The Syntax and Phonetics of Hiberno-English Dialects

SUMMER LAURICK

Supplying a diverse list of phonetic and syntactical examples, Summer Laurick's researched study explains how linguistic characteristics of Gaelic continue to influence different Irish English (or Hiberno-English) dialects. This essay was written for Linguistic History of the English Language with Dr. Annick Bellemain.

DESPITE GAELIC'S LONG HISTORY as Ireland's native language, English usage has increased drastically within the past 200 years, effectively usurping Gaelic. English originally arrived in Ireland along with English settlers in the twelfth century, and although Gaelic language and culture experienced a resurgence around 1600, English never died out and returned full-force later in the seventeenth century. To this day, Irish English, or Hiberno-English, retains syntactic and phonetic characteristics of the original Gaelic.

There are five major dialects of Hiberno-English: Local Dublin English, Non-Local Dublin English, West and South-West Irish English, Supraregional Southern Irish English, and Ulster English (Jordan). In order to study syntactic and phonetic qualities of Hiberno-English, the major dialects must first be distinguished from each other.

Local Dublin English is considered to be the more traditional of the dialects and is generally spoken by Dublin's working or lower class. Although in the past it was non-rhotic—that is, /r/ was not pronounced unless followed by a vowel—it has made a transition to being somewhat rhotic in a way that is similar to the New York accent in America (Jordan; Hickey, "Dublin English"). It also features a reduction of /t/ to a fricative, which is perhaps its most obvious phonetic feature. Finally, Local Dublin English has many disyllabic vowels, breaking short vowels into two, such as in "mean" [miːən] and "moon" [muːən] (Hickey, "Dublin English"). The glottal stop for /t/ (turning words like water into wa'er) is also present in this dialect. This characteristic is commonly mocked, especially in media; as a result, many native speakers will attempt to overcorrect the /t/, producing pronunciations that emphasize the sound (wa'er into waTER) (Hickey, "Variation").

Non-Local Dublin English, also known as New Dublin English, is associated with the middle class and began with the avant-garde youth movement of the 90s; it combines all new varieties of Dublin English and was used as a way to distance oneself from Irish and Gaelic tradition (Jordan). Vowel sounds in this dialect tend to be short.

West and South-West Irish English is a strong, melodic accent with some vowel differences; for example, /ou/ has a rounder, more open sound, turning words such as "about" into "aboat." Words with diphthongs such as "throat" and "chase" are also shortened, making them sound as if they possess only one vowel sound, changing the words into "thrut" and "chess" (Jordan). This dialect is also referred to as Cork English, Kerry English, or Limerick English.

Except for in the north, Supraregional Southern Irish English is spoken in every part of Ireland. It is a newer dialect which tends to be neutral in sound, with vowel pronunciation closer to that of the British (Jordan).

Finally, Ulster English, or Northern Irish English, is an interesting dialect that sounds very similar to the Scottish accent; the /oo/

sound is pronounced with a Scottish tilt in the front of the mouth, turning "loose" into "luse" (Jordan). This dialect tends to have a rising intonation at the ends of sentences, much the way a question would be intonated in standard English.

Hiberno-English's borrowed syntax from Irish Gaelic is noticeably different from typical standard English syntax. One prominent trait is reduplication, the practice of repeating a word or phrase exactly or with slight tonal change immediately after itself. Like most Hiberno-English syntactic quirks, this is usually done to illustrate intensity or clarification; for example, adding "to be sure to be sure" after a statement, such as "I brought my wallet to be sure to be sure," is usually understood to be the equivalent of the standard English "just in case" (Urbanczyk). If one wished to use reduplication for clarification, they would ask something similar to, "Does he *like* like me?" putting emphasis on the first reduplicated word; this particular usage is common in standard English as well.

Another significant borrowed quality from the Gaelic language is Hiberno-English's lack of the words "yes" and "no." Like reduplication, this is solved by repetition. Rather than answer questions with simple "yes" and "no" words, Hiberno-English speakers usually respond with a form of the verb in the question; for example, when asked, "Is it raining outside?" a Hiberno-English speaker would reply, "It is," "Tis," or "It's raining." The verb may also be negated for a negative answer, thus making the reply, "It is not," "Tis not," or "It's not raining." This pattern is also used especially in the Ulster English dialect for neutral intensification in sentences, such as "That's good food, so it is," and "We need to go, we do" ("Hiberno-English").

When indicating if an event took place recently, in Hiberno-English the word "after" is added to the present continuous; this is known as recent past construction. For example, to say someone has recently eaten, one would say, "He is after his supper." If one wanted to communicate that someone had arrived after traveling, they might say, "She's after walking here." In traditional English syntax,

the first sentence implies that he wants to eat his supper, but in Hiberno-English the word's interpretation is direct (Hickey, "Syntactic Ambiguity").

In addition to "after," Hiberno-English uses the words "will," "so," and "now" commonly, usually for purposes of emphasis or as neutral filler words. In British English it is commonplace to say "shall," as in, "Shall I pick one out for you?" In Hiberno-English the word "will" takes the place of "shall," but the meaning is the same in the sentence, "Will I pick one out for you?" The word "now" is normally placed at the end of sentences and may find its way into any type of situation; it is used for "completing an utterance without contributing any apparent meaning" ("Hiberno-English [Irish English]"). Sayings such as "Take care now," "There you go now," and "Hold on now" regularly tack the word on without any linguistic significance other than perhaps to extend a friendlier tone. The Hiberno-English usage of "so" is much the same, although it often is used to indicate agreement in the same way "then" would be used in standard English. For example, rather than saying "Let's go then," "That's fine then," or "Bye then," it becomes "Let's go so," "That's fine so," or "Bye so." This syntactic habit also makes use of reduplicating with is/are/have/etc.

Although English has permeated Irish culture and become its most commonly spoken and learned language, remnants of Gaelic syntax and phonetics have remained ingrained in the various dialects. Although the grammar is often confusing, as it varies so widely from what we are used to in standard English, as well as overlapping in the different accents, the unique quirks of the Hiberno-English dialect are part of what makes the Irish culture and people so colorful and interesting. ► ►

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