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# The English Language in Ireland: An Introduction

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## Abstract

**I**rish English, as the oldest overseas variety of English, displays a number of features which are unique to Ireland or which show characteristic patterns in the use of variation within English more generally. Many of these features reflect the interacting influences of settlement from England and Scotland, bringing with it elements from British dialects as well as elements now considered obsolete in British English, and transfer (via intergenerational bilingualism and language shift) of elements from the Irish language. Some features of this mix have continued from early times to the present, others have died out with the increasing homogenisation of Irish English, and still new elements, from internal change and other linguistic influences, continue to develop the language.

**Keywords:** Irish English, Hiberno-English, Irish language, dialectal syntax, phonological variation, dialect lexicon

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## 1. Introduction

**I**n an era in which the globalisation of the English language has become a topic of considerable importance, there is much to be learned from the study of Irish English, which can be considered as the oldest of the 'overseas' varieties of the English language. Different names have been used to denote the English language in Ireland - chiefly *Hiberno-English*, *Anglo-Irish*, and *Irish English* - and though motivations have been proposed for each of them, the term I will use here is simply *Irish English*. This term is intended to denote the geographical location of this complex variety of English, following parallels with *Indian English*, *British English*, *American English*, and so on. The name controversy, which has been reviewed, for example, by Croghan (1988), Kallen (1999: 73-74), Dolan (2006), and Hickey (2007: 3-6) inevitably turns our attention to the two main historical influences on Irish English: settlement and linguistic relations set up by English colonisation, and contact with the Irish language, which was for many years the dominant language of the majority. We will start this review with a brief look at the historical background to the establishment of Irish English, and then consider aspects of *Irish English* grammar, phonology, and vocabulary. For the latter, we will rely on four types of data: (1) the published record of dialect studies; (2) corpus data as attested in the International Corpus of English for Ireland (ICE-Ireland), for which see Kirk et al. (2011) and Kallen and Kirk (2008); (3) my own field notes, denoted here with (JK),

followed by the provenance of the speaker who is being quoted; and (4) literary examples where authors have reflected aspects of the spoken language.

The external history of Irish English – how English was introduced to Ireland and came to be the dominant language over a period of more than eight centuries – is a complex topic, which we can only summarise here. More detailed accounts of this external history are given in sources such as Hogan (1927), Bliss (1977, 1979), Barry (1982), Kallen (1988, 1994, 1997b), Hickey (2007), Amador Moreno (2010), and, specifically for Northern Ireland, Braidwood (1964) and Corrigan (2010). Nevertheless, it will be instructive if we keep in mind a general linguistic chronology which may be divided as follows: (1) *languages before English*, including (a) Irish, the first evidence of which dates from around the 4th century (though cultural artefacts suggest the coming of Celtic civilisation at least 700 years before this time), (b) Latin (brought through early contacts with the Roman world and later Christianisation in the 5th century), and (c) Scandinavian languages, of particular importance during the period from the end of the 8th to the early 11th century, when Ireland was involved in trade, conflict, and political association with the Viking world and its network of associations; (2) *the introduction of English colonisation*, which stemmed from a military expedition sanctioned by Henry II of England and lasting over a series of events between 1167 and 1171; (3) *an era of Gaelicisation*, which parallels a decline in the Anglo-Irish colony due to a variety of economic and political causes (as well as the effects of a 14th century plague), during which the descendants of the Anglo-Norman colonisers became at least partially assimilated to the cultural and political loyalties – as well as the linguistic preferences – of the Gaelic majority; (4) *a rise in the status of English*, following the revival of English colonial interests which started in the efforts of Henry VIII to unite Anglo-Irish and Gaelic society into one polity firmly under English rule, and continued with plantation and resettlement schemes in the 16th and 17th centuries whose aim was to anglicise and subdue the land by settling large numbers of loyal English and Scottish colonists; (5) *a popular shift to English*, which began to spread among Irish-speakers in the 18th century, but which gathered momentum via generations of transitional bilingualism during the 19th century, and (6) *the current regime*, stemming from the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921-22, which ultimately led to the present day 26-county Republic of Ireland and the six counties of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. Though English is extensively used in both jurisdictions, and Ó Riagáin (2007: 229) estimates that no more than 5% of the population in the Republic ‘use Irish as their first or main language’, the association between Irish and national identity has been enshrined in civil and educational policy in the Republic, and maintains a value, alongside Ulster Scots, in discussions over language and identity in Northern Ireland: English is so widely used in Ireland that it is not even mentioned in the cultural sections of the 1998 Belfast Agreement, or Good Friday Agreement: see *Agreement* (1998) and Kirk and Ó Baoill (2000).

## 2. Irish English syntax

### 2.1 Clause-level syntax

Several features distinguish Irish English with regard to the order of information in the sentence, and to the way in which clauses are combined. The use of sentence clefts, in which new information is placed initially following *it is*, *it's*, *'tis*, or *is it*, and the use of initial position for new information (often referred to as topicalisation) are illustrated by the examples in (1) and (2) below. In these sentences, the material in cleft position appears in italics.

- (1) a. It is *more English* they are speaking now (Filppula 1999: 247)  
 b. It's *looking for more land* a lot of them are (Filppula 1999: 250)  
 c. It's *Guinness* <,> are arranging it anyway (ICE-Ireland S1A-086)  
 d. Is it *racing* they are? (Synge [1907] 1941: 150)
- (2) a. He is workin' over there. *In some building* he is workin' with ['for'] the couple of weeks (Filppula 1999: 261)  
 b. And she was always sitting in the corner [...] not speaking, but *a kind of a sound like moaning* she'd make to herself (Gregory [1920] 1970: 131).  
 c. And eventually *come along* the Summer Project and we put it on the programme, and they couldn't say no (JK; Dublin)  
 d. *Hay* mostly, we grow, and barley (Hickey 2007: 267).

Many constructions of this kind are not unique to Irish English, yet patterns of usage show distinctively Irish features. In particular, we should note that the examples cited above do not involve emphasis or contrast as they usually do in other varieties of English. Not surprisingly, then, word order of this kind appears more frequently in Irish English than in many other varieties. Filppula (1999: 260-261), for example, demonstrates that the frequency of topicalisation (measured in instances per 10,000 words) across different sets of data ranges from 15.9 occurrences in Co. Kerry to 8.6 in Dublin. These figures contrast with a frequency of 4 occurrences per 10,000 words in a corpus of educated British English. Thus while Irish English to some degree simply exploits word order flexibility that is available in English generally, close inspection and quantitative analysis show features that can distinguish Irish English in subtle yet definite ways.

Other clause-level features which we mention here include the use of what is generally referred to as 'subordinating *and*' to join clauses, and 'contact relative' clause constructions, which lack a complementiser to introduce a relative clause. These types are exemplified in (3) and (4) below. The conjunction *and* as shown in (3) is used to join two clauses into different kinds of relationship. In (3a), for example, the second clause depicts a situation which is ongoing at the time of the event denoted by the first, while in (3c) the second clause poses a contradiction to the state of affairs depicted in the first clause. We can paraphrase subordinating *and* with *although*, *while*, or other conjunctions in other Englishes, but the precise function of *and* depends very much on the discourse context of the utterance. The 'contact relative' clauses of (4) have been marked with Ø to indicate the position of the complementiser which is missing at the start of the relative clause. Note

that while *who* or *which* could readily fill this gap, examples as in (4d) show that, particularly with the copular verb *be*, it is more than just the complementiser which may be deleted.

- (3) a. You put in your nose ['appeared'] *an'* us churning (Henry 1957: 206)
- b. He was talking to me *and* he all the time bouncing the ball (JK; Dublin)
- c. How could that madman have his senses *and* his brain-pan slit? (Synge [1907] 1941: 153)
- d. And there was your man *and* he putting ridge tiles on a roof (ICE-Ireland S1A-083)
- (4) a. Never eat pork Ø is not well done! (Moylan 1996: 361)
- b. It was my own son Ø hit me (Synge [1907] 1941: 148)
- c. And then I was reading there's a few of the other lads out of fifth year Ø might be called in to do the ushering (ICE-Ireland S1A-072)
- d. I had three aunts Ø nurses ('who were nurses' [JK; Kerry])

## 2.2 The verb system

No doubt the single most commonly-discussed feature of Irish English is the verb phrase. In particular, the different ways in which Irish English realises what we might call perfect aspect (realised in general English with *have* + VERB *-en*, as in *John has eaten the beans*) has attracted scholarly attention since the 19th century: overviews include Harris (1984), Kallen (1989: 7–22), Filppula (1999: 90–130), Hickey (2000, 2007: 193–213), Corrigan (2010: 61–63), and Amador-Moreno (2010: 37–43). These reviews, and the sources they discuss, show that there is considerable flexibility between the formal realisation the perfect and the meaning relationships which trigger the use of one form or another. The range of alternatives to the general English perfect has also given rise to a view that this form, as Harris (1984: 307) puts it, 'rarely occurs in basic H[iberno]-E[nglish] vernacular'. Space limitations preclude a detailed discussion of all of the relevant forms here, but the following account gives a brief profile of the most characteristic types.

### 2.2.1 Perfect aspect

The most distinctive of the Irish English perfect forms, the *after* perfect, appears to have undergone a transformation from its earliest attested usage to the pattern which holds today. Early examples appear to refer to events in the future, though the more recent structure, which became robust in the 19th century and is illustrated in (6) below, unambiguously functions as a perfect in taking a retrospective view of events initiated in the past which have relevance at the moment of speaking. Harris (1984) has used the label 'hot news' to denote the semantics of this form, yet studies such as Kallen (1991), Ronan (2005: 262–263), and McCafferty (2006: 135–139) show that for many speakers, the *after* perfect, while often co-occurring with adverbs of recency and rarely used to refer to remote or counterfactual events, is not restricted to 'hot news'. In Kallen (1991: 66) I also argue that speech act status and social closeness have a role to play in uses of the *after* perfect, since *after* perfects frequently occur in situations where the speaker draws attention to

an event that is known to the listener but which forms the focus of chastisement, e.g. *You're after breakin the gate!*. O'Keeffe and Amador Moreno (2009) similarly emphasise the function of "scolding", including "self-inflicted or self-deprecating" utterances with the *after* perfect. Thus while (6a) uses *after* to point to an event which has occurred only recently before the moment of speaking, (6b) offers the speaker's view of unnecessary killing which took place over an extended time in Northern Ireland which was still going on at the moment of speaking, and (6c) shows what McCafferty (2006: 142-144) calls the 'preterite use' of the *after* form to bring a more remote past into a current narrative; (6d), spoken between sisters at the family dinner table, and (6e) demonstrate respectively the chastising and self-critical functions of *after*. These latter forms, particularly, would not have the same pragmatic effect if rendered with the regular English *have* perfect.

- (6) a. I'm *after* spilling a drop of that in the saucer (Kallen 1991: 66)
- b. Over the 2000 people that's *after* bein murdered and killed there - it could never have happened (Kallen 1989: 10)
- c. I'm *after* paying £12 for a pram for Tony forty-seven years ago that wasn't worth £1! He was a robber. (Kearns 1994: 190)
- d. Julie you're *after* kicking my bare foot, you fuckin bitch! (JK; Dublin)
- e. Must go back to it again oh I don't know what I'm *after* doing now at all [sound of cutlery hitting plate] see I don't know what we have I'll just save it all (O'Keeffe and Amador Moreno 2009: 528)

The perfect can also be expressed in Irish English using a tensed form of the verb, extended with adverbial reference so as to cover a time from the past which includes the moment of speaking or a past-tense point of reference. Harris (1984) labelled this form as the 'extended now' perfect, borrowing a term from McCoard (1978), but since McCoard uses this phrase in his analysis of the English perfect in general, I suggest that 'extended tense form' better captures the essential dynamic in which a simple tensed form (either past or present) is extended to take on perfect reference. Examples are found in (7), where the relevant verb and adverbial are italicised. The commonly-used question form in (7d) is frequently misunderstood by those unfamiliar with Irish English to be a question about future intentions, but the Irish English sense of a retrospective perfect (as in 'How long have you been here?') clearly follows from the pattern in (7).

- (7) a. He's *working these years* on it (Henry 1957: 172)
- b. I'm here *since 1927* and I'm very proud of Marino (JK; Dublin)
- c. She *has her eye on it for ages* (JK; Galway)
- d. *How long are you here?*

A further Irish English verbal category - which is restricted to transitive verbs and includes an object between the auxiliary and the main verb - has often been treated as an example of the perfect. Some definitions are structural, as in Filppula's (1999: 107-116) account of the 'medial object perfect', while semantic definitions are suggested by the label 'accomplishment perfect' in Kallen (1989: 16-18) and 'resultative perfect' given by Hickey (2007: 208-210). Examples are seen in (8): the Irish English form should not be confused with causatives such as *I had a dress made* [for me] or the malefactive passive as in *I had my windows*

*broken* [to my cost], which it superficially resembles. Here the verbal construction is italicised, and the object is in bold.

- (8) a. I *have* **it** pronounced wrong (Harris [1983] 1985: 5)  
 b. I'm sure you *have* **the other lot** corrected already (JK; Dublin)  
 c. Bill *had* **sweets** bought for them (JK; Dublin)  
 d. But sure we *have* **it** heard from olden times that they [fairies] were there (Filppula 1999: 302fn)

Though it is tempting to see the forms in (8) as re-orderings of the regular English perfect, Henry (1957: 177-179) argues instead that this 'retrospective' construction shows 'a clear preoccupation with state' rather than action. Harris ([1983] 1985: 35) goes further, in stating that this construction should not be treated as a form of the perfect, but as 'a complex construction consisting of a main *have* clause and an embedded clause containing an *-ed* participle'. In this case, he argues, *have* is 'not a grammatical formative', as would be the case in general English, 'but a lexical verb denoting possession'. A biclausal analysis is also suggested in Kirk and Kallen (2007: 278-282), where this form is called the 'pseudo-perfect', based on the analysis of sentences, as in (9), in which the subject of the main (*have*) clause is not the agent of the conjoined clause. An example such as (9c) is particularly instructive, since the speaker here does not state that the Taoiseach (the head of government in the Irish parliamentary system) had not requested information, but, rather, that the Taoiseach was not in possession of information which had been requested by others. Changing the word order to *\*The Taoiseach hadn't requested the full information* would change the meaning completely. Such examples give further support to a biclausal analysis which would apply to sentence types in both (8) and (9).

- (9) a. I've **two daughters** married today <, > and they are carrying on that tradition still that the sitting room door is locked until Christmas morning and then in and presents are opened (ICE-Ireland S1B-035)  
 b. You've a lot of people who've **cows** calved already at this time of the year (ICE-Ireland S1B-035)  
 c. The Taoiseach *hadn't* **the full information** requested in the House earlier this morning (ICE-Ireland S1B-058).

A final point in relation to the perfect concerns the view that the English perfect with *have* is not a part of the Irish English verbal system. There is no parallel structure in Irish, and the alternative structures discussed above may give weight to the view that uses of *have* perfects lie outside the Irish English system. Even literary representations such as those analysed by Amador Moreno (2006), however, show the unmarked use of *have* perfects alongside the forms discussed above. Fieß (2000: 200) shows *have* perfects to be robust in her East Galway dialect sample, representing 43 out of the 92 tokens of the present perfect under analysis. Kallen and Kirk (2007) point out that while ICE-Ireland contains five examples of the *after* perfect in the entire corpus, standard *have* perfects predominate: within one subcomponent of conversational texts alone (representing 90,000 words), ICE-Ireland shows 44 *have* perfects just with the main verb *been*.

### 2.2.2 The generic/habitual category

The other widespread distinctive feature of the Irish English verbal system concerns the marking of generic qualities and habitual actions. Three different generic or habitual markers are found in (10) below: *do*, *be*, and a combination of *do* + *be*, with the main verb in progressive form. Note that in the second of these categories, *be* is relatively invariant, almost always occurring as *bes* (sometimes spelled as *be's* or *bees*) and never using regular morphology as in *\*I am*. Uses of *do* here are not to be confused with emphatic or contrastive *do* as found elsewhere.

- (10) a. Did you never read in the papers the way murdered men *do bleed* and *drip*? (Synge [1907] 1941: 129)  
 b. If I go in to meet a spark ['electrician'], I *do find* a carpenter (Kallen 1989: 6)  
 c. He *bes* always *joking* (O'Neill 1947: 264)  
 d. She *does be sitting* there at nights watching Seven Days (Kallen 1989: 7)

One unsettled question on generic/habitual verb forms concerns the differentiations which can be made within sets such as (10). Semantic differences can be suggested – as between the recurrence of discrete events seen in (10b) versus more extended states of affairs as in (10d) – but existing evidence does not give us a clear pattern. It is sometimes suggested that *be* forms are more specifically associated with the Ulster dialect area. As noted in Kallen (1994: 180), however, various dialectal accounts cite the *be* form in counties Meath, Roscommon, and Dublin, while Hickey (2007: 231–232) cites recessive dialectal evidence of the form in Wexford. Fieß (2003: 176–177) shows that contrary to expectations, the generic/habitual *be* form is the single most common of those she found in fieldwork in East Galway, further suggesting that the geographical breakdown between the two forms is far from clear.

## 2.3 Phrase level syntax

The dialectological record provides ample evidence of distinctive features in the Irish English use of prepositions and in the structure of noun phrases. We will illustrate prepositional usage here with the preposition *on*. As seen in (11a), *on* can act as a dative of disadvantage to mark a noun phrase as the recipient of negative consequences, and to denote a variety of what Filppula (1999: 219–223) calls 'various physical and mental sensations, states or processes', illustrated in (11b). Possession is shown as in (11c), while a construction referring to newspapers is in (11d).

- (11) a. And what really scared her then was she went to kind of put her arm forward and the arm locked *on her* (ICE-Ireland S1A-053)  
 b. What hurry is *on* you? (Joyce 1910: 31, Moylan 1996: 342)  
 c. That one has a lug ['ear'] *on* her like a snipe (Henry 1957: 148)  
 d. They're only *on* the paper for being famous because they're *on the paper* (JK; Galway)

Use of the definite article *the* in Irish English provides a further point of contrast and overlap with other varieties of English. We find a range of usages that include possession and personal reference, generic features, academic subjects, and more abstract types of reference. Influence from Irish, which has no indefinite



article and has different rules for use of the definite article, is often suggested as an source for Irish English patterns, and is reviewed by Filppula (1999: 64–68).

- (13) a. That was *the dear journey* to me ['I paid dearly for it'] (Joyce 1910: 83)  
 b. I want to destroy him for breaking *the head* ['my head'] on me with the clout of a loy (Synge [1907] 1941: 141)  
 c. She couldn't make *the priest* o' the two of them ['couldn't afford to educate both of them for the priesthood'] (Henry 1957: 118)  
 d. But America is a better country in that line of *the labouring*. B'cause you are, you are paid for rough sweat there (Filppula 1999: 62).

### 3.1 Phonology

No less than with syntax, the development of the sound system of Irish English shows a mixture of influences from early settlement patterns, contact with Irish, and subsequent developments with the grown and internationalisation of English in Ireland. A major split occurs along the lines of the Ulster dialect zone, with certain features of phonology in Ulster English clearly related to Scottish English, though there are other features which may be organised more on an east-west division than the north-south division implied by taking Ulster as a focal point. Though a detailed description of Irish English phonology is outside the remit of this paper, the following sections discuss some of the most salient features.

### 3.2 Consonants

Dental and alveolar sounds show recurring themes in Irish English, particularly in the loss of phonetic [θ] or [ð], where use of a purely interdental fricative is often found regularly only in Ulster English. Outside of Ulster, the alternatives to [θ] and [ð] are phonetically varied, including alveolar stops, dental stops, and a widely-used affricate which includes a dental stop a secondary non-strident fricative element, as in [tθ] and [dð]. Thus Henry (1958: 123) gives examples with pure stops as in [tɑ:t] 'thought' and [tatʃ] 'thatch' and, drawing a parallel with dental stops in Irish (where the modern language has no [θ] or [ð] sounds), [d̪o:z] 'those' and ['br̪əd̪ər] 'brother' (Henry 1957: 57). Lack of a clear contrast between /t/ and /θ/ or /d/ and /ð/ means that oppositions in pairs such as *tin* and *thin* or *death* and *debt* may be neutralised for some speakers.

The phonetic realisation of /t/ and /d/ provides a great deal of variation in Irish English. Unstressed vowels followed by /r/ often trigger dentalisation, as seen in ['spl̪ɪnd̪ər] 'splendour', ['l̪əd̪ər] 'ladder', and ['m̪əd̪ər̪n̪] 'modern' (Henry 1957: 57), though it can occur in other environments as well. A signature feature of Irish English, especially outside the Ulster dialect zone, is the use of an alveolar fricative realisation for alveolar stops in syllable-final position when preceded by a stressed vowel in the same metrical foot. Pandeli, Eska, Ball, and Rahilly (1997) have given a detailed phonetic description of the voiceless sound, and note a diversity of transcription symbols for it. Following Ó Baoill (1990: 161) I treat the sound as a lowered version of /t/ and transcribe it here as [t̪]. Typical sites for what is commonly referred to as the lenition of /t/ include word-finally (as in /k̪at̪/ 'cat' and /r̪ab̪ət̪/ 'rabbit'); between two vowels, shown in /b̪ʌt̪ər/ 'butter' and /'ɪr̪ət̪eɪt̪əd̪/ 'irritated'.

This process does not occur word-initially or before stress in words such as *attack* or *pretend*; an immediately preceding consonant usually blocks the use of lenition, though some speakers will use [t] following, especially, /r/, as in /mɑrt/ 'mart' and /'pɑrti/ 'party'. The voiced counterpart [d] is also found in Irish English, though not as frequently; it has not been studied in as much detail. Yet [t] and [d] are not the only realisations of alveolar consonants which give a characteristic flavour to Irish English: the full range of realisations for /t/ includes the tap [ɾ], glottal stop [ʔ], and [h], as well as [tʰ] and [θ], which can occur in syllable-initial position. Henry's (1958: 123-127) picture of traditional dialect captures the variation well, citing examples such as [sθrɔ:k] 'stroke', [bʉtər], [bʉhər] 'butter', ['lɛhərʒ] 'letters', and [sʉtʰ] 'soot'. Contemporary urban vernaculars do not show quite the same patterns as in traditional dialect, yet, as reported in Kallen (2005), data files from a study of working class speech in Dublin include examples such as [lɛgdɪʔ] 'legged it' [i.e. 'ran'], [daʔ] 'that', [gər ʌvər əv] 'got out of', [mɛh] 'met', [a'baʉh] 'about', and [strih] 'street'. Though the use of [ɾ] and [ʔ] may not be unique to Irish English, [h] is much less common, since it violates a general constraint in English phonology against the use of [h] in a syllable coda. The influence of Irish may be suggested here, since Irish does allow for /h/ in coda position, though it does not have the [t] sound in its phonetic repertoire. The total pattern of realisations may thus include elements that show convergence with Irish, convergence with other English dialects which use [ʔ], [ɾ], and [tʰ], and phonological universals.

### 3.3 Vowels

Ulster English can be characterised by its points of similarity to Scottish English and Scots, especially in the use of central or front vowels in the GOOSE and FOOT lexical sets as defined by Wells (1982). Centralisation of the vowel can lead to the neutralisation of vowel quality contrasts between, for example, *foot* [fʉt] and *food* [fʉt], but vowel length differences, which often reflect the Scottish Vowel Length Rule (Aitken 1981), may establish contrastive sets. Outside of the Ulster dialect zone, GOOSE words are a well-defined class with [u], but the FOOT and STRUT lexical sets show the variable assignment of [ʊ], [ʌ], and intermediate vowels such as [ɔ̃] in words such as *bush*, *push*, *cushion*, *pudding*, *foot*, *soot*, and *stood*.

Geographical tendencies are seen in raising of the /ɛ/ vowel in words of the DRESS lexical set, particularly, though not exclusively, before nasal consonants. Henry (1958: 111) cites realisations such as [prɛ'tɪndɪŋ] 'pretending', [ɸwɛ'n] 'when', [bɪnʃ] 'bench', [dɪvɪl] 'devil', and [nɪkst] 'next' from a range of data points, though his evidence and the view of Ó Baoill (1990: 159) suggest that raising is less common in Ulster dialects. In the case of [dɪvɪl], the pronunciation has become lexicalised, so that *divil*, which can be used as a negator (as in *divil the bit of news* meaning 'no news'), constitutes a separate lexical entry from *devil*. By and large, raising to /ɪ/ is now a recessive feature, though for some speakers it is still quite productive: I cite a speaker from the southwest of Ireland who had recently returned from Japan, and who used the pronunciation ['bɪnto:] to refer to the Japanese packed meal commonly known as a *bento*. Raising of DRESS words to /ɪ/ provides many possible homonyms, such as *pen* and *pin*, *ten* and *tin*, or *mess* and *miss*.

## 4.1 Lexicon

Distinctive features of the Irish English lexicon arise from its historical development, and are usually classed in three groups: (a) words which have been incorporated from Irish, (b) words from English and Scottish dialects or words from British English which have become obsolete or otherwise restricted in Britain, and (c) innovations which arise internally or from other loanword sources. Because of the long history of contact between Irish and English, it is not always possible to differentiate clearly between words of the (a) and (b) groups: some words are better described by Wigger's (2000: 187) term 'interlingual lexeme', indicating that, especially for bilingual speakers who were crucial in the formation of Irish English in the 19th century, it was, as Wigger says 'irrelevant in many common instances' to consider a word as English or Irish. In the following sections, we will give an overview of these types of words. Since this overview can only provide a limited sample, dictionaries such as those of Ó Muirithe (1996, 2010), Macafee (1996), Moylan (1996), Wall (2001), Dolan (2004), and Share (2008) are particularly recommended.

## 4.2 The Irish lexicon

Though examples of borrowing from Irish into Irish English are seen in our earliest records, we will concentrate here on words which feature in the modern dialectal record and the standard language. The pace of language shift made its impact on Irish English not just by limited borrowings, which frequently fill lexical gaps for which there is no word in other varieties of English, but by the importation of Irish words in a process that led to the continued use in the new language of words which had salience in the old. We could suggest the following examples (given in Irish or in a conventional Anglicised form), organised into themes to give the flavour of this part of the lexicon. *People and conversation*: *amadán* 'fool'; *bodhair Uí Laoire*, literally 'deafness of Laoire', used to refer to a person who hears only what they wish to hear; *flahoolagh* 'generous, good-hearted', sometimes to an overly-generous degree; *ráiméis* 'nonsense', also 'talk nonsense'; *plámás* 'smooth talk, flattery'; and discourse markers such as *a mhic* (literally 'son' in the Irish vocative case) and the ironic *moryah*. The latter term is used to express a possible contrary interpretation to an assertion, as in 'He was helping her with her homework *mar dheá*' (JK; Cork). *Food and drink*: *boxty*, a food made from grated potatoes, eggs, flour, and salt, fried or baked on a griddle; *crubeen*, a boiled pig's trotter, narrowed in meaning from the more general Irish word for a (little) claw or hoof; and *drisheen*, commonly used to refer to a boiled meat pudding, narrowed in meaning from Irish *drisín* 'intestine'. *Miscellaneous words*: *bata* 'stick' (especially, as used in schools before corporal punishment was abolished); *bacaidí* 'lame, unsteady, crooked', applied to people as well as inanimate objects, and related to Irish *bacach* 'lame, defective, imperfect'; *mi-ádh* 'bad luck'; and *traneen* 'a straw', and by extension 'something worthless, of no value'.

## 4.3 The English and Scots lexicon

It is difficult to know when the English sub-lexicon of Irish English started to distinguish itself from the founding dialects of Britain. Some English words of Old

English or French etymology occur only in Irish English texts; others known more generally are first recorded in Irish English, though we cannot be sure if these words originated in Ireland or if they simply represent chance attestations. Words of this kind include *horyness* 'filth' (based on *hory* 'foul, filthy,' but only cited in the nominal form by the OED from a 15th century Irish English text); *swagger* (first cited in the OED from 1598, but appearing in an Irish English text from 1518); and *voucheous*, possibly meaning 'boastful' or 'arrogant'. Borrowings and multiple influences make simple etymologies in Irish English difficult, even in this period: Lucas (1995: 42), for example, notes etymologists' uncertainty in deriving the word *rusin* 'lunch' in a 14th century Anglo-Irish poem from Irish *ruisín* or suggesting that the Irish word may ultimately come from English. Though many words of this period became obsolete as Irish English modernised, some continuity is suggested in analyses of the archaic dialect of the baronies of Forth and Bargo, in Co. Wexford. Words considered archaic by the OED but found in the 19th century dialect glossary compiled by Jacob Poole (Dolan and Ó Muirthe 1996) include *attercop* 'a spider', hence also a 'small, insignificant person', *poustee* 'power, ability, bodily strength', and *hachee* 'cross, ill-tempered'. Though the dialect is no longer spoken, some words from it are still used in the region: here we may cite *chi* [tʃɔɪ] 'an armload', 'small quantity' (JK; Wexford); *backstir* 'plough a patch of land for a second time' (Byrne 2002: 80), also listed by Ó Muirthe (1990: 154); and *vanged* 'sprained, stiff' (Ó Muirthe 1990, Byrne 2002).

The modern period of settlement brought with it new sources of English dialectal material. The Plantation of Ulster naturally introduced many new linguistic elements: see the dictionary edited by Macafee (1996), a subsequent review by Kirk (1999), and discussion by Corrigan (2010: 79–99). Corrigan (2010: 84) points out that the years of conflict known as the Troubles in Northern Ireland have hardly been considered as a feature of Ulster dialect, yet this period has spawned many lexical items, such as *sally* 'Saracen tank' (JK; Newry) and Corrigan's *lift* 'detain for questioning'. Much of the Ulster lexicon, though, reflects more general affiliations to Scotland and the North of England: illustrative examples include *boke* 'vomit', *ferntickles* 'freckles', *skelf* 'splinter', and *thole* 'endure, tolerate, suffer'. The boundary between usage in Ulster and the rest of Ireland is not necessarily absolute, and sometimes calls for a quantitative assessment. ICE-Ireland, for example, shows 394 examples of *aye* 'yes' in the Northern Ireland spoken material, as well as 28 examples in the Republic. Bearing in mind that the Republic includes three counties of historical Ulster, these figures broadly confirm that the Ulster dialect lexicon does not stop at the political border.

Considering the more general English dialect lexicon in Ireland, we may use the same categories as we did for Irish in order to illustrate common usage. *People and conversation: ABCs* (with the first letter pronounced [a], as in traditional Irish English) 'mottled red lines on the shins caused by sitting too close to a fire'; *chisler* 'child'; *latchico* 'disagreeable, unpleasant, untrustworthy person'; *mot* 'girlfriend, girl'; *pooley* 'urine', especially used in connection with children; *sca* 'gossip, news', shortened from *scandal*; *shift* 'kiss' in a romantic or sexual sense; and *stroke* 'appetite'. *Food and drink: coddle* or *Dublin coddle* denotes a stew made by boiling sausages, bacon rashers, onions, and potatoes together; *gur cake* refers to a cake made with

fruit and cake scraps baked between two layers of pastry; *stirabout* 'porridge'. *Miscellaneous words*: *airy* 'lively, fond of pleasure'; *anymore*, used in positive senses to mean 'from now on', 'nowadays', and 'still', discussed in Kallen (1997a: 153) with examples such as *Wool is so expensive anymore* (JK; Galway); *cog* 'cheat in school, examinations'; *eccer* 'homework, school exercise', cited by Partridge (1972) as Oxford slang of the late 19th and early 20th centuries but apparently not now used outside of Ireland; *power* 'large quantity', and *powerful* 'very good', formerly widely used in English, but now considered by the OED to be regional or associated with Irish English. Other words with English etymology demonstrate innovative meanings, such as *yoke*, whose core meaning in the OED refers to a device for joining animals together for ploughing, but which in Irish English is widely used to refer to 'a thing in general' or as a mildly derogatory term for a person.

#### 4.4 Mixed and other lexical sources

Some words of the Irish English lexicon have an identity in both languages, making etymology complex. A word like *fooster* 'bustle; act in a fussy, ineffectual manner', for example, can readily be related to Irish words such as *fústrach* 'fussy, fidgety' and *fústaire* 'fussy, fidgety person', thus suggesting an etymology from Irish. Yet the EDD also cites *foochter* [fu:χtər] 'confusion, turmoil; a bustling confused method of work' in Banffshire in Scotland, as well as *fooch* in Devon and Cornwall to mean 'disorder, confusion'. The general sense and geographical distribution of these items could also suggest an English etymology for the Irish English term. Dual etymologies are not necessarily in competition: an Irish English term can arise from convergence between the two possible source languages, or, via bilingual contact, can be taken into one language and then recycled back into the other language. Other such words with similar dual etymologies include *gombeen*, which absorbs the meanings 'fool', a 'profiteer', and a 'piece of something, especially a lump of tobacco' from a variety of sources (see discussion in Kallen 1997a); *crack/craic* 'talk, conversation, fun, news'; *blather/bladar* 'nonsense, talk nonsense'; *bother* 'deafen with noise'; and *grig/griog* 'make envious', 'irritate'. Loan translations play a role as well, and sometimes give new meanings from Irish to words that are otherwise well known in English. Irish English *weather*, for example, can be used both to refer to climate, as in general English, and to time (as in *How are you this weather?* 'these days'), capturing the two primary meanings of Irish *aimsir*.

Finally, we note that other words in the Irish English lexicon come from other sources, unknown etymologies, and novel coinage. *Gazebo* [gə'zebo] 'tall or awkward strange object or person' appears to combine both an uncertain etymology for the architectural sense (see OED) and an uncertain history in the sense of personal reference, which Partridge (1972) relates to 19th century Australian and American slang, with possible influence from Spanish *gazapo* 'a shrewd fellow'. *Grush, gushie* 'scramble for money, food, or other small items or gifts' is a word with an unknown etymology. *Tallyman* appears at first to be a regular English word referring to a person who tallies, but in the Republic, this word refers specifically to someone who observes the counting of ballots in elections and is typically called on to make predictions as the count proceeds: this meaning is not given in the OED.

## 5. Conclusion

The preceding discussion has been designed to survey a range of features – whether in syntax, phonology, or lexicon – which distinguish Irish English from British or the later overseas varieties of English. Some of these features may reflect the influence of the Irish language through generations of bilingualism and language contact, others may reflect founding influences from British dialects, and still others may arise from an interaction between these two influences, or from other sources. Our presentation touches on a certain contradiction when we consider the life of language in society. As noted in the introduction, the colonial history of English in Ireland and its co-existence with Irish Gaelic have kept a distinctively Irish form of English apart from the core elements of Irish linguistic ideology. In the Republic of Ireland, Irish retains a special position as the ‘first official language’ in the Constitution (see Article 8, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*), while in Northern Ireland, where many more English and Scots speakers settled in the 17th century, it is Ulster Scots rather than Ulster English that has figured in public debates over language and identity. Yet there is no doubt that the distinctive features of Irish English, only a sample of which can be discussed here, have created a variegated language that has retained its distinctiveness over generations. In this way, despite potential ideological qualms or the influences of international English more generally, Irish English continues to play a role – well recognised in literature and film – in the local, regional, or national identities of speakers from throughout the island.

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