A TRANSLATOR'S VIEW OF IRISH TERMINOLOGY
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Léadh an páipéar seo ag seimineár de chuid L'Association européenne de terminologie a tionóladh i mBaile Átha Cliath 27-28 Iúil 2007. Saothrú na téarmaíochta sna teangacha neamhfhorleathana ba théama don seimineár. Leasaíodh cuid de na hiontrálacha atá luaite sa pháipéar ó tháinig www.tearma.ie in áit www.focal.ie.

This paper examines the difficulties encountered by English–Irish translators in using terminology sources. Particular reference is made to inconsistency and conflicting advice within the same sources and disparity in use between various institutions.

I was invited to take part in this panel with the request that I speak from the perspective of a user of modern Irish terminology. In fact, I am not so much a 'user' as an out-and-out addict. As a translator and as a trainer of translators, my work absolutely depends on the availability of Irish terms equivalent to those found in English source texts. As such, I welcome the arrival of new resources such as the online terminology database www.focal.ie [www.tearma.ie] and the ongoing research and publications of the Coiste Téarmaíochta (CT), which is the Terminology Committee of the Irish language promotional body, Foras na Gaeilge. There is a new energy in the work of Irish language terminology, despite a lack of resources and staff. It is with reluctance, then, that I draw our attention back to some long-standing problems and to the substantial inconsistency in various sources of Irish terminology.

Let's deal quickly with the obvious blunders made by translators who, when translating a polysemous word in English, select an Irish word that relates to an inappropriate meaning or shade of meaning. Take, for example, the use of the Irish word *fuil-líonadh* to translate 'congestion' in the compound term 'traffic congestion'. When non-Irish speakers are told that *fuil-líonadh* means, literally, 'blood-filling' they may guess that the term has been incorrectly used in its medical sense, i.e. of an organ becoming clogged with blood. Perhaps if the translator had linked traffic congestion to blood pressure we might have more sympathy. As it is, I can make no excuse for the translator, whose TL vocabulary should include the correct, non-specialist term *brú tráchta* without any recourse to terminology sources. Worse again, *fuil-líonadh* was apparently chosen from focal.ie, where its correct usage is clearly delineated by markers such as 'ailment', 'symptom', 'injury', 'medicine', 'medical'. It would please me to say that such lazy misuse of sources is rare in Irish translation, but the evidence is otherwise. 'Congestion' is not the only polysemous term to take leave of (one of) its senses during the act of translation.

Much incorrect usage is more subtle than the example above. *Plúchadh* (literally 'stifling', 'suffocation') is a common conversational word for asthma but would be quite inappropriate in translating a title such as the Asthma Association of Ireland. Instead, the organization is known in Irish as *Cumann Asma na hÉireann*. One might more readily excuse a translator guilty of errors of register. Few aspects of language are more subtle or elusive and Irish language dictionaries and terminology lists very rarely give any direction on such matters. *Plúchadh* and *asma* are both given on focal.ie with no indication that the international term might be more suitable for specialist use. Of

course, a translator who writes *Cumann Plúchaidh na hÉireann* is still at fault. No professional with real sensitivity to language and an adequate knowledge of the TL would consider that to be an acceptable translation. Even so, the lack of direction on the matter of register raises the question: 'Do Irish language terminology sources occasionally fail even scrupulous and highly competent translators?' The answer is obviously yes, because no works of reference can ever anticipate all the needs of their users. There is, however, a more systematic flaw in the provision of terminology in Irish: inconsistency from one source to another and sometimes even within the same source.

Too often translators are confronted by a choice of Irish terms for one and the same concept. This cannot always be described as a flaw in the terminology sources. It would be impossible, for example, to prescribe a single term for much native flora and fauna without privileging one dialect of Irish over another. A bat may be given any of the following names: *ialtóg* or *ialtóg leathair*, *eitleog* or *eitleog leathair*, *sciathán leathair* ('leather-wing'), *feascarluch* ('evening-mouse'), *leadhbóg leathair* and the exotic *bás dorcha* ('black death'). All of those names are in use to some or other extent. Users of Irish will hear and read these terms and may consult terminology sources hoping to find them. The conflicting prerogatives of descriptivism and prescriptivism lead to all of them being listed while a certain prominence is given to one, namely *ialtóg*. Most of the terms related to bats will feature *ialtóg* rather than any of the other words for bat. Thus, a 'bat roost' is a *fara ialtóg* and different species of bat are known as *ialtóga* plus various qualifying words. There is however no absolute impediment to describing a bat roost as a *fara sciatháin leathair* or some other such formulation using any of the words above. A multiplicity of terms is possible, but a translator's skill in using terminology should extend to an awareness of what I'll call, for want of a better word, the alpha term *ialtóg*. At the very least, the translator should avoid using *bás dorcha* in the Irish title of a group of bat-lovers.

My next example better illustrates the systematic problems faced by competent and scrupulous translators. I and many other colleagues recently had to sit an accreditation examination for Irish translators. The exam is administered by Foras na Gaeilge, the all-island Irish language promotional body. It was necessitated by the experience of state bodies who depend on translation services to fulfil their obligations under the Republic of Ireland's Official Languages Act (2003). It is a challenging exam, and rightly so. State bodies need to know that accredited translators receiving public money can provide an adequate service. Candidates were given access to various on-line and printed terminology sources during the exam, which featured nothing that could be characterized as highly specialist or arcane.

It did, however, have lines such as this: 'Because the disease agent's protein originates inside the host cells it triggers antibody production by the immune system.' The main translation decision to be made in relation to that sentence is choosing an Irish word equivalent to the polysemous 'agent'. When the exam was finished a number of us disregarded the advice we give our own students and took part in a 'post-mortem' analysis of our decisions. Most of agreed that the choice in regards to 'agent' was a simple one. *Gníomhaire* is mostly used in relation to people engaged in a commercial activity, e.g. *gníomhaire eastáit* ('estate agent'). The closely related word *gníomhaí* is mostly used in a grammatical context or in referring to individuals who are active in

some way, e.g. *gníomhaí teanga* ('language activist'). The correct chemical term, or so we imagined, is *oibreán*.

One candidate, suddenly rather anxious about the direction of this post-mortem, pointed out that there was support in various sources for *gníomhaí* in the context of chemistry. Sure enough, a quick perusal of the entries for 'agent' on focal.ie revealed the extent of the confusion. The entry for *gníomhaí* at the top of the web page seems to restrict that word's use to grammar or to references to a 'doer' or 'active person'. The entry for *oibreán* quite clearly marks that word's use in chemical processes. So far so clear. The headwords are followed by a series of examples illustrating the use of each term. Unfortunately, these examples are just as likely to confuse as to instruct. Culled from various dictionaries published over decades, they contradict and confound each other. Thus *The Dictionary of Geology and Geophysics* (2004) suggests two terms for 'agent of erosion': *gníomhaí creimthe* and *oibrí creimthe*. With the additional of *oibrí*, whose usual meaning is 'worker', we now have a *ménage à quatre*. In *Dictionary of Physiology and Health* (1981) *oibreán baictéarach* is given for 'a bacterial agent'. One is relieved to see *oibreán* reinstated until one comes across *gníomhaí bácála* for 'baking agent' in *Handbook of Retailing Terms* (2003).

This last example gave me much cause for thought. *The Handbook* was compiled by the predecessor of Foras na Gaeilge in an attempt to persuade supermarkets and department stores to use bilingual signage. The methodology adopted was to prepare lists of bilingual signs already in use and the person responsible for this work was none other than the current author. If one accepts that *gníomhaí* is equivalent to 'activist' then *gníomhaí bácála* strongly suggests something like 'baking activist' (one who is militant about baking?) Can I excuse myself by pleading that I was only following dictionaries? In *Dictionary of Agriculture and Dairying* (1987) we find *gníomhaí ceimiceach* for 'chemical agent'. It seems harsh to blame the translator who has to pick a way through this terminological maze.

The high degree of inconsistency in Irish language terminology sources has been discussed at length in the books of Maolmhaodhóg Ó Ruairc,[1] a member of the EU Council of Ministers translation staff and the only author to have published a substantial body of work on pragmatic translation from English into Irish. The arrival of <u>focal.ie</u> has highlighted the problem to an even greater extent, as indicated by the example of 'agent' above. The CT is aware of the problem and has taken action. Users of <u>focal.ie</u> are invited to register inconsistencies or terms they believe to be flawed. The hope is that over time a greater degree of consistency and clarity can be achieved.

I thought it might be useful to complete this paper with a brief analysis of some of the causes of the substantial inconsistency in Irish terminology.

(1) Native terms and international terms

In common with other European terminology bodies, the CT has for some time gravitated towards the use of transliterated 'international' terms in the specialized realms of LSP. This is in contrast to the amateur zeal of earlier Irish revivalists, who advocated, as a point of principle, coining specialist terminology from 'native sources'. A useful example of the nativist tendency is the rejection by the writer Seán Ó Ciarghusa of *téarma* as an Irish equivalent for the word 'term'.[2] He suggested instead *dánfhocal*, which might be translated as *mot d'art*, but which was unfortunately ambiguous; *dánfhocal* already being in use with the meaning 'a verse epigram'. In a

landmark essay published in 1947, G.H. Paghan, who lectured in science through the medium of Irish, highlighted similar flaws in Irish scientific terminology.[3] Many of the terms he scorned in his essay have disappeared from use and have been replaced by more acceptable Greek and Latin-based terms, e.g. *ciandarcán* (from *cian* 'distant' and *dearc* 'look') has been replaced universally by *teileascóp*.

As might be expected, however, the tendency towards international terms has been uneven. Many of the terms held up for ridicule by Paghan are still in use, including *scagdhealú* for 'dialysis' (from *scag* 'filter' and *dealaigh* 'seperate'). Older, 'native' forms exist alongside fresh coinings. The Irish lexicographer Tomás de Bhaldraithe famously singled out as an example of the chaos of Irish terminology the numerous attempts to render into Irish the prefix 'hydro'. In his *English-Irish Dictionary* (1959) he lists 18 different Irish prefixes, including the native *uisce* ('water'). The adoption of the prefix *hidr-* has imposed order but 'hydro-electric station' is given as *uisce-stáisiún leictreachais* on focal.ie and in *Dictionary of Geography and Planning* (1981). Again the translator is left scratching his or her head. No one would suggest a wholesale clearing of older native terms which have taken root in the language. One could easily make a case for *scagdhealú*, for example, as an accurate description of the concept of dialysis. It's more difficult to make a case for *uisce-stáisiún* and the problem is compounded by the rather vague directions given on focal.ie. The international term for electricity, *leictreachas*, has long been in competition with the native *aibhléis*, a word which does not lend itself easily to deriving the hundreds of terms related to the basic concept of electricity. Some direction on the relative status of the two terms would be welcome but in describing *aibhléis* focal.ie gives only *in úsáid*/in use. What does that mean? Terminologists can't afford to assume that the public can read such shorthand. A more appropriate marker would be 'informal' or suchlike, which is used successfully elsewhere on the same site.

(2) Institutional disparity

The Translation Department of the Irish Houses of Parliament is known in Irish as Rannóg an Aistriúcháin. It provides Irish language translations of the following texts (i) The Order of Business in the National Assembly and in the Senate (ii) Bills (iii) Statutory Instruments and (iv) occasional international treaties. The staff of the Rannóg have produced easily the most significant body of Irish translation in the history of the language. Inevitably they have also coined vast numbers of terms. The problem for translators and others who wish to utilise this vast resource is the significant disparity between the terms favoured by the Rannóg and those prescribed by the CT. Efforts have been made to minimize differences. The Rannóg has representation of the Steering Committee of the CT, for example. Some disparity is inevitable, of course, given that the Rannóg was operational, in embryonic form, even before the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922, while the CT was not placed on a permanent footing until 1968. There are further complicating factors. The staff of the Rannóg operate under a certain, but not total, compunction to adhere to precedent. Thus, while the common Irish term for 'parking' is simply *páirceáil*, the Rannóg persists with *locadh*, the term originally used in the Road Traffic Acts. The highly specialized nature of legislative translation further militates against a 100% match between the terms favoured by the Rannóg and the CT. In all commentaries on Irish terminology there is a marked tendency to underestimate the differences between the two institutions. For translators, however, the difficulties

are obvious and significant. I recently asked my second-year students on the Post-Graduate Diploma in Translation to write a commentary on the terms used in the Irish translation of a text produced by the Legal Aid Board. One would hope for a large degree of uniformity in legal terminology, but one does not always get what one wishes. A student who searched for 'ancillary order' on www.achtanna.ie, a bilingual database of Irish legislation, came up with the following: *fo-ordú* (and an older spelling *fó-ordú*), *ordú foghabhálach* and *ordú coimhdeach*. Those three terms and their variants come from within the Rannóg's own corpus of translations. Other dictionaries yielded further variants on the same theme, such as *fo-órdú cúntach* in *Focal sa Chúirt* by Leachlainn S. Ó Catháin (2001).

Disparity between the CT and the Rannóg, and within those institutions themselves, was evident in terms such as 'custody' (of a child). *Caomhnóireacht* is clearly prescribed as the appropriate term on focal.ie but, as is so often the case, that prescription is unfortunately cancelled out in the examples below, which include custody of children/*coimirce leanaí* and get custody of the children/*faigh coimeád na leanaí*. Three terms for the same concept. A useful feature of focal.ie is the glossary of Rannóg an Aistriúcháin terms which appears at the foot of the web page under the following proviso: 'IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT This auxilliary glossary contains terms and phrases from the database of Rannóg an Aistriúcháin (Translation Section), Office of the Houses of the Oireachtas. They do not form part of the Foras na Gaeilge validation system for terminology.' This feature often serves to illustrate the disparity in terminology between the Rannóg and the CT. In the case of 'custody', the term *coimeád* is used within the Rannóg with admirable consistency and there is no mention of *caomhnóireacht* (which more properly means 'guardianship') or *coimirce*.

Some of the students expressed a bias towards the CT terms on the basis that they were used more widely than those of the Rannóg. Indeed, the choice between contending terms is often a very simple one. If 'the League of Nations' is mentioned in a history text the Irish translator would be well advised to follow popular precedent and write *Conradh na Náisiún*. The fact that the Rannóg consistently used *Cumann na Náisiún* is neither here nor there. But legislation impinges on daily life in a great many ways, and so too does the language of legislation. Many 'uncommon' Rannóg uses have imposed themselves on spoken Irish. The word *sóisialach* (which usually means 'socialist') is commonly used in the sense 'social' in the context of the Social Welfare system. Where there is disparity between the term prescribed by the CT and the term used by the Rannóg, translators must make informed decisions more or less on a case-by-case basis, using such yardsticks as common usage (which is not always relevant, there being no 'common' usage to speak of), transparency, accuracy and acceptability. Critical assessment of the use of terminology in Irish translations suggests that those skills, and more basic skills, are not universal.

I should also mention those 'unofficial' or 'unapproved' terms that make their way into speech in direct competition with terms coined by either the CT or the Rannóg. Suppose that a translator is working on the text of a notice announcing a vacancy for a 'facilitator'. In the main body of focal.ie he or she will find *éascaitheoir* while the ancillary glossary of Rannóg terms suggests *furasóir*. In fact a number of organizations, including Údarás na Gaeltachta, a development authority for the Irish-speaking regions, have adopted *áisitheoir*. Some of these terms appear on focal.ie with the marker *gnáthchaint*/colloquial. Such clear advice on the status of terms is to be

welcomed but I'd like to see more of this type of term on focal.ie and other sources. The CT have nothing to say on the word *áisíneacht*, for example, which competes with the officially-coined *gníomhaireacht* in the sense 'agency'. This despite the fact the distribution agency for Irish language books, *Áisíneacht Dáiliúcháin Leabhar*, is part of the same government body as the CT itself.

      Finally, I'd like to stress that I mention these difficulties in a strictly matter of fact way. It is not my intention to be unduly pessimistic or critical of the fine individuals charged with the difficult task of providing the Irish language with a modern terminology. If there is an unacceptable level of inconsistency in modern Irish terminology there is also an awareness of the problem and a will to act. And the problem is best addressed by translators and terminologists working in co-operation.

Tagairtí

1. See especially his handbook for translators, *Aistrigh go Gaeilge*, Cois Life, 1997 in which he lists some notable inconsistencies in an appendix: 161-165.
2. In his essay 'Do Thionntódh Teangan' in the collection *Ar mo Mharanadh Dam*, Oifig an tSoláthair, undated.
3. In his essay 'Téarmaíocht na hEolaíochta', in *Féilscríbhinn Torna*, essays and studies presented to Professor Tadhg Ua Donnachadha (Torna), Cork University Press. 1947.