

# SOME HINTS AS TO HOW ENGLISH LITERARY MATTER SHOULD BE TRANSLATED INTO IRISH.

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The most important, the most far-reaching, the most dangerous question of all for learners, when they set about translating English into Irish is the question of how to manage *figurative language*. It may be laid down as a general rule, such is the innate antagonism between the two languages in every phase, that so surely as a word is used figuratively in one it is certain to be taken literally in the other and to express outrageous nonsense. It is, for example, quite a common practice in English to call a *man* a 'lord of creation.' In Irish a literal rendering of those words either has no meaning at all or has a blasphemous meaning. Hence when translating English into Irish we must ignore the figurative expressions and merely express correctly in Irish the *sense* which the figurative expressions convey. If the figurative expression is translated literally into Irish it is almost certain to miss the true sense altogether and to put in its place something intensely absurd. If a person looks at a page of present-day English it appears to him, at first sight, to be quite *literal*. A little reflection will show him that it is almost all *figurative*. There is hardly a word that is not used in a more or less figurative sense. The translator comes and, ignoring that fact, proceeds to translate with rigid literalness. All his constructions are faultlessly grammatical, but the result of his labour is simply intolerable. His Irish is a thing the like of which was never heard out of the mouth of a human being, and which no Irish speaker will listen to a second time.

The translator must first find out the *sense* of what he wishes to translate. Then he must turn his back completely upon the English

*words*, think the thoughts out as they ought to be thought out in Irish, and then express the thoughts in Irish exactly as he would express them if they were his own thoughts and he knew no language but Irish.

‘Oh! but,’ someone will say, ‘in order to do that a person must have a thorough knowledge of both languages.’

Exactly so. It is an outrage upon common sense for any person to attempt to translate from one language to another unless he has a thorough knowledge of both.

The attempt has been over and over again made to translate from English into Irish by persons who had an *imperfect* knowledge of English and *no knowledge at all* of Irish. The result is what ought to have been expected. Even in the case of Mr. Feenachty, who had a good knowledge of both languages, but who had not a good knowledge of what *true* translation is, a mass of unreadable matter is the result.

A person can translate fairly well *from* a language he has *learned into* his native language, *if he knows his native language well*. No man can translate *into* a language which he knows *imperfectly*.

The masterpieces of Greek and Latin are splendid specimens of perfection in language. All of us who have passed through classical schools can remember what the translations of the Greek and Latin classics are like. They are the poorest, the meanest, the most unclassical specimens of English that can possibly be found. Still it must be remembered that those translations have been made for the express purpose of giving an exact idea of the *intrinsic sense* of the originals. It must also be remembered that the translators of the Greek and Roman classics have been men who have made themselves masters of the originals before they attempted the work. As specimens of English their best efforts have been abject failures. Even when they did not bind themselves down to exact literal reproduction their best efforts have been abject failures. Gladstone’s lyrical reproductions of Latin originals are certainly failures. I do not consider it an exaggeration to apply the term *abject* to them. They *are* abject as compared with the originals.

Now, if all those great efforts have been failures, how is it to be expected that translations from English into Irish, by people who do not know Irish well, can be successful? Of course it is impossible; I say it is impossible even for a person who knows both languages well to make a translation an even tolerable success. Then how is English matter to be reproduced in Irish language? I answer, *reproduce* the matter; don't *translate* it.

Read over the English matter carefully. Take all the ideas into your mind. Squeeze the ideas clean from all English *froth*. Be sure that you allow none of that oozy stuff to remain. English is full of it. You must also get rid of everything in the shape of metaphor. Take instead of it the true idea which the metaphor is intended to convey. When you have the ideas cleared completely of all foreign matter, put them into the Irish side of your mind, and shape them into Irish language, just as you would if they had been your own ideas from the start.

If you are able to do that, do it, and we shall be all delighted to read the result of your efforts. If you are not able to do it yet, aim at it and you very soon will. But do not *torture us with your translations*. **THEY ARE BY FAR THE MOST DEADLY ELEMENT IN THE DISEASE WHICH IS KILLING OUR LANGUAGE.** They effectually disgust and repel the most courageous of native Irish speakers.