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Spásbháid, spásárthaí and *spáslonga*: issues of terminology in the translation of sci-fi and fantasy into Irish

Introduction

The history of sci-fi and fantasy in Irish is mainly one of translation. Until the start of the Gaelic Revival in 1893, Irish had been a neglected language of the poor, uneducated and powerless, and had been for almost three centuries. The number of native speakers had fallen to just over 600,000 from maybe four million half a century previously. However, with the start of the Revival, Irish gained a measure of status, and later, with the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922, it was given recognition as an official language of the country. As such, it is supported by the State and one of the ways this support manifested itself was the Government's translation scheme in the 1920s-30s, under which foreign works were translated and published in Irish for the Irish language readership. Amongst these were sci-fi/ fantasy works by authors such as H.G. Wells (*The War of the Worlds*, translated as *Cogadh na Reann*, and *The First Men on the Moon*, as *An Chéad Chuairt ar an nGealaigh*), Robert Louis Stevenson (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. However, as discussed elsewhere by Philip O'Leary,[1] home-grown sci-fi

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[1] See specifically O'Leary [2005] for his discussion of (the lack of) science fiction

(never mind fantasy) was rarely produced because, in O'Leary's opinion, a) nobody had any interest in science as a subject in general, and b) sci-fi was not considered a serious literary genre. And things have not changed much since. Although fairly recent times have given us a dystopian novella (*Pax Dei*, from the 1980s), fantastical elements in novels (e.g. *Cuaifeach Mo Lon Dubh Buí*, also from the 1980s), and various modern authors whose works (mainly short stories) frequently contain elements of the fantastical (e.g. Mícheál Ó Conghaile, Daithí Ó Muirí, Tomás Mac Síomóin) it cannot be said that Irish has anything approaching its own sci-fi/ fantasy genre.

As such, despite its status as an official language of the country and a greater number of speakers, it is lagging behind its two sister languages, Scottish Gaelic, which has recently seen its first sci-fi and fantasy novels (*Air Cuan Dubh Drilseach* and *An Sgoil Dhubh*, respectively), and Manx, with its own entry into the fantasy genre (*Droghad ny Seihill*). This lack of creativity has led Tim Armstrong, the author of *Air Cuan Dubh Drilseach*, to ask, on his blog, why there are no such works in Irish [Armstrong, 2015]. Regarding O'Leary's two theses, he says that he cannot speak about the first (that Irish writers had no interest in the subject), but on the second (that sci-fi was not considered a serious literary genre) he says:

> Nuair a leughas mi ficsean saidheans, chan eil mi an dùil ri sgudal, ach cuid dhen litreachas as dùbhlanaich agus as inntinnich a leughar anns an latha an-diugh, agus gu dearbh, tha mi a' smaoineachadh […] anns an t-saoghal nuadh anns a bheil teicneòlas a' toirt buaidh nas treasa air beatha mhac-an-duine le gach latha, tha ficsean-saidheans a' sìor fhàs nas cudromaich mar *genre*. Agus am fianais Mary Shelley gu Kazuo Ishiguro, an robh daoine inntinn-fhosgailte a-riamh fo amharas gum b' urrainnear litreachas le 'L' mòr a sgrìobhadh ann am ficsean-saidheans? Ach chan eil teagamh gu bheil cuid mhòr ann fhathast nach cuir mòran diù anns an *genre*, agus is dòcha gu bheil am beachd staoin sin a' claonadh sgrìobhadh ann an Gàidhlig na h-Èireann agus Gàidhlig na h-Alba fòs.

> When I read science-fiction, I'm not hoping for cheap rubbish, but some of the most challenging and intellectual literature which is being read today and, I think […] in the new world in which technology is influencing people's lives more and

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in Irish, and [1994] and [2004] for a more general discussion of Irish literature of that era and the questions raised, including that of translation.

more each day, science-fiction is continually growing as a *genre*. And in the light of Mary Shelley to Kazuo Ishiguro, was any open-minded person ever in doubt that science-fiction was not literature with a capital 'L'? But there is no doubt that there are still many today who have no interest in the genre, and it is likely that that shallow opinion is still biasing writing in Irish and [Scottish] Gaelic.

He asks the Irish readers of his blog for their opinions as to why there is no sci-fi in Irish but, unfortunately, no revealing answers were particularly forthcoming.[2] But whilst Irish language writers might eschew science-fiction and fantasy overall as a native genre themselves, some headway has been made in the field of translations, with some major international works appearing in recent years. It should be noted here, however, that as virtually everyone in Ireland speaks English anyway, these translations tend to be a labour of love for the text and the language, and not for royalties, as would the reading of such translations. Hence, it is a fairly eclectic selection. Amongst these are the first *Harry Potter* (*Harry Potter agus an Órchloch*); the first *Artemis Fowl*; *The Hobbit* (*An Hobad*); *Alice in Wonderland* (*Eachtraí Eilíse i dTír na nIontas*) and *Behind the Looking Glass* (*Lastall den Scáthán agus a bhfuair Eilís ann roimpi*); *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (*An Leon, an Bandraoi agus an Prios Éadaigh*), *A Game of Thrones* (*Cluiche na Corónach*) and some not from English either. The first book of Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy (*An Fhondúireacht*) has been translated from the Swedish by a Finn and, if we stretch the sci-fi/ fantasy definition to breaking point, Viktor Pelevin's *Омон Ра* (*Amón-Rá*) has been translated from the Russian by the author of this paper.[3] There have also been recent re-issues of some of the books originally translated in the 1920s and 30s, including *Dracula, Cogadh na Reann* and *Cás Aduain an Dr Jekyll agus Mhr Hyde*.

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[2]   One respondent did mention Mac Síomóin, but when asked which of his works is science-fiction, the respondent fell silent. Mac Síomóin's works do contain fantastical elements, but none could be classified as pure science-fiction or fantasy in the traditional understanding of the genre.

[3]   Technically, the translation of Asimov is a 'relay translation', in the sense that it is not from the original language (English), but via another (Swedish), but as is mentioned later in this paper, this was a deliberate decision taken by the translator so as to avoid falling under the influence of English when translating into Irish, and not as a result of not knowing the source language.

However, although Irish has not made the genre its own, sci-fi/ fantasy does exist in the language, but even still it is not without its problems. In a general everyday sense, the language has to deal with a lack of native-produced terminology and a dwindling number of first-language native speakers who have been uninfluenced by English, as well as the rise of second-language speakers of varying quality and the English-influenced younger generations of first-language speakers. As a microcosm of these very real problems facing the language, it is worth looking at some of the more heated comments arising from the Irish translation of *The Hobbit*.

An Hobad

The Irish translation of *The Hobbit* ruffled a few feathers, and brought out Internet extremists from both sides of the Irish-language spectrum. On the one hand was the blogger An Sionnach Fionn, who felt that the translator, Nicholas Williams, and editor, Alan Titley, both retired professors of Irish, should have better Gaelicised not just 'Hobbit' as a word, but also the word for Tolkien's elves, given in the Irish version as *ealbh* (pl. *eilbh*), but which he describes as an "awful Gaelicisation" [An Sionnach Fionn, online]. Although the translation of *The Hobbit* is prefaced by a bilingual Irish and English introduction [Tolkien, 2012: viii-xi] explaining how the translator and editor chose the Irish word for elves (basing it on a Scottish Gaelic word which was originally borrowed from Old Norse), this in no way impresses An Sionnach Fionn. He quotes another report as saying that the publication of the translation was delayed by years before a suitable word could be found, which he fobs off by announcing that the Irish word *sióg*, or variants thereof, were perfectly good and should have been used itself.[4] An Sionnach Fionn modestly sets himself up against Tolkien himself by announcing "Maybe Tolkien would approve of [ealbh] but I certainly don't." He goes on to wish *ealbh* a short-lived life: "I'm just hoping that Ealbh dies the

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[4] *Sióg* is glossed in Ó Dónaill (1977: 1098) as meaning a 'fairy'. *Siógaí* is glossed as '1. Elf, fairy. ~ linbh, elf-child, changeling. 2. Delicate little person weakling. 3. Precocious person; very knowledgeable person. 4. Interfering gossip.'

linguistic death it so richly deserves. But I doubt it", although he does retract this statement in the discussion that followed in the comments section. On the other hand, defending the use of *ealbh* against the choice of *sióg* and all the linguistic baggage that would accompany it, the editor Alan Titley said "…I do not think *siógaithe* would do at all. It smacks too much of fairyland in the worst sense of that peterpannish way, and I do not think that Tolkien would have approved… [*siógaithe* is] far too unTolkienish, I would say, and too much reminiscent of thousands of bad folktales!"[5]

An Sionnach Fionn is also unimpressed by the Gaelicisation of the word *hobbit* itself. He sees in hobbits a mere cousin of the Irish *leprechaun*, stating:

> It is perfectly clear that the Halfling Hobbits of Tolkien's Middle-earth have a close role-model in the Little People of Irish Folklore, the Lucharacháin or Leipreacháin. Yes, that's right: Leprechauns. However the more literary term Lucharachán for Hobbit would surely have been more suitable, and more indicative to an Irish-speaking reader, than the utterly meaningless Hobad.

Of course, 'hobbit' as a word is far from 'meaningless', and the idea of equating Tolkien's halfling with an Irish fairytale creature who, in popular culture, sits under mushrooms dressed in green and fixing shoes whilst protecting his pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is a joke. In the online discussion on this topic, the publisher himself felt the need to comment on the world-wide shocked reaction if Irish were to have turned hobbits into leprechauns.

At the other end of the spectrum is djwebb, a staunch supporter of a very small dialect of Irish (in Múscraí, in County Cork), and especially how it was spoken a century ago, and who is fiercely intolerant of anything which does not match his idea of perfection. As such, his opinions should be taken not with a pinch of salt, but rather with a whole bag, but there are still some valid points amongst his rabid outpourings. In his entry entitled "Nicholas Williams' droch-Ghaelainn in *An Hobad*" ("Nicholas Williams' bad Irish in *An Hobad*"), he sets about taking apart

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[5]   Quoted in the discussion on An Sionnach Fionn's blog. Clearly, Titley has in mind the association with fairies, although the idea of Tolkien's elves being represented as gossips or know-alls is, in itself, intriguing.

the first paragraph of the Irish translation. One of his issues, akin to that of An Sionnach Fionn, but from a different perspective, is the invention of the word *hobad*. His argument is that, as it is a loan word, it should have been left in English and merely italicised:

> Not only is there no Irish word *hobad*–it is correct to use loan words in italics where no native word exists, mirroring the way in which native speakers use words such as "microwave" in their Irish (there is no Irish word *oigheann mícreathonnach* [*sic*]).

This of course ignores the inconvenient fact that *oigheann micreathonnach* does exist and people are free to use it if they so wish, and are equally free to ignore it. The author's argument (and not just about hobbits) is that, unless these words are self generated by the small, isolated Irish-speaking communities themselves, they have no authority in the language. As such, it would seem that djwebb would like the language to remain rooted in the early 20th century world of fishing and farming, and no-one should Gaelicise a word like 'hobbit' unless it were to happen spontaneously, which is most unlikely in this day and age. This also ignores the fact that it is up to the translator themselves to make such decisions, rightly or wrongly, and Williams decided to Gaelicise such an internationally-known word.

It is worth reading the whole entry, however, as the blogger does seem to have valid points to make about the influence of English on the translation, especially the tenses used – and this only in a discussion of the first paragraph – but this is somewhat lost in his *ad hominem* attacks on the people involved. He refers to Williams' Irish as tripe, that *An Hobad* "is fit only for the bin" and that it is "not in good Irish, and should be pulped."

The other sci-fi and fantasy works which have been translated into Irish in recent times have not caused anywhere near such controversy, but in themselves have raised the same, recurring issue of terminology, just not in such an emotive way. The main question is what to do with words or concepts (like hobbits or elves) that native speakers never needed: should they be left as they are, should they be adapted to Irish orthographic rules, or should an Irish 'equivalent' be found or, indeed, invented?

Gaelicising Terms

The example of *hobbit* is a microcosm of one of the major issues that plagues the translation of science-fiction and fantasy (and not only) into Irish, namely, how to deal with words and ideas that do not, or have not, existed in the language. There does exist in Ireland *An Coiste Téarmaíochta* ("The Terminology Committee"), which is tasked with coming up with Irish equivalents for foreign words, terms, concepts etc., but its work is mostly specialist and/or technical. It does not fall within its remit to invent an Irish equivalent for hobbits, elves or anything else. The *Coiste* does deal with scientific terminology, though, and the issue of a standard vocabulary for scientific terms, and the exposure of Irish speakers to English, has meant that a lot of the recent reissues of the older translations from the 1920s and 1930s have had their terminology brought up to date, so that a modern reader may enjoy the translations without any difficulty. The Irish translations of *Dracula*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The War of the Worlds* have all been adapted, to a certain degree, to modern times.

However, apart from specialist vocabulary, it is generally left to the individual translator to deal with new or foreign concepts. As one example of this, Ó Dónaill's major Irish-English dictionary from as late as 1977, and which is still considered, to a certain degree, to be the standard dictionary work and is in constant reprint, gives no Irish word for 'spaceship', although 'astronaut' ('spásaire') is given, and this despite the fact that de Bhaldraithe's English-Irish dictionary from 1959 offers *spáslong* [1959: 686]. In other words, if the Irish language translator were to rely on Ó Dónaill alone, an Irish astronaut could live on the moon, but would have no means of getting there. Thus, in the two recent translations of texts set in space, namely *An Fhondúireacht* and *Amón-Rá*, the Irish-language reader can indeed encounter, as an equivalent of the English *spaceship*, *spáslong* (e.g. *Amón-Rá*, p. 72; *An Fhondúireacht*, p. 6), but also *spásárthach* (*Amón-Rá*, pp. 12, 18, 133), *réaltárthach* (*Amón-Rá*, p. 11), *naomhóg spáis* (*An Fhondúireacht*, p. 172) or *spásbhád* (*An Fhondúireacht*, p. 187), each one just as valid as the other in Irish, although

spacevessel, *starvessel*, *spacecurrach* or *spaceboat* would sound very alien or antiquated in English.[6]

As with *hobbits*, the general tendency in translation would thus seem to be to Gaelicise words to some degree, as opposed to leaving them untouched. This involves one of two methods: a) a translation or a calque or b) a transliteration. Apart from hobbits, other terms that have been Gaelicised as the need arose are the Russian *луноход* as *cairt ghealaí* (lit. 'moon cart') in *Amón-Rá*, and 'protective energy field' as *díchumadóir* (lit. 'decomposer') in *An Fhondúireacht*. In the same text 'nyak[s]' was transliterated as *naighceanna*, although the translator chose to leave *credit* (the unit of currency) in English, without trying to either invent an Irish equivalent or adapt the word to Irish orthographical rules. Interestingly, in his foreword the translator states that he chose to translate from the Swedish as opposed to the English original in an effort to avoid the sort of Englishisms that would seem to have ruined *An Hobad* for some [Asimov, 2014: xiii].[7] This Gaelicisation extends to personal names too, to a certain degree, so *Alice* (in Wonderland) becomes the Irish *Eilís*, and Bilbo Baggins is Gaelicised as *Biolbó Baigín*. Harry Potter and his friends stay unaltered, although Seamus Finnigan, who is Irish, is Gaelicised in the translation as Séamas Ó Fionnagáin.

The translation of more fantasy-related vocabulary has also lead to problems in Irish, although well-established words such as sword, shield etc have been around since Irish literature was first written down. However, as Irish was the language of the poor, the uneducated, and the dispossessed for centuries after 1600, various mainstream European ideas or concepts passed the language by. This can be seen in a small way by the trouble of rendering the word *witch* into Irish. The English word immediately conjures up an image of an old woman in black on a broomstick with a black cat beside her, but the Irish equivalents do not. According to de Bhaldraithe and Ó Dónaill, the various Irish words for *witch* and *wizard* are:

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6   A currach (usually 'curragh' in English) is a traditional type of Irish boat with a wooden frame covered in canvas.

7   See also this translator's general discussion on Irish terminology in science and science fiction [Höglund, 2013].

Witch:
- cailleach (na gcearc/ feasa) (witch/ hag [lit. old woman of the hens/ of knowledge])
- bean/ cailleach Ultach (witch [lit. Ulster woman/ old Ulster woman])
- draíodóir mná/ bandraoi (witch/ enchantress [lit. female druid])
- fuachaid/ amaid (witch/ hag)
- fia-chailleach (witch/ hag/ unruly woman [lit. wild old woman])
- upthóg (witch/ charm-worker)

Wizard:
- draoi (wizard/ magician)
- draíodóir fir (wizard/ enchanter)
- asarlaí (enchanter/ magician/ medicine-man/ necromancer/ sorcerer/ witch-doctor/ wizard)

As can be seen from the above, there is no easy one-to-one equivalent, and it is unlikely that options such as *cailleach na gcearc* 'the old woman of the chickens', or *fia-chailleach* 'a wild old woman' would fit the bill if one has to discuss witches in Harry Potter. *Upthóg*, a charm worker, for example, does not have the same idea behind it as does the English *witch*, and *fuachaid/ amaid* is explained as being literary. The word most commonly employed therefore is *cailleach*, as used in the translation of the book by Enric Lluch and Óscar T. Pérez, although the translator of C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* chose *bandraoi*, and Alan Titley chose *an bhean feasa* for his novel-in-verse about Goody Glover who was hanged as a witch in Boston in 1688. Wizards like Harry Potter also cause problems, in that a native word like *asarlaí* covers a whole range of meaning, from a magician who performs card tricks all the way to a necromancer who raises the dead, thus lacking the precision of the English, and which would lead to howls of laughter if Harry Potter became a sorcerer or a witch-doctor as opposed to a boy wizard, just as if hobbits were transformed into leprechauns, and elves into fairies or, possibly, gossips.

As with swords and shields, spells and charms have been known in Irish since earliest times, so translators can choose from *geasóg*, *briocht* (both meaning 'charm, spell'), *ortha* (also meaning 'incantation')

etc. Goblin-like creatures also existed, so native words like *bocán* or *bocánach* ("a goblin" [Ó Dónaill, 1977: 117]) can also be brought into play and adapted to various situations, as can *ginid* ('genie, sprite, demon. ~ *ghlinne*, demonical spirit supposed to haunt glens' [ibid. 631)]) or *gruagach* ('hairy goblin, brownie *al.* ogre' [ibidem: 675]). However, these terms are frequently more all-encompassing than their English equivalents, which can give rise to problems in its own particular way. If we return to *An Hobad*, we can see that the Irish word *púca*, given by Ó Dónaill as meaning 'hobgoblin' [1977: 974], has been adapted for *goblin*, with *mórphúca* (lit. big *púca*) as *hobgoblin* itself. This is in contrast to the Harry Potter translation where the word used to describe the goblins in Gringotts' Bank is the aforementioned *gruagach*. As can be seen, two translators can have two different words for the same concept. And if *gruagach* is a goblin in Harry Potter, as opposed to an ogre, which word would be used to describe the cartoon character Shrek, for example? Ó Dónaill also suggests *torathar* as being a 'misshapen creature, monster, ogre' [1977: 1256], but where does that leave an ordinary monster? *Arracht*?[8] But this can also mean a 'giant', which is usually *fathach*, but also *gruagach* which has been used to mean 'goblin' in *Harry Potter*…

In the case of 'newer' concepts, however, e.g. 'vampires' and 'zombies', the tendency again is to simply Gaelicise them, as with hobbits and elves, so we end up with *vaimpír* and *zombaí*, even though *v* and *z* are not native Irish letters. This sometimes occurs at the expense of possible native terms that could be used, or indeed have been in the past. For example *súmaire/ deamhan fola* (lit. 'blood-leech/ -demon') could be used instead of *vaimpír*, and *súmaire* was, in fact, the word used in the Irish translation of *Dracula*. In the case of zombies, *bás ina sheasamh/ bás gorm/ éagbhás* (lit. 'standing death/ blue death/ death--death', i.e. a dead-and-alive person [Ó Dónaill, 1977: 91, 474]) could have been adapted and employed if so wished. Indeed, this use of 'foreign' terms would seem to be taking over even those 'native' terms that have been in use previously, so, for example, it is more common to encounter the Irish word *mumaí* 'a mummy' than that based on a native

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[8]   This is used in the series of translations for young people under the title *Cófra Lán Arrachtaí* ("A Press full of Monsters") by the publishing house Leabhar Breac.

root, i.e. *seargán*.[9] It is also possible to encounter a term that actually makes no sense in the given context, e.g. the use of *ollphéist* (lit. 'huge worm, serpent') as an all-encompassing word to mean 'monster', at the expense of the more correct Irish words *arracht* or *torathar*.

Conclusion

Irish has, as such, no fantasy or sci-fi genre that it can safely call its own, but there does exist a very small 'sci-fi/ fantasy in translation' genre. Small as this is, in itself it is not without its own issues and problems of terminology due to the lack of a settled vocabulary, which can lead to the translator having to go it alone in some cases and, in some extreme instances, calling down upon themselves a hail of abuse. If not that, then the translator has to make decisions regarding what term most closely matches the source language term, but this will not necessarily match another translator's personal choices in the same genre. All in all, the issue of Irish terminology in sci-fi and fantasy is nearly still always one of personal taste.

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9   This is happening in other areas too, for example *mamach* 'mammal' is taking over from *sineach*, and *reiptíl* 'reptile' from *uathphéist*.

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Summary

This article looks at the issue of terminology in Irish language translations of science fiction and fantasy. Although there are no original works *per se* in the language, there do exist several translations of well-known international works.

This has given rise to the problem of what to do in those cases where concepts or terms do not exist, or have never existed, in Irish: should a term be coined or invented, should they be left in the original form, or should they be written according to Irish orthographic rules? This article examines the reaction to the Irish translation of *The Hobbit* and of the main terms therein, and then focuses on those cases where Irish does have terms, but which are not one-to-one equivalents for the English word in question.

Keywords: Irish, terminology, translation, *The Hobbit*, science-fiction, fantasy

STRESZCZENIE
Spásbháid, spásárthaí i spáslonga: **terminologia w przekładach literatury science-fiction i fantasy na język irlandzki**
Artykuł ten porusza kwestię terminologii w tłumaczeniach na język irlandzki dzieł science fiction i fantastyki. Pomimo braku oryginalnych utworów w języku irlandzkim z tego zakresu, istnieje kilka przekładów znanych międzynarodowych dzieł. Sytuacja ta doprowadziła do dylematu, co należy zrobić w tych przypadkach, w których nie istnieją lub też nigdy nie istniały w języku irlandzkim pewne pojęcia i terminy: czy powinny być one wymyślone, czy może pozostawione w oryginalnej formie lub też napisane zgodnie z irlandzkimi regułami ortograficznymi? Artykuł analizuje reakcję, jaką wywołało irlandzkie tłumaczenie *Hobbita*, a w szczególności głównych nazw bohaterów książki, a następnie skupia się na tych przypadkach, w których język irlandzki dysponuje pewnymi zwrotami, które nie są jednak bezpośrednimi odpowiednikami tychże zwrotów w języku angielskim.

Słowa kluczowe: język irlandzki, terminologia, tłumaczenie, *Hobbit*, science fiction, fantastyka