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# An Editorial Comment: Speech Acts and Feidhmchláir

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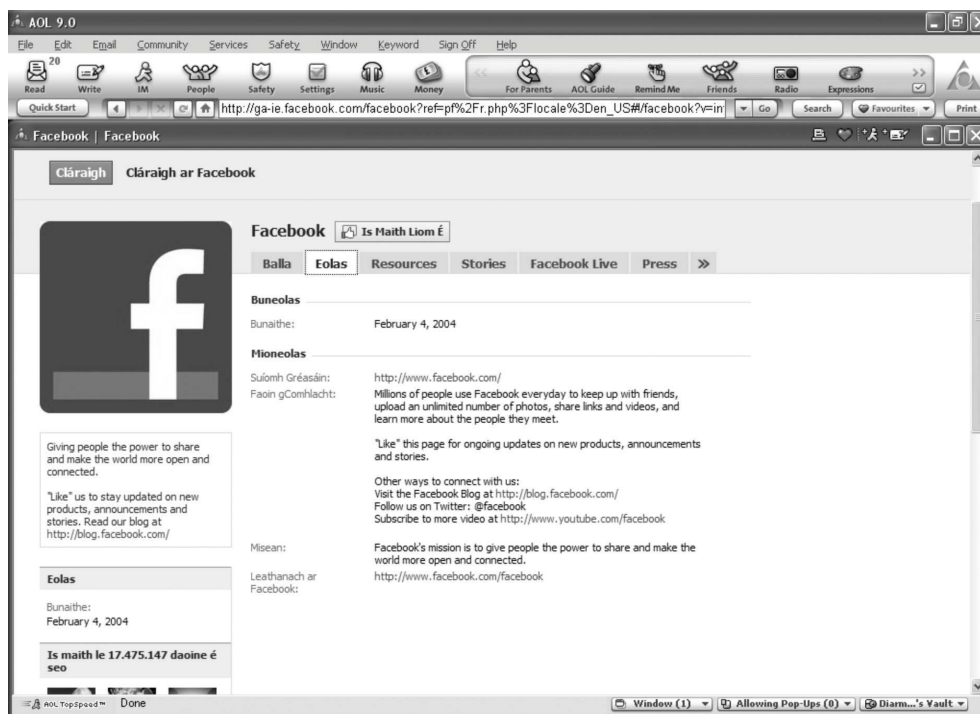
# An Editorial Comment: Speech Acts and Feidhmchláir

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- 1 The study of translation in Ireland has been, and indeed remains, much concerned with two domains of language – literature and public administration. For a minority, or minoritized, language such as Irish, these domains are, of course, extremely important in elevating the status of the language in society. The various papers in this edition rightly reflect this. But, some of the activity that sustains the vitality of any language is a much more prosaic affair. After all, no less an authority on translation in Ireland than Michael Cronin claims that every Irish-speaker is also a translator: “Is aistritheoir gach Gaeilgeoir beo”. Everyday acts of translation are essential linguistic behaviours, yet rarely do they occasion our serious attention. It seems to me that here may be a number of reasons for this. The first is difficulty in identifying our data. What constitutes the commonplace act of translation? The second is the apparent inaccessibility of the raw material and its relative ephemerality. When and where do these acts occur? A third reason is methodological uncertainty. How might we systematically study these data? A final reason, I would argue, is our lack of confidence in the potential importance of such acts. Might any given datum be in any way significant beyond the act of translation itself? Unfortunately, given the natural limitations of editorial comment, I must restrict myself to doing little more than being provocative and maybe even self-indulgent in responding to my own questions. I trust that the reader will forgive me these transgressions.
- 2 For the sake of clarity and brevity I will confine my comments to two sets of acts of translation, sets which occur at the extreme ends of the spectrum of the activity, given the limitations of proving “editorial comment”. The first, at the most official, solemn – and symbolic – end of the spectrum is constituted by the self-translation by certain members of the Northern Ireland Assembly [NIA] of their Irish language contributions to debates on the floor of the chamber. Then, in somewhere at the other end of the spectrum – although no value judgement is implied – we have a domain which concerns a much greater public and exists in the cyberspace of internet as social networking, there exists the translation of “Facebook’ from English into Irish.

- 3 The protocol of the NIA whereby Members of the Legislative Assembly [MLAs] who wish to speak in Irish are required to immediately provide an English language translation of their contribution has been the object of much comment. Some interest pertains to the potential discriminatory consequence of causing MLAs who wish to use Irish in this manner to suffer a restriction in that they are given no more time than other MLAs who speak only in English. Another concern is that while the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (NI) has put in place mechanisms for managing the translation of various documents into the Irish language, actual practices vary enormously across the different government departments<sup>2</sup>. Such variations could very well be explained by the institutional culture of said departments, or by the impact of the particular views of the ministerial team responsible for leading certain departments. Such matters merit research from the perspective of language planning and policy, or public administration. But it is the mundane act of self-translation on the floor of the NIA which is the most interesting. For me, this constitutes a performance in translation. By this I mean that it is far more than simply the vocal presentation of material in both Irish and English. Instead, what we have here is, to my mind, a type of speech act<sup>3</sup>. It is the quality of performativity<sup>4</sup> which makes these particular acts of translation worthy of our attention. In these instances, to paraphrase Austin, something is being said and being done through words – the self-translated utterance brings about a substantive transformation in the meaning of the event within which it is occurring. In this context saying is doing. There is some irony at work here as Irish-speaking Irish republicans of the north of Ireland often wheel out an adage when appealing for action – “Don’t say it, do it!” My intuition is that in these acts of self-translation, to paraphrase Austin, “saying is doing” – the word is the action. Clearly, what I have done here is nothing more than to make a bald assertion. This particular set of everyday acts of translation constitutes a fertile area of activity for scholars. Clearly, it relates to language policy and public administration but has implications which, politically and linguistically, raise much wider and weightier questions.
- 4 My second, totally contrasting, area of enquiry takes us far from the confined floor of the Irish legislators and the administration of the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is geographically non-confined, relates to a different class or classes of Irish speakers, of an age group probably much more variable than that of the Assembly and is essentially ludic in nature: I am talking about Facebook. As we all know, this is a social networking site with around half a billion members worldwide. The text on the Screenshot (Screenshot 1) from the Facebook site explains simply the purpose of the site as a means of giving “people the power to share and make the world open and more connected”.



screenshot 1

- 5 Facebook began life in 2004. It is a perfect example of the sorts of Websites that now define “Web 2.0”:

The term **Web 2.0** is commonly associated with web applications that facilitate interactive **information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration** on the **World Wide Web**. A Web 2.0 site gives its users the free choice to interact or collaborate with each other in a **social media** dialogue as creators (**prosumer**) of **user-generated content** in a **virtual community**, in contrast to websites where users (consumer) are limited to the passive viewing of **content** that was created for them. Examples of Web 2.0 include **social-networking sites, blogs, wikis, video-sharing sites, hosted services, web applications, mashups** and **folksonomies**<sup>5</sup>.

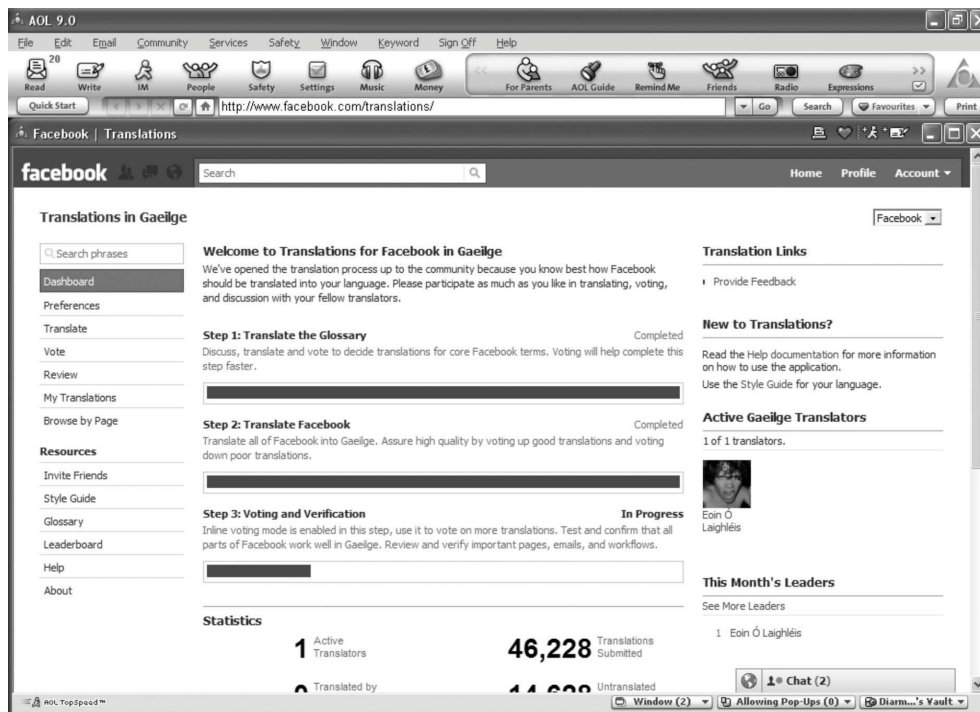
- 6 From the point of view of translation, the critical feature of Web 2.0 is the explosion of user-generated content. The idea is that the material we see online is the product of ordinary members of the community of users of sites such as Facebook. Initially Facebook was an English language site but has since been translated into several other languages. The launch of the process of translating Facebook into Irish was something of a media event as it was deemed newsworthy by “The Sunday Times” among many others. While the simple fact of Facebook being available in Irish is interesting in itself, it is the relationship between the culture of the creation of user-generated content and the act of translating Facebook into Irish that is of greatest interest to me. This relationship has the potential to provide a rich set of linguistic data for exploring everyday acts of translation in a clearly defined social context. Moreover, given the size of the membership of Facebook and the nature of its use, the significance of Facebook as Gaeilge could be substantial. For example, the process of translation in which different possible Irish language versions of terms such as “poke”, “tag” and “profile” were offered and voted upon by volunteer translators implies a peculiar democratisation of translation which, to

my mind, merits study. Screenshots 2 and 3 (below) introduce the bald framework of this process.

- 7 Ellis provides a more detailed overview of the key features of the “architecture” of the Facebook translation process, comprising the development of a “glossary”, the use of the technique of “dynamic explosion”, and application of “linguistic rules”. Taken together, Ellis describes this as “an innovative approach to web site internationalization”. This raises the question of what it means when the Irish language becomes a tool whereby something like Facebook is internationalised. Moreover, the precise nature of this architecture of translation, and its sociolinguistic implications, merit examination. Some of the end results of this process are not, *prima facie*, wholly unproblematic. For example, take this Facebook statement which sets out some guidelines to contributing translators:

Dydd Mercher, Chwefror 25, 2009 am 3:40yh

Prepositions + Article: According to the Official Standard both lenition & nasalisation are acceptable after preposition + article. ie. ar an mbord or an an bhord. In Facebook, the defacto standard has become the more standard Munster/Connemara way, ie. ar an mbord. Please use this standard in all translations. Please also note that DENTALS apply to nasalisation – an an ndeasc ar an dtraein, etc are NOT correct<sup>8</sup>.



screenshot 2

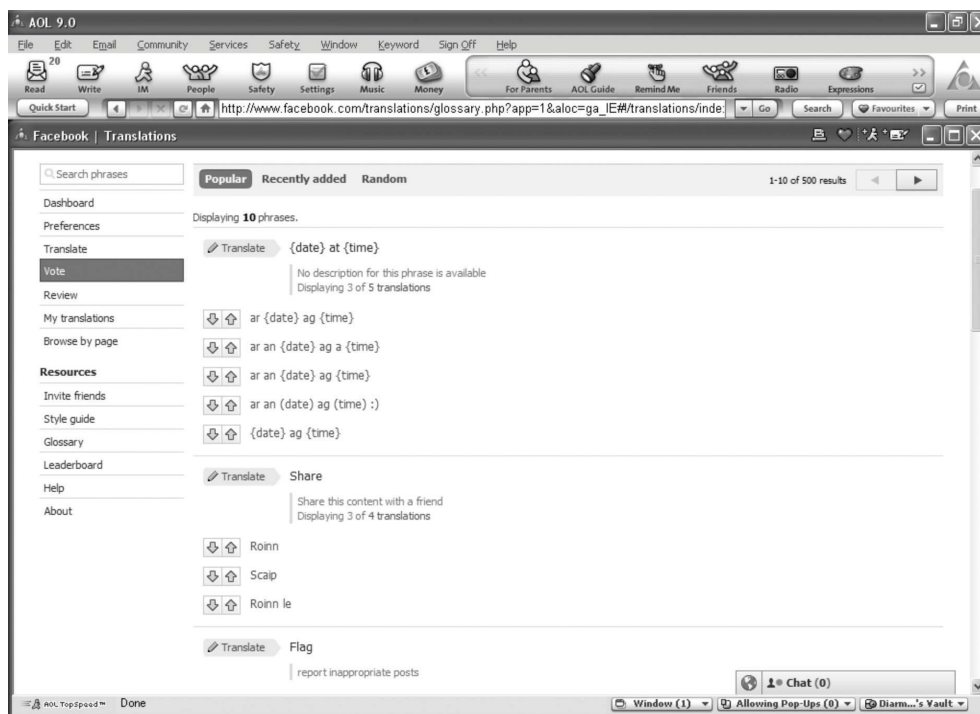
The screenshot shows the AOL 9.0 browser window with the Facebook Translations page. The browser's address bar shows the URL <http://www.facebook.com/translations/>. The page content includes:

- Statistics:**
  - 1 Active Translators
  - 46,228 Translations Submitted
  - 0 Translated by You
  - 14,628 Untranslated Phrases
- Discussion Board:**
  - Displaying 5 of 104 discussion topics
  - Rónua ar Facebook?** 7 posts. Updated on August 8, 2010 at 6:44am
  - "Cathair Reatha" = Béarlagar - Ba chóir go mbeadh náire orainn.** 13 posts. Updated on July 27, 2010 at 9:25am
  - bearla** 10 posts. Updated on July 22, 2010 at 2:22pm
  - abairtí úsáideach (useful sentences) :)** 6 posts. Updated on July 7, 2010 at 4:46pm
  - chant lom** 5 posts. Updated on June 28, 2010 at 2:15pm
- This Month's Leaders:**
  - See More Leaders
  - 1 Eoin Ó Laighléis

The footer of the page includes "Facebook © 2010 · English (US)" and a navigation menu with links for "About · Advertising · Developers · Careers · Privacy · Terms · Help".

screenshot 3

- 8 What does “*de facto*” mean in this context? How was this arrived at? The democratic nature of the process is, in a sense, quite transparent. The community of users can vote for or against particular possible translations (see Screenshot 4), and opinion can be clearly noted but the decision, once taken, seems to be quite absolute and irreversible. Moreover, perhaps some voices in this process are more equal than others.



screenshot 4

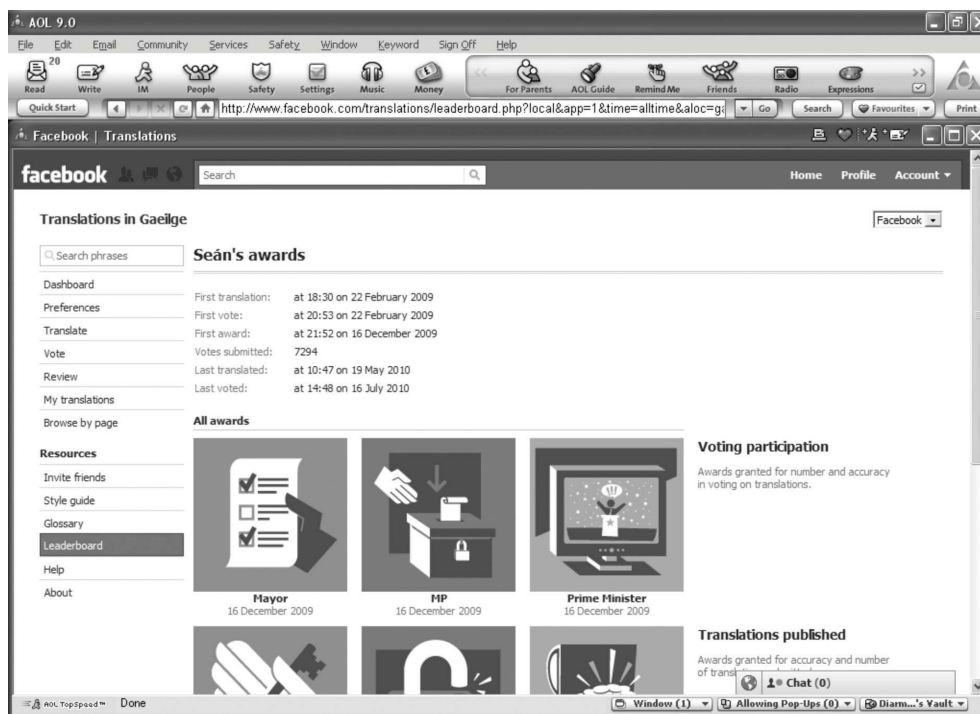
- 9 Some translators are certainly more active than others. Facebook tracks the numbers of phrases translated, the numbers of words translated and the numbers of votes cast upon the various proposed translations by each of the individual translators. Also, translators can gain awards for their efforts in both voting and translating and Facebook publishes all of these results for the whole community to read (for example Screenshots 5 & 6). To conduct an ethnographic study of such a community of translators seems to me to be a worthwhile exercise.

Rank	Name	Phrases	Words	Votes
79	Keire Murphy	9	77	0
80	Liam McGee	5	76	0
81	Cathal Ó Maoileoin	10	74	37
82	John Lunney	19	72	60
82	Richard King	4	72	42
83	Eoin Doyle	10	69	5
84	Kevin Bolton	9	68	143
85	Daniel Farrell	10	65	142
85	Cathal Ó Murchú	4	65	23
86	Sinéad NicDhiarmada	10	64	9
86	Sarah Ní Riain	10	64	16
87	Derek McHugh	7	63	36
88	Carl O' Connor	8	62	135
89	Aodhán Ó Deá	11	61	29

screenshot 5

- 10 It is now ten years since the sociologists Daniel Miller and Don Slater<sup>9</sup> invited us to subject the Internet to serious academic scrutiny and it is nine since the linguist David Crystal<sup>10</sup> (2001) made his first substantial intervention in this field. Computer-mediated communication has since emerged as an important area of academic study with its own dedicated peer-review journal [<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/>]. As yet minority languages and their relationship with translation have enjoyed very little attention in this context. It appears to me that cyberspace ought to be the next destination of at least some students of Irish and translation, and I hope the contents of this book will stimulate them “to boldly go” in this direction.





Screenshot 6

## NOTES

1. Michael Cronin, *An Ghaeilge san Aois Nua*, Baile Átha Cliath, Cois Life Teoranta, 2005, p. 16.
2. See, for example, the transcript of a fairly recent NIA discussion on this matter [[http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/culture/2007mandate/moe/080207\\_linguistic.htm](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/culture/2007mandate/moe/080207_linguistic.htm)] accessed 30th September 2010.
3. J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, Cambridge, Ma., Harvard University Press, 1962; J. Searle, *Speech Acts*, 1969, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
4. J. Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, 1997, New York, Routledge.
5. [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web\\_2.0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0)] accessed 30th August 2010.
6. C. Coyle, "Facebook gets set for an Irish language lesson' *The Sunday Times*, January 11, 2009 [<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/ireland/article5489404.ece>] accessed August 30, 2010.
7. D. Ellis, "Names in translation and social language modeling" [[http://www.facebook.com/translations/glossary.php?app=1&aloc=ga\\_IE#!/note.php?note\\_id=128753848919&id=9445547199&ref=mf](http://www.facebook.com/translations/glossary.php?app=1&aloc=ga_IE#!/note.php?note_id=128753848919&id=9445547199&ref=mf)] accessed 30th August 2010.

8. [ [http://www.facebook.com/translations/index.php?aloc=ga\\_IE&app=1&translate&p=20#!/translations/wiki.php?app=1&aloc=ga\\_IE](http://www.facebook.com/translations/index.php?aloc=ga_IE&app=1&translate&p=20#!/translations/wiki.php?app=1&aloc=ga_IE)] accessed 30th August 2010.
9. Daniel Miller, & Don Slater, *The Internet. An Ethnographic Approach*, 2010, Oxford, Berg.
10. David Crystal, *Language and the Internet*, 2001, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
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