




Pikey and Shelta

**A Socio-Linguistic, Phonologic, and Pragmatic Analysis of Irish Traveller Linguistics in Guy
Richie's Snatch**



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The dominant language of the Irish Traveller community, Shelta, features prominently in Guy Ritchie's crime-comedy film *Snatch* (2000). The film features a Brad Pitt character, Mickey O'Neil, who is an Irish Traveller (known as a "pikey" in the film) who utilizes the Shelta language as his character's dialect. Pitt and other actors portray a very stereotypical example of Traveller language and behavior, which is referred to as "pikey" or "piker" throughout the film. That particular label is a pejorative slang term, which often refers to a lower-class person regarded as coarse or disreputable. As a result, it is considered an ethnic slur among the Traveller community. The correct term for the language is "Shelta" or "Gammon," and the film's portrayal of the Traveller use of the language reflects British society's view of the Traveller community. O'Neil's uses the language to mixed success: while he incorporates many known characteristics of spoken Shelta, he does not utilize any of its unique vocabulary. Pitt's portrayal of Mickey O'Neil as a "pikey" succeeds, as he incorporates word choice, phonologic features, and speaking rates that real Shelta speakers use.

Shelta, widely known as Cant and known to its native speakers as Gammon, is often used as a crypto-lect to exclude outsiders from comprehending conversations between Travellers.¹ Linguists have been documenting Shelta in various forms since the 1870s, and it's possible that the language existed as far back as the 13th century.² There are a variety of possible origins for Shelta, but experts hypothesize that the Traveller community in Ireland was predominantly Irish speaking until the British conquest introduced bilingualism (Irish and Hiberno-English) into the isle of Ireland. Socio-linguist Sharon Gmelch, in a work describing the life of an Irish Traveller woman, writes the following to describe the Shelta linguistic features:

¹ McArthur, Tom. 1992. *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford University Press

² Meyer, Kuno. 1909. *The secret languages of Ireland*. *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, New Series, 2: 241–6.

“Most Gammon words were formed from Irish by applying four techniques: reversal, metathesis, affixing, and substitution. In the first, an Irish word is reversed to form a Gammon one – mac, or son, in Irish became kam in Gammon. In the second, consonants or consonant clusters were transposed. Thirdly, a sound or cluster of sounds were either prefixed or suffixed to an Irish word. Some of the more frequently prefixed sounds were s, gr, and g.... Lastly, many Gammon words were formed by substituting an arbitrary consonant or consonant cluster in an Irish word. In recent years, modern slang and Romani (the language of the gypsies) words have been incorporated. The grammar and syntax are English.”³

Although he does not use any uniquely Shelta words, Pitt’s character adequately portrays the typical “pikey” Shelta usage. The exact number of unique words in the Shelta dictionary is hard to determine, but is estimated at around 2,500 words, most of which are only used for conversations between Travellers.⁴ It is therefore unsurprising that no unique Shelta words are used in the clip, which depicts Londoners interacting with Travellers. However, through the excerpt from *Snatch* in which Tommy (Stephen Graham) interacts with the Traveller community to purchase a caravan, the linguistic differences between British English and Traveller Anglican-Shelta are evidently displayed.

One common feature of the Shelta language and dialect is extremely fast speech. Linguists have measured speed of speech, or speaking rate, in a variety of contexts. Speakers of British English tend to produce about 193-195 words per minute, as taken across radio broadcasts, conversation, and television.⁵ The average speaking rate, in syllables per minute, for

³ Gmelch, Sharon. 1986. *Nan: The Life of an Irish Travelling Woman*. London: Souvenir Press. p. 234.

⁴ McArthur, Tom. 1992. *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford University Press

⁵ Tauroza, Steve and Allison, Desmond. 1990. *Speech Rates in British English*. Applied Linguistics, Issue 11

British speakers in conversation is approximately 263 s.p.m.,⁶ and for Irish English speakers, around 271 s.p.m.⁷ Using the software Praat, the speed at which the various actors in the clip from *Snatch* speak at was measured (see Appendix 1). When combined, the two “Londoners,” Tommy and Turkish, spoke at an average of 203 words per minute and 216 syllables per minute, slightly above average in the words per minute but below average in the syllables per minute (this is mostly due to Turkish’s voice over, which is purposely slowed speech). However, the “pikeys,” when including the younger kids involved in the clip, spoke at a rate of 286 words per minute and 317 syllables per minute. These counts represent a dramatic increase between the regular British English speakers (and the average English speaker), and the speed of speech of the Shelta speakers. The differences between the Pikeys and Londoners, over the course of a minute, are about 82 words, or 101 syllables, which represents an astounding amount of additional information. The difference gets larger if the children are excluded: 94 words per minute and 117 syllables per minute.

There are many plausible reasons for this elevated speed of speech. However, as Turkish states in the clip, “pikeys” are known to be good negotiators, and “it’s part of the reason they talk like they do: so you can’t follow what’s being said.”⁸ Expert linguists, studying the Shelta language, agree: “[Shelta] is used primarily to conceal meaning from outsiders, especially during business transactions and in the presence of police. Most [Shelta] utterances are terse and spoken so quickly that a non-Traveller might conclude the words merely had been garbled.”⁹ Thus, the language usage within the clip accurately reflects the real world usage of Anglicanized-Shelta, in that both are spoken rapidly in order to confound outsiders.

⁶ Tauroza, Steve and Allison, Desmond. 1990. *Speech Rates in British English*. Applied Linguistics, Issue 11

⁷ Lee, Alice, and Doherty, Rachel. *Speech Rates of Irish-English Speakers*. November 22, 2008. ASHA Convention.

⁸ *Snatch*, directed by Guy Ritchie (2000)

⁹ Gmelch, Sharon. 1986. *Nan: The Life of an Irish Travelling Woman*. London: Souvenir Press. p. 234.

The Shelta speakers in the clip also exhibit a number of phonological features, many of which have been co-opted from either native Irish or native English linguistic characteristics. An example of this occurs when Mrs. O’Neil says the word “thieves.” In her pronunciation, she converts the “th” sound, or /θ/ in IPA, into a “t” sound, or /t/. This is known as th-stopping: the realization of the dental fricative [θ] as the dental stop [t].¹⁰ A common feature of Euro-Anguillan English, th-stopping provides a window into the linguistic makeup of Shelta, as it must have adopted some English linguistic features. Similarly, the combining of aren’t and you into “aren’cha” by the young “pikey” represents the adoption of British English linguistic behavior. The change stems from several processes: the alteration of /ju:/ into /jə/, the changing of the /t/ to /f/, the dropping of the /j/ completely, and the combination of the syllables into one word with no pause. In addition, “going to” becomes “gonna,” and the /v/ is eliminated from “of,” both of which are indicative of the adoption of British English linguistic tendencies. Finally, Mrs. O’Neil’s use of the word “right” at the end of a question results in a “tag question,” another feature of London-spoken English.¹¹ Thus, the Shelta dialect portrayed in the film has adopted some of the characteristics of certain dialects of British English.

There are several other distinct linguistic features of the “pikey” speech that appear throughout the clip that are not exclusive to British English. The first is g-dropping. All three of the “pikey” characters (the teenager, Mickey, and Mrs. O’Neil) drop the “g” on all words ending in “ing,” turning /ŋ/ into /n/. Examples include murderin(g), doin(g), and comin(g). There is no discernable pattern as to where, within a sentence, the “ing” ending words have a “g” dropped, since in the relatively small sample size listed, every “ing” word drops its’ “g.” The usage of “g

¹⁰ Wells, J.C. 1989. *The British Isles. Accents of English*. Cambridge: University Press. pp. 565–66, 635

¹¹ McDonald, Kurtis. 2009. *English Tag Questions Are Quite Complicated, Aren’t They?* Kwansai Gakuin University Humanities Review, 13:91-102

dropping” is patterned, to an extent, in that every single dropped “g” precedes a consonant sound. This may be due to the small sample size of phrases, or potentially because the “ing” words almost always precede consonants. However, as has been studied at length, “g” dropping of this style is associated with lower socioeconomic status.¹² This well-established theory lends gravity to the hypothesis that Guy Ritchie uses his characters to expose and discuss stereotypes about the Traveller community, since Travellers are commonly stereotyped as lower class vagabonds.¹³ In addition, there are several instances of the vowel sounds within “would” being dropped, producing a sound that can be closely approximated in IPA as /ɪd/. This occurs twice: within “would you look at the size of him?” and within “See if the fellas would like a drink.” Again there seems to be no pattern of dropping, as one “would” begins a sentence and flows into a /j/ while the other is placed in the middle of a sentence and precedes a /l/, and although both instances are followed by consonants, that is likely due to small sample size. It seems likely that, although unconsciously made, the major reason to drop the syllables of “would” is to confuse the listener. It also has the effect of speeding up speech, as it reduces the length of the word and also the number of syllables while maintaining the meaning. Thus, this particular phonetic practice acts to support and implement the incredibly quick speech rate of the “pikey” dialect.

The final two phonetic elements of the “pikey” portrayal in *Snatch* are the most unique and easiest to identify. There is “o-dropping”, specifically on the end of two letter words ending in “o” such as “to” and “do.” In this case, however, there is a pattern: the drops occur only at the end of such two letter words, and only when the word precedes a vowel sound. Mickey’s sentence “Weather’s been kind to us” becomes /weðəz bi:n kaɪnd tʌs/, with the “to” and the “us”

¹² Liberman, Mark, and Yuan, Jiahong. *Automatic Detection of “g-dropping” in American English Using Forced Alignment*. Accessed from: <http://languagelog ldc.upenn.edu/myl/ldc/g-dropping-submitted.pdf>

¹³ Geoghegan, Tom (11 June 2008). *How offensive is the word pikey?*. BBC News.

combined into a single syllable word pronounced similar to tusk (without the “k” sound at the end). Similarly, Mrs. O’Neil and Mickey, when speaking the phrase “do you like,” change the individual syllables of “do” and “you” into /dʒɑ/, dropping the “o” from “do” while also, as previously explained, using “ya” rather than “you.” In contrast to the previous examples of g-dropping and the dental stoppage, “o-dropping” doesn’t match to a recognized speech pattern of British English. Similarly to the alterations made to “would,” the dropping of the “o” from two letter words that precede vowels allows for the combination of two syllables into one, speeding up speech and confusing the non-“pikey” listener while maintaining meaning for those who can understand it. The final unique phonological element, the changing of /ɒ/ to /æ/ in pronouncing “dogs” as “dags” does not have a basis in British or American English slang or dialects. As a result, it is incredibly noticeable, and is one of the most remarked upon sentences within the film. If not for the fact that the sentence “d’ya like dags” is clarified within the clip (both through verbal clarification and through visual clarification, since Mickey points to his dogs while he makes the statement), the meaning would likely not be clear. This is exactly what Guy Richie intended: it demonstrates concretely the difference in dialect while also informing the viewer that the language would be un-intelligible without clarification.

Guy Ritchie’s film *Snatch* portrays “pikeys,” a pejorative term for the Irish Traveller community. Irish Travellers can speak English, but their primary language is Shelta, which is based on Irish Gaelic but also incorporates British English.¹⁴ Brad Pitt’s portrayal of a Tinker boxer named Mickey O’Neil utilizes a variety of “pikey” linguistic mannerisms, from g-dropping to “o-dropping” to fast speech. His failure to use words belonging exclusively to the Shelta vocabulary does not mean that his portrayal is inaccurate to reality. Since those words

¹⁴ Gmelch, Sharon. *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*. “Irish Travellers.” 1996.

would only be understood by an Irish Traveller audience, and the scene in the film analyzed above contains interactions between Traveller's and Londoners, O'Neil avoids those words while staying true both to the linguistic elements of Traveller speech and to the intentions of such elements: to confuse those who engage in business interactions with Travellers.

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Appendix 1: Speaking Rates

Spoken By	Line	Syllable Count	Word Count	Time
Kid	That's a flash car, mister.	6	5	1.67
Tommy	Not as flash as your bike, though is it?	9	9	1.73
Kid	Who are you looking for?	6	5	1.15
Kid	Want me to go and get him?	6	7	1.37
Tommy	That's a good lad.	4	4	1.12
Tommy	Are you going to go get him for me?	9	9	1.31
Kid	Yeah.	1	1	0.52
Tommy	What are you waiting for?	6	5	1.78
Kid	The five quid you gonna pay me.	6	6	1.5
Tommy	Fuck off, I'll find him me self.	6	6	1.8
Kid	Two fifty.	2	2	0.7
Tommy	You can have a quid.	5	5	0.8
Kid	You're a real tight fucker aren'cha?	9	7	1.38
Turkish	There was a problem with pikeys who are gypsies.	3	9	2.26
Pitt	What're you doing?	4	3	0.34
Pitt	Get out of the way, man.	6	6	0.65
Turkish	You can't understand much of what is being said.	11	9	2.22
Pitt	You Tommy?	2	2	0.49
Pitt	Come about the caravan?	4	4	0.68
Pitt	Fuck, man.	2	2	0.51
Pitt	Call me Mickey.	3	3	0.5
Turkish	Not Irish, not English.	6	4	2.14
Tommy	How are you?	3	3	0.54
Pitt	Weather's been kind to us	6	5	1.02
Turkish	It's just Pikey.	3	3	1.58
Pitt	Fuck me. Would you look at the size of him?	10	10	1.88
Pitt	How big are you?	4	4	0.62
Pitt	Hey Kids, how big is he?	6	6	1.51
Kid	Big man, that's for sure.	5	5	0.94
Pitt	come and look at the size of this fella.	10	9	1.37
Pitt	Bet you box a little, can't you, sir?	9	8	1.364
Pitt	You look like a boxer.	5	5	0.82
Mrs. O'Neil	See if the fellas would like a drink.	9	8	1.6
Tommy	I could murder one.	5	4	0.991

Mrs. O'Neil	Be no murderin done around here, I don't mind telling ye.	15	11	2.52
Pitt	Get your hands out of there, ya cheeky little shite	12	10	1.8
Pitt	Cup of tea for the big fella?	8	7	1.145
Mrs. O'Neil	Don't be silly, Mickey.	6	4	1.04
Mrs. O'Neil	Offer the man a proper drink, right?	8	7	1.81
Pitt	You little bugger.	4	3	0.82
Mrs. O'Neil	Is the big fella not coming with us?	10	8	1.69
Tommy	He's minding the car.	5	4	1.313
Mrs. O'Neil	What does he think we are, thieves?	7	7	1.67
Tommy	No, nothing like that, Mrs. O'neil	9	6	1.67
Tommy	He just likes looking after cars.	8	6	2.09
Pitt	Good dags.	2	2	0.67
Pitt	Do ya like dags?	3	4	0.58
Tommy	Dags?	1	1	0.66
Pitt	What?	1	1	0.28
Mrs. O'Neil	Yeah, dags.	2	2	0.732
Pitt	Dags, do ya like dags?	4	5	0.943
Tommy	Oh, dogs.	2	2	1.54
Tommy	Sure, I like dags.	4	4	1.84
Tommy	I like caravans more.	4	4	1.17
Mrs. O'Neil	You're very welcome.	5	3	0.98

Words Per Minute	Total Words	Total Time (min)	Avg words/min
Kid	38	0.154	247.021
Tommy	72	0.339	212.243
Turkish	25	0.137	182.927
Pitt	99	0.300	330.147
Mrs. O'Neil	50	0.201	249.128
Londoners	97	0.476	203.824
Pikeys	187	0.6544	285.758
Pikeys Without Kids	149	0.501	297.663

Syllables Per Minute	Total Syllables	Total Time (min)	Avg syllable/min
Kid	41	0.154	266.522
Tommy	80	0.339	235.826
Turkish	23	0.137	168.293
Pitt	105	0.300	350.156
Mrs. O'Neil	62	0.201	308.919
Londoners	103	0.476	216.432
Pikeys	208	0.6544	317.848
Pikeys Without Kids	167	0.501	333.622

Appendix 2: IPA Translation

That's a flash car, mister. /ðæts ə flæʃ kɑ: 'mɪstə/

Not as flash as your bike, though is it? /nɒt æz flæʃ æz jə baɪk ðəʊ ɪz ɪt/

Who are you lookin for? /hu: ə jʊ 'lʊkɪn fə/

Mr. O'Neil. /mɪstə əʊ ni:l/

Want me to get him? /wɒnt mi: tə get hɪm/

That's a good lad. /ðæts ə gʊd læd/

Piss off. /pɪs ɒf/

Are you going to go get him for me? / ə jʊ 'gəʊɪŋ tə gəʊ get hɪm fə mi:/

Yeah. /jeə/

What are you waiting for? / wɒt ə jʊ 'weɪtɪŋ fə/

The five quid you gonna pay me. / ðə faɪv kwɪd jʊ 'gɒnə peɪ mi:/

Fuck off, I'll find him meself. /fʌk ɒf aɪl faɪnd hɪm mi:seɪf/

Two fifty. / tu: 'fɪftɪ/

You can have a quid. / jʊ kæn hæv ə kwɪd/

You're a real tight fucker aren't cha? /jə ə riəl taɪt 'fʌkə aren tʃə/

There was a problem with pikeys who are gypsies. /ðeə wəz ə 'prɒbləm wɪð paɪki:z hu: ə 'dʒɪpsɪz/

What're you doin? /wɒtɪr jʊ 'du:ɪn/

Get out of the way, man. /get aʊt əv ðə weɪ mæn/

You can't understand what's being said. /jʊ kɑ:nt ,ʌndə'stænd wɒts 'bi:ɪŋ sed/

You Tommy? /jʊ 'tɒmi/

Come about the caravan? /kʌm ə'baʊt ðə 'kærəvæn/

Mr. O'Neil. /mɪstə əʊ ni:l/

Fuck, man. / fʌk mæn/

Call me Mickey. /kɔ:l mi: miki/

Not Irish, not English. /nɒt 'aɪərɪʃ nɒt 'ɪŋɡlɪʃ/

How are you? /haʊ ə jʊ/

Weather's been kind t'us. / 'weðəz bi:n kænd tʌs/

It's just Pikey. /ɪts dʒʌst paɪki:/

Would you look at the size of him? /ʊd jʊ lʊk ət ðə saɪz əv hɪm/

How big are ye? /haʊ bɪɡ ə ji:/

Kids, how big is he? /kɪdz haʊ bɪɡ ɪz hi:/

Big man, that's for sure. / bɪɡ mæn ðæts fə ʃʊə/

Hey, Ma, come and look at the size of this fella. /heɪ ma: kʌm ənd lʊk ət ðə saɪz əv ðɪs 'felə/

Bet you box a little, can't chou, sir? /bet jʊ bɒks ə 'lɪtl kɑ:nt ʃʊ sɜ:/

You look like a boxer. /jʊ lʊk laɪk ə 'bɒksə/

Get out of the way. /get aʊt əv ðə weɪ/

See if the fellas would like a drink. /si: ɪf ðə 'feləz ɪd laɪk ə drɪŋk/

I could murder one. /aɪ kʊd 'mɜ:də wʌn/

Be no murderin done around here, I don't mind tellin ye. /bi: nəʊ mɜ:dərɪn dʌn ə 'raʊnd hɪə aɪ dəʊnt mʌnd 'telɪn ji:/

Get your hands out of there. /get jə hændz aʊt əv ðeə/

Cup o tea for the big fella? /kʌp ə ti: fə ðə bɪɡ 'felə/

Don't be silly, Mickey. /dəʊnt bi: 'sɪli mɪki/

Offer the man a proper drink, right? /'ɒfə ðə mæn ə 'prɒpə drɪŋk raɪt/

You little bugger. /jʊ 'lɪtl 'bʌgə/

Is the big fella not comin with us? / ɪz ðə bɪg 'felə nɒt 'kʌmɪn wɪð əs/

He's minding the car. / hɪz 'maɪndɪŋ ðə kɑː/

What does he think we are, thieves? / wɒt dʌz hiː θɪŋk wi ə tiːvz/

No, nothing like that. / nəʊ 'nʌθɪŋ laɪk ðæt/

He just likes looking after cars. / hiː dʒʌst laɪks 'lʊkɪŋ 'ɑːftə kɑːz/

Good dags. / gʊd dægz/

D'ya like dags? /dʒɑː laɪk dægz/

Dags? / dægz/

What? / wɒt/

Yeah, dags. / jeə dægz/

Dags. / dægz/

D'ya like dags? /dʒɑː laɪk dægz /

Oh, dogs. /əʊ dɒgz/

Sure, I like dags. /ʃʊə aɪ laɪk dægz/

I like caravans more. / aɪ laɪk 'kærəvənz mɔː/

You're very welcome. / jə 'veri 'welkəm/