonial. It offers an outstandingly clear archetype of the postcolonial condition in all its diversity. Ian Crump refers to this fact in the following account:

**... , Irish literature has self-consciously defined itself as primarily a national**

**(ist),anti – colonial literature. Moreover, precisely because of its many (re) constructions of Irish racial , linguistic , and sexual identities , this literature offers an especially potent paradigm for the postcolonial condition in all its multiplicity. (1996,31)**

Crump further suggests that Irish literature passes through five stages of development. In the 1880s, Irish writers started to revive their native precolonial tradition; they mainly aimed to address their colonizers. After their Gaelic tradition has been ruined, the Irish people experienced a sense of displacement due to the ever growing British influence over them. Moreover, the Potato Famine (1845 – 1848) made bitterer this sense of displacement . In the second stage, writers' literary output extended beyond their national boundaries. They habitually preferred to separate themselves from home and chose a voluntary absence from Ireland. A third stage then follows: writers tried to dispossess their literature of its mythological element in order to uncover the meaning underlying it. Writers from the fourth stage attempted to avoid the worldwide vision of their antecedents. Finally, in the last phase, writers produced an anti-colonial literature from an overwhelmingly female perspective. (Crump, 32 – 9) Crump goes on to say :

**As this account of Irish literature suggests , a literature does not cease to be postcolonial once a colony has attained its independence, any more than its politics its economics , or its history does . The struggle against colonialism , neocolonialism ' double colonialism' is an ongoing one , and postcolonial writers remain engaged in efforts**

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**to create a beauty which shapes this  
struggle even as it escapes from these  
postcolonial realities which bruise them  
....(40)**

On the cultural plane, Irish writers have been engaged in reconsidering the progressive decline of colonialism in Ulster and the persisting effects of neo-colonialism in the Southern Republic. For example, James Connolly (1868 – 1916) was an Irish socialist and patriot who developed strongly socialist beliefs. He believes that the rights of Irish workers could only be accomplished by a struggle against British Imperialism in Ireland. In his *Labour in Irish History* (1910), Connolly judges early Irish society as a socialist unit and interprets the position of the Unionists in Ulster as the result of the discriminatory policy of British colonialists. Furthermore, Patrick Henry Pearse (1879 – 1916) was committed to the fulfillment of the Gaelic League's aspirations. He advocated his nationalist convictions in his journal – *An Barr Buadh*. He was sentenced to death by a British court martial as he was previously appointed commandant-general of the Republican forces on Easter Monday. Similarly, Douglas Hyde (1860 – 1949), the first president of Ireland, was another cultural activist. Hyde joined the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language. He also stressed the cultural and social importance of Irish for national self-esteem. In general, he argued for the maintaining of all that was best in Irish language and history, and against the random borrowing and inept imitation of English manners and habits. Hyde also directed attention to the expressive potentials of 'Hiberno – English'. He formulated an exact English adaptation of the phraseology and syntax of the Irish oral folk tradition, so that the reader could shift easily from text to translation. Similarly, in 1980, Brian Friel established the Field Day – a literary movement as well as a theatre company – to redefine the Irish cultural identity.

As a postcolonial writer, Brian Friel (1929) sought a return to his Irish roots and, as a result of that, restored confidence to his long-forgotten history. William Pratt profiles Friel's major accomplishments: " **Brian Friel is arguably the best living playwright, a dramatist whose works attract immediate interest in Dublin, London or New York whenever they are introduced in those major theatrical cities ....** " (Online) Similarly, Mike Burns expounds on the same idea of Friel's popularity. Burns writes:

Is this some sort of Friel theatrical mania? Not really. Simply an **overwhelming desire by theatre managers, actors, producers, directors, writers, and theatregoers to celebrate the remarkable contribution this public yet intensely private, man has made to Irish and world theatre over the past four decades.** (Online)

In fact, Friel together with Beckett, have frequently proved themselves to be Ireland's most successful and prosperous dramatists. Friel's literary output matches up to his coevals'. As Maxwell has observed, " **With them and with Beckett it falls into a recognizable line of dissent. Of the writers whose images are in their origin directly of Ireland ....**" (1984, 212) Though he was highly connected with Derry, Friel was born to Omagh in Northern Ireland. In 1960, he moved to Co. Donegal as regional violence appeared in Northern Ireland.

The abiding concern of Friel's work is the cultural clash between the colonized and the colonizer – a typically binary psychological opposition. In most of his works, he portrays two opposing forces that are pulling in opposite directions. In *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1969), he reflects upon his central poetic vision of Irish exile. *The Gentle Island* (1971) presents a strong juxtaposition between pastoral scenes and its disagreeable reality. *The Freedom of the City* (1973) scrutinizes the Irish nationalist milieu which is best exemplified in the excessively burning political crisis in Northern Ireland. *Volunteers* (1975)

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represents a more allegorical and emblematic treatment of Irish history. Friel's translation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1981) echoes his perpetual interest in the role of 'English' in Ireland. Again, *The Communication Cord functions* as a variation on the theme of 'translation'. All these pieces are tied together by a common theme: the nostalgic yearning for some unattainable ideal. It is easy then to glimpse the political implication of his writings. In short, Maxwell states emphatically: " ..., Friel has written the most substantial and impressive body of work in contemporary Irish drama ...." (201)

Nevertheless, Friel's political notions are becoming less intense by referring to more private or personal affairs, employing themes like fidelity and deception to work on two levels. In brief, his theatre examines the inner forces that determine external action. In his *Celtic Revivals*, Seamus Deane notes:

**It is this weight of inherited failure and the uniqueness of the individual response to it which are both made manifest on Friel's double stage, the exhibition area and the magic circle area. The anguish of the individual life passes over into the communal life through violence, borne in language. ... (1985, 173)**

Friel's fusion of the national and the social forms the basis of his characters' self-recognition. Kieran Flanagan asserts this view: "...this playwright struck an unexpected sociological chord. This was an Irish voice that spoke in an accent capable of being heard by young sociology students ...." (Online)

Unlike his contemporary Irish nationalists, Friel does not seek to go back to his linguistic roots. Irish nationalist writers try earnestly to regain their Gaelic culture and language as they were before. In Baker's words: "... By reacting against an imposed language, Irish nationalists endeavor to restore their own identity and return symbolically to precolonial status, before their homeland was appropriated and translated." (Online)



Per contra, one of Friel's preoccupations is to write in English. In *A Short History of Irish Literature*, Seamus Deane has this to say of Friel:

**This process in Friel culminated in the widely acknowledged masterpiece, *Translations*, in which the linguistic crisis which saw the disappearance of Gaelic and its replacement by English becomes the focus through which questions of authority and failure, love and treachery, culture and its disintegration are examined .... (1986, 246)**

*Translations* is generally regarded as Friel's supreme artistic achievement. The events of the play occur in an Irish-speaking community in Co. Donegal where the drunken schoolmaster and scholar of classics – Hugh – has run a hedge school for 35 years. He is highly honored by his village people. Owen – Hugh's son – undertakes the role of a translator when the British troops map Co. Donegal. Owen is, in reality, an intermediate agent between two different social or cultural environments. On the other hand, Yolland has been authorized to make himself responsible for renaming all the landmarks in the country. Strangely enough, he has his own conservations about this task of renaming. Yolland and Maire are attracted to one another. In this respect, love becomes the shared 'language' between them. Etherton explains:

**If art can help us understand this failure of communication at the moment of communication then perhaps we can glimpse the nature of other failures beyond communication which language is trying to accommodate. The poetic vision of Brian Friel uses the theatre to explore failure: in language and in society. (1989, 148)**

In response to that, Manus, the local girl, learns 'English' as a means of progress in life while Hugh rejects strongly the decline

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of Gaelic. Sarah has a serious speech impediment, but she learns how to pronounce her name. By the end of the play, Yolland disappears while Owen has already left. Thus, Friel's characters stand for passive products of cultural imperialism. They are left with the expectations of a better future which could be accomplished by a new generation. *Translations* becomes an open-ended play. To quote William Pratt:

**His characters are always restless, and they move about in strange directions, dreaming of journeys that never take place and giving real American names to their destinations but seeming always to arrive at a dead end - - that is, to go nowhere. Yet what is strange about Friel's dramas is that somehow 'nowhere' exists: it is at the very least an intended destination, and at most it is a dreamworld beyond space and time, where the characters hope to find the kind of personal fulfillment impossible in the real world they know.... (Online)**

Paradoxically, Friel's Irish characters have a strong sense of belonging to their homeland together with an impulse to wandering. In his *Celtic Revivals*, Deane writes: **".... In *Translations*, there are two Irelands, two languages, two kinds of violence, ..."** (170) His characters' longing to move to a Utopia offers greater opportunities of personal realization. Deane adds:

**Ireland is, of course, a metaphor in these contexts as well as a place. It is the country of the young, of hope, a perfect coincidence between fact and desire. It is also the country of the disillusioned, where everything is permanently out of joint, violent, broken .... (170-71)**

The play has been acclaimed as a representation of colonialism; it probes the linguistic imperialism of 'English' in Ireland. On the other hand, Irish patriotism is quite noticeable in the play. Phrases of conflict occur, for example, in Hugh's opinion of the impact of English on the Irish people:

**Hugh:** Indeed - English, I suggested, couldn't really express us .... (1981, ACT. I, p. 25)

Yolland, as a representative of the colonizer, is attracted to Irish:

**Yolland:** {To Maire} Very kind of you - thank you ... (To Class.) I can only say that I feel - I feel very foolish to - to - to be working here and not to speak your language .... (Act I, p.32)

Yolland feels an intense intimacy to the Irish countryside. He adds:

**Yolland:** I think your countryside is - is - is - is very beautiful. I've fallen in love with it already.... (Act I, p.32)

Furthermore, Hugh realizes that the mere linguistic usurpation does not necessarily entail an actual physical usurpation. He addresses Owen warningly:

**Hugh :** But remember that words are signals, counters. They are not immortal. And it can happen - to use an image you'll understand. It can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of ...fact. (Act II, Sc. I, p.43)

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It is likewise important to reconsider the functional role ascribed to language. In *Translations*, the concept of language highlights the thematic boundaries of the whole play. When Friel chooses to write in English, he addresses a larger number of audience but in an oblique way. In fact, he is using the essential means of colonialism as a tool of his own emancipation. In this way, Friel aspires to promote the conscience of the whole world and to frustrate the psychology of imperialism. He maintains that Irish literature should not be written in Gaelic; he believes that his general thoughts must not be restricted to one region. Michelene Wandor astutely remarks that: "**Although the play is in English, it is actually meant to be in Gaelic, a kind of verbal trompe- l'oeil device ....**" (1993,62) When Friel presents an image of his Irish people in English, he aims to convey to others his concept of his own peculiar identity through this process of self - presentation. Charles Baker Says:

**Past victims of colonialism, who had English imposed upon them, are now free to do with it what they will. By speaking and writing their own brand of English, the Irish will maintain their individuality while remaining in the modern world....**

(Online )

Accordingly, *Translations* underscores Friel's obsession with language and politics. English is portrayed as one of the principal reasons behind the fall of Gaelic. This decline of Gaelic and its substitution for English turns to be the focal point around which themes of domination, love or infidelity evolve. Christopher Fitz - Simon comments on the dilemma of the whole play in the following assessment:

**... it is really about language - about the destruction of a language by that of a superior colonial power , about the basic notion of language as a means of conveying thought , and about the nature of words. (1983, 195)**

In like manner, Etherton writes: **".... A more difficult and intractable reality is now being depicted: Ireland as part of a world threatened by neo - colonialism and by the gross and increasing imbalance between rich and poor nations ...."** (XVI)

This interest in Irish political and historical causes was aroused after the Great Famine (' The Great Hunger ') (1845 - 1848). Due to this national disaster, the potato crop was wiped out by the fungus *phythoptera infestants*. Literarily, the famine constitutes a recurrent motif on which many Irish writers have modeled their creative works. Etherton goes on to say:

**The potato famines which followed confirmed in the material world what had already taken place in the people's culture. Once the renaming was completed, mass emigration was inevitable in the wake of the famine. The countryside no longer existed as anything that Irish could name. (203)**

Between 1845 - 1851, over a million of the Irish left their country. Only then, English names were practically integrated into the minds of the Irish and divided their own peculiar culture. Brendan O' Connor remarks:

**With associations of famine and mass emigration, what was once a major European language was relegated to a past most of us preferred to forget . At one point in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century it disappeared almost completely from daily life.... ( Online )**

However, in 1922, serious measures were undertaken by the Free State to promote the rebirth of Irish. In 1937, Irish was generally accepted as Ireland's first official language. Nowadays, the *Gaelscoileanna* or ' all - Irish schools ' plays a major role in spreading primary and secondary schools in Ireland. Other channels disseminate the language in the Irish social milieu;

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namely, *TG4* – 'The Irish Language Television Station', *Radio na Gaeltachta* – 'The Irish Language National Radio Service' as well as Irish newspapers. Brendan O' Connor concludes: **"While the picture is not universally rosy it is clear that the spirit is willing regarding the Irish language and there is a strong basis of knowledge from which to cultivate the current renaissance...."** (Online) In this way, Irish intellectuals open up a window on the 'other' which only takes place by dialectic with the self; they play the role of mediators between two cultures for the benefit of their Irish society.

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A SUMMARY  
OF

The Impact of English on Post-Colonial  
Identity  
Brian Friel as an Example

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This paper is essentially concerned with the influence of 'English' on post-colonial identity in an attempt to bring to light the political implications of the language . By such study of a bilingual identity , the purpose of this research is to find out consequences of being different . I would also like to apply these views on the contributions of the Irish dramatist, Brian Friel in postcolonial literature

## ملخص بالعربية

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### تأثير الانجلىزىة على هوية ما بعد الاستعمار براين فريل كنموذج تطبيقى

يتناول البحث دور اللغة فى التعبير عن هوية للفرد فى مجتمعه. فيقدم البحث التأثيرات المختلفة للغة الانجلىزىة على شخصية ما بعد الاستعمار . وبذلك يحاول البحث القاء الضوء على الابعاد السياسية و الاجتماعية للغة من خلال دراسة لاعمال الكاتب المسرحى الايرلندى براين فريل . ان اى محاولة للتحرر من اللغة الخاصة باى مجتمع هى , فى الحقيقة , محاولة للتصل من هوية و ذاتية الافراد فى هذا المجتمع . فعلى سبيل المثال , يزعم الامبريالليون انه قد يصبح الانسان سجيناً للغة و لتقافته لمجرد تمسكه و اعتزازه بهما . و بذلك فالسؤال الذى يطرحه البحث هو: هل من الممكن الانتماء الى لغتين او ثقافتين مختلفتين و بنفس الدرجة ؟