

HIBERNO-ENGLISH: THE RESULT OF A LANGUAGE CONTACT SITUATION

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1. Introduction

“The history of language is often a story of possession and dispossession, territorial struggle and the establishment or imposition of a culture” (Paulin, 1984: 178)

The English language came into Ireland in two successive waves, in the 12th century by the followers of Strongbow’s Norman invaders and with the Tudor Reconquest from 17th century onwards. The peoples of the first invasion spoke Norman French and English, however, although the English language was gaining ground on administration and in spite of the well-known Statues of Kilkenny in 1366 (detering the spread of the native language), the Irish language (IR) maintained its linguistic supremacy. Then, the English policy in Ireland under the Cromwellian Act of Settlement in the 1650’s aimed at the replacement of the natives by English planters. The ‘new English’ brought by the planters developed very slowly among the Irish people and it was to symbolise possession and power, whereas the dispossessed and powerless native population spoke IR.

The aim of the present study is to describe the features of the spoken present-day dialect of English in Ireland, the so called Hiberno-English (HE). Many of the HE features which diverge radically from Standard English (St.E) could be shown to have come from the dialects of English brought to Ireland, and others may be traced to the IR language. However, the most striking linguistic features of HE speakers are traces of their mother tongue, i.e. IR, which persist in what has been called ‘Substratum Interference’ (Filppula, 1991: 16). I shall measure the degree of substratum and superstratum transfer in Ireland according to the phonological and morphological level. In order to establish the theoretical principles of HE, I have relied on previous scholarly works. However, much of my information comes from a series of seminars from 1994 to 1996 on HE imparted by Professor T. P. Dolan for the MA on Anglo-Irish Literature. In this paper examples are not concocted but are drawn from my own research based on actual conversations, recordings and notes.

2.1. Phonological Level: Consonant system

Certain features of the consonant system of HE may be explained in terms of a historical

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compromise between the IR and the English systems. The IR consonant system distributes many of their phonemes in pairs, one member known as ‘broad’ (velar) and the other as ‘slender’ (palatal). The distribution of these pairs, originally phonetically conditioned by the presence of a following front or back vowel and by association with other front or back consonants, is now also morpho-phonemic.

- i. *bád* /ba:d/ (St.E ‘a boat’) *báid* /ba:d’/ (St.E ‘boats’)
 ii. *bó* /bo:/ (St.E ‘a cow’) *beo* /b’o:/ (St.E ‘alive’)

The early generation of HE speakers had to select those IR sounds which most resembled those of the new acquired language. On the other hand, IR speakers maintained those sounds which were distinct phonemes in the IR consonant system, mainly the distribution of phonemes in ‘broad’ and ‘slender’. This process is known as ‘phonemicisation of allophonic variants’ (Adams, 1985: 29).

In the following lines I shall analyse those aspects of the HE consonant system which differ most from the standard pattern.

2.1.1. HE /ʃ/ ↔ St.E /s/

The IR phonemic contrast between /s, s’/ is quite similar to St.E fricative alveolar /s/ and fricative palato-alveolar /ʃ/. Nonetheless in IR /s’/ ‘the blade is held lower, and the sound is duller’ (Hogan, 1934: 9), as in IR *súil*. Early HE seems to have had a ‘consonant-cluster conditioning process’ (Sullivan, 1976: 81) determining the use of the two phonemes. However, the subsequent evolution of the /s, ʃ/ distinction has not maintained that distribution, e.g. *most* [mo:ʃt], *spend* [ʃ’pen], *sprain* [ʃ’prein].

2.1.2. HE /ʃ/ ↔ St.E /tʃ/

IR does have affricate phonemes. The first generation of HE speakers had to adapt the phonemes they knew to the target language, and the fricative postalveolar phoneme seems to have been the most adequate. Examples from my corpus are: *much* [muʃ], *lunch* [lʌnʃ]. However, a common counterexample is *church* [tʃuʃ]. It seems that HE tends to pronounce /ʃ/ for St.E. /tʃ/ in word-final position.

2.1.3. HE [k’], [g’] ↔ St.E /k/, /g/

Barry (1986: 106) notes that the influence of IR in the HE usage of the palatal allophones [k’] and [g’] may have been reinforced from West Midlands dialects in Britain, ‘where initial [kj] and [gj] also occur’. In HE we find fronted velars [k’] and [g’] in initial and final position. The voiced palatal allophone [g’] occurs initially in words such as *Gaelic* [’g’e:lik], *gig* [g’ig], *garden*

[^hgʷaʰdn], that is, in contexts where [gʷ] precedes a front vowel. The voiceless palatal allophone [kʰ] is used when a front vowel precedes it, e.g. *Mac* [makʰ], *speak* [spikʰ].

2.1.4. HE [ϕ, β] ↔ St.E / f, v /

IR equivalents of St.E. labiodental fricatives are /ϕ, β/. Thus, the first generation of HE speakers identified both sets of phonemes, using those which they knew best, viz. the IR /ϕ, β/, e.g. *leave* [le:β], *half* [haϕ], *Stephen* [sʰtiβn], *loaf* [lo:ϕ].

2.1.5. HE [ϕ] ↔ St.E /w/ ‘wh-forms’

Early HE speakers identified the English voiceless /π/ with the IR voiceless /ϕ/. This usage has been frequently recorded in the Elizabethan period (Bartley, 1954) in words like: *ferē*, *fithēr*, representing St.E ‘were’ and ‘whither’. Two illustrations of this usage in my HE material are: *wave* [ϕeiβ], *wedding* [ʰϕedin].

2.1.6. Labio-velar fricatives /π/, /w/

The pre-1800 St.E voiceless consonant /π/ is still retained in the dialect. HE /π/ and /w/ are two different phonemes, which can be found in the minimal pair *which* [πItʰ] and *witch* [wITʰ]. Some more instances are: *where* [πeð], *what* [πɔt], *when* [πen].

2.1.7. Dental and alveolar plosives /T/, /D/

IR /tʰ, dʰ/ sound quite similar to the St.E sounds, but while the St.E phonemes are dental-alveolar stops, the IR ones are dental-velar stops. HE speakers distinguish the /θ/ sounds from the /t/ sounds and they interpret the opposition in terms of place of articulation (dental vs. alveolar), while St.E speakers do so in terms of manner of articulation (fricative vs plosive). The realisations /T, D/ for St.E /θ, ð/ are very frequent in my recordings, e.g. *thirteen* [Tɛʰtin], *whether* [ʰπeDθ], *nothing* [ʰnʌTIn].

2.1.8. Alveolar-approximant /J/

HE /J/ seems to occur in the environment in which IR would have a lenited /r/ (Kühlwein, 1983: 68). The HE phoneme is produced whenever an ‘r’ is written, even in places where St.E would omit it, e.g. *park* [paJk], *first* [fɛJst], *pattern* [ʰpatθJn].

2.1.9. Lateral /l/

The HE lateral phoneme /l/ is characterised by its clarity in all environments, in contrast to the St.E /l/ which shows a ‘dark’ articulation. In this section there is no need to provide specific examples since any HE utterance containing an ‘l’ reflects the ‘bright’ quality of HE /l/.

2.1.10. Aspirate /h/

HE speakers pronounce the ‘h’ everywhere is written, either in syllable-initial or syllable final position. This feature leads us again to IR, since St.E. /h/ is restricted to syllable-initial position. HE, however, pronounces the /h/ phoneme in final position in words borrowed from IR, such as geographical names, surnames and proper names, or lexicon describing IR traditional aspects, as in *McGrath* [mɔ̃ˈgrah], *loch* [loh] or *Lavagh* [laβah].

2.2. Phonological Level: Vowel system

Seventeenth-century IR consisted of five short vowel phonemes /i, ε, a, o, u/, five long phonemes /i:, e:, a:, o:, u:/ and a series of diphthongs (Lunny, 1981: 124). The importance of the IR vowels in the establishment of the HE vowel system is beyond doubt. Bliss affirms that the sounds of the IR vowels corresponds to that of HE vowels between 1650 and 1800 (Bliss, 1972: 64).

Seventeenth-century English consisted of six short vowel phonemes /i, ε, æ, ɔ, ʌ, U/, six long vowel phonemes /i:, e:, a:, ɔ:, o:, u:/, and three diphthongs /ɔ̃i, ɔ̃u, ɔ̃i/ (Wells, 1982: 419). There were no IR phonemes for the English /ɔ/ and /ɔ:/, and to complete the English pattern the front and back allophones of IR /a/ and /a:/ were elevated to phonemic status in HE. As Bliss observes (1979: 199), the acquisition of English by the IR people did not occur until the changing period between Middle and Modern English.

2.2.1. Retroflex vowels

HE has a complete set of vowel oppositions in the environment of a following /r/: i^R, e^R, a^R, ɔ^R, u^R, o^R, ɔ^R. After the ‘Great Vowel Shift’ the phoneme /r/ became silent in English in contexts ‘vowel + /r/’ or ‘vowel + /r/+ consonant’. Some HE instances from the corpus are: *pair* [ˈpe^R], *car* [ˈka^R], *poor* [ˈpo^R].

2.2.2. Epenthetic /ð/

The sound of the epenthetic vowel is the same in IR and HE, i.e. /ð/, thus for example, IR *seilbh* [ʃel^ðv], HE *film* [fil^ðm]. When early HE speakers had to render English consonant clusters they recurred to the IR usage, based in the producing of offglides in enclitic consonants (IR *airgead* /ar^ðg^ðd/). The substratum case seems obvious in cases like HE *harm* [ˈhar^ðm] or *petrol* /ˈpɛt^ðrɔ̃l/. Nonetheless, Kallen (1994) bases HE svarabhakti on the eighteenth century process of metathesis, giving place to pronunciation such as [ˈmader^ðn] for ‘modern’.

2.2.3. /ʌ/, /ɔ/, /u/

Words like *bus*, *strut*, *bull* may be realised in the dialect with an /ʌ/, /ɔ/ or /u/. My impression of these renderings is that HE speakers as a whole are aware of the difference between /ʌ/ and /u/, although the distinction is barely maintained in spoken HE.

2.2.4. Merger of /æ/ and /a/

St.E /æ/ and /a:/ phonemes are usually rendered in HE under /a/. As in the preceding case, HE speakers distinguish between the two St.E. phonemes, however due to the low functional load of the distinction, in the majority of cases *aunt* and *ant* are similarly pronounced as [ant].

2.2.5. Diphthongs

The polythongal quality of the IR vowels has been brought into HE gliding. Moreover, in some cases HE vowels sound as actual diphthongs, e.g. all [a^ul]. P. L. Henry (1957) affirms that it is particularly common in Northern varieties. However, though palatal gliding is almost confined to the North of Ireland, velar gliding is a significant feature in the Southern variety of HE, mainly within Munster. On the other hand, we have the absence of the *price/choice* opposition. On Hogan's account (1934), this feature is one more example of the many archaisms that pervade the IR dialect. This phenomenon appears in *violin*, *violent*, pronounced with /ɔi/.

3. Morphological Level

3.1. The noun centred character of the IR language accounts for the numerous nominalised forms in HE. The influence of the IR verbal noun is strikingly clear in the extensive use of the preposition *of* in the dialect, literally translating such IR idioms as *cuil adail* into HE *a bit of a visit*.

- a. *What would you expect from the likes of her?*
- b. *Tuesday afternoons she comes here in a bit of a visit.*
- c. *It's an awful of disgrace that the party shoulda show today at all.*

3.2. In IR the numerals *aon* ('one'), *dó* ('two'), and the multiple of ten, are followed by a singular noun. HE plural nouns which indicate quantities omit the 's-ending' when they are preceded by a numeral. This usage, once permitted in English, is widespread in today Ireland. Hence, for instance:

- d. *Forty quid, son.*
- e. *I've a thousand pound, but watch it, them knackers fight fierce dirty.*

3.3. A peculiar IR influence in HE is the ‘mode of specification’. IR sense of singularity and duality is reproduced in our dialect as the following example shows:

f. *Believe me, they’re a lot better than senior players, I seen it with me two eyes.*

3.4. The IR language maintains the division within the second personal pronoun between singular and plural: IR *tú* is used to address one person, and *sibh* to address more than one person. HE also distinguishes between singular and plural second person pronouns. *You* in HE is singular, and *youse* (with its variants *yous*, *yez* and *yiz*) is plural.

g. *Are yiz going to the pub?*

h. *There’s none of yours good.*

3.5. Another typical HE feature from IR provenance is the use of *himself* and *herself* to refer to a person ‘who has acquired seniority through sheer graft and effort’ (Hayes, 1996: 30). Usually in the home *himself* refers to the husband and *herself* to the wife.

i. *Where’s herself? Where’s the dinner?*

j. *However last night himself came to me and spoke to me.*

3.6. Unlike St.E, which employs intonation rather than grammar to express emphasis, the IR language utilises two different grammatical means to mark emphatic and reflexive pronouns: by adding the suffix *-féin* (St.E ‘self’) to personal pronouns, and by adding the emphatic suffix *-sa* / *-se* to the noun qualified by the possessive pronoun. It is also possible to use both in the same structure. HE translates IR *féin* as *self* and following the IR and earlier English models, uses the reflexive pronouns as emphatic pronouns. Thus, for instance:

k. *I wasn’t born in Kerry myself.*

l. *I thought frustration in meself, I have two teenagers meself...*

The use of *itself* as St.E. ‘even’ also derives from IR, and it is found in utterances such as *The girls itself would be afraid to go in.*

3.7. There are four relative pronouns in IR (Joyce, 1896: 46-7): *a* which in some cases is replaced by *dá* (St.E ‘who’, ‘which’, ‘that’, and sometimes ‘all which’ / ‘all that’), *noch* (St.E ‘who’, ‘which’, ‘that’) and *nach* (St.E ‘which not’). Unlike St.E, the relative does not distinguish between the nominative and accusative case, and sometimes may be elided. In HE the relative pronoun is commonly *that*. *Wh*-forms are rarely heard in the dialect.

m. *Yes, that man that's dog beat his daughter.*

There are substratumist and retentionist explanations to this phenomenon. Thus, Hughes (1966: 269) notes that IR has to use 'rather involved paraphrases' to express St.E. 'whose' and 'whom'. Further on, he points out that HE relativised expressions are obvious translations from IR. Hogan (1934: 146-7), on the other hand, describes relativisation at the Shakespearean period, and affirms that the use of *that* and the omission of the relative pronoun widely recur.

3.8. The diminutive suffix *-een* from the IR diminutive suffix *-ín* 'no doubt come from IR' (Hogan, 1934: 100). This diminutive expresses affection or contempt, and HE speakers had to incorporate it into their dialect since St.E does not own an equivalent form.

n. *And that maneen was screaming in me face to move the car.*

o. *I just want a bitteen of your luck.*

3.9. In the realm of deixis IR distinguishes three degrees of distance: *seo* (St.E 'this'), *sin* (St.E 'that'), and *siúd* (St.E 'that, yonder'). HE also shares this pattern. Thus, besides *this* and *that*, HE uses *thon* equivalent to IR *siúd*. Although this tripartite pattern is also found in earlier St.E (Todd, 1975: 187), the influence of the Irish language has reinforced its usage.

p. *You must look forward to every morning going down thon farms.*

3.10. Bliss (1984: 149) reports the widespread use of *in it*, meaning 'in existence', 'there', all around Ireland. We find once again an IR idiom which justifies the HE one. Thus, the Christian Brothers (1976: 277) explain that the IR compound-pronoun *ann* is employed after *tá* (St.E 'is') and means 'in existence, extant'.

q. *There are still some very good men in it that get bad treated.*

r. *Nice day, for the time that's in it.*

3.11. The HE construction '*for to* + infinitive' seems to be a literal translation of the IR '*chun* + verbal noun'. Contrary to this view many scholars, such as Bertz (1987) and Harris (1993), argue that this HE construction is a retention of the older English usage '*for to* + non-finite complement'. Generally speaking, *for to* in such a construction corresponds to St.E 'to' or 'in order to'.

s. *To tell the truth she didn't come here for to see me.*

t. *Would you like your daughter for to marry in that situation?*

3.12. As Greene notes (1966: 48), the IR language has no specific lexical entries for the St.E. verb *to have* and therefore, there is no perfect tense corresponding to the St.E. one. Nevertheless, the St.E. perfects may be rendered in IR by means of two periphrastic constructions, i.e. ‘*tá + ag*’ and ‘*tá + taréis*’. Both constructions refer to the completion of the action, however the ‘*tá + taréis*’ construction adds the meaning of recency.

u. Tá sé tréis² leitir a scríobh. (lit. ‘He’s after writing a letter’)

This construction follows the formula: ‘*tá + subject + taréis + (object +) verbal noun*’. A natural constraint on this structure, as its corresponding construction in St.E, is that it cannot be used in negations. The IR periphrastic form corresponds to St.E ‘subject + *have* + just + past participle (+ object)’, thus *u* above may be translated into St.E as ‘he has just written a letter’. Some HE examples are provided below:

v. The detective garda is after being shot dead in Limerickcity.

w. Despite that the manager is after saying that there’s room for improvement.

The IR ‘*tá + ag*’ construction in sentences such as *Tá leitir scríte aige* (lit. ‘He has a letter written’) follows the formula: ‘*tá + something + -en verbal adjective + ag + subject*’. Although strictly speaking, this structure can only mean ‘*there is + something + past participle + at me*’, it is the IR equivalent to St.E ‘*I have + past participle + something*’. Therefore, we may translate the preceding IR sentence into St.E *He has written a letter*. It should be noted the position of the verbal adjective in the IR idiom, since as I shall exemplify below, HE perfects maintain the IR word-order. Owing to this fact, in certain contexts the HE perfect may mean quite a different thing in St.E. The origin of HE perfectives with the verb *to have* is not as clear as that of the *after* perfect construction. Sullivan (1976: 127) bases HE ‘*have* perfects’ exclusively on the IR construction ‘*tá + ag*’ whilst Hogan (1934: 143) considers both Elizabethan English and IR influence.

x. They have two dogs inherited.

y. He has all the rest eaten except the bones.

3.13. One of the many controversies that has occupied scholars of HE is that of the origin of HE imperative with *let* followed by the second person pronoun *you*. According to van Hamel (1912), this usage is originated in the negative form. With this construction HE speakers may distinguish ‘between the negative form of the indicative and that of the imperative’ (Van Hamel, 1912: 280-1), as in IR. Consequently, ‘*let you*’ was extended to include affirmative as well as

negative sentences. Similarly Bliss (1972), after analysing some possible retentionist explanations based on the confusion between *let*, *leave* and its Old E. distinctive form *leve*, states that the solution to the problem should be found in the IR idioms. When IR speakers want to adapt IR idioms such as *bíodh deoch agat!*, literally ‘let there be a drink at you!’, they render the IR third person imperative as *let*, and the second person explicitly expressed by IR *agat* as *you*. Thus, *let you have a drink*.

z. *Let you complain to the GAA.*

z'. *Let you not be forcing them to speak Irish.*

The continuous imperative form preceded by *don't* in negative imperatives is by far the most common among HE speakers, ‘including those who aspire to be accepted as users of St.E’ (Dolan, 1984: 54). It comes from the IR structure *Ná bí ag* in sentences such as *Ná bí ag insisnt dom*, translated into HE *Don't be telling me*.

aa. *Don't be picking on me at school.*

bb. *...but please, don't be preaching us in Irish in the House.*

3.14. In IR the preposition *ar* (St.E ‘on’) is always used to express disadvantage, ‘both bodily and mental’ (Christian Brothers, 1976: 266). Following the IR model, the use of the preposition *on* as a ‘dative of disadvantage’ is a commonplace in HE. In the majority of cases HE *on* is followed by a pronoun which literally translates the IR prepositional pronouns: *orm*, *ort*, etc.

cc. *She said that on me, the way the people in the area didn't speak to me.*

dd. *The husband went away and she cursing on his life.*

3.15. Some of the most common IR simple prepositions are amalgamated with the seven personal pronouns, forming what is known as pronominal prepositions. They function as subject or object to verbs. Thus, to *le* (St.E ‘with’) corresponds *liom* (St.E ‘with me’), *leat* (St.E ‘with you’) and so on.

ee. *For a couple of months the back was very sore with me.*

Other distinctive uses of *with* in HE are the following:

1. HE *with* ↔ St.E ‘for’, ‘for the duration of’ ↔ IR *le* in phrases such as *le bliain*.

ff. *But that was my father, and he's dead with three years now.*

² The Irish preposition was once *iar*, usually reduced to *ar*, but it is now *tar éis* (Bliss, 1979: 300), usually reduced to *tréis*.

2. HE *with* ↔ St.E ‘by’. Van Hamel (1912: 283-4) affirms that this usage denotes ‘the agent or cause, with passive verbs’ and that it comes from IR, unlike Henry who observes that it is a retention of the Shakespearean use (1958: 144).

gg. *I’m starved with the hunger.*

4. Conclusion

As my previous study shows, in many issues relating to the origin of HE distinctive features, it is sometimes difficult to know whether they may be explained on an Irish-substratum basis, or on an English-retentionist basis. Possibly, the Old English usage and the IR language were mutually reinforcing in the establishment of the HE pattern, alongside the effects of linguistic universals in contexts of language shift. About the conservative nature of the dialect, we may affirm that the English of Ireland, being more secluded and not exposed to the same influences as in England, has retained many 17th century English features.

The type of explanations I have adopted here is purely linguistic, but as Suzanne Romaine, among many others, points out ‘language shift cannot be understood except in relation to social context’ (Romaine, 1995: xviii), and sociohistorical factors of the contact given situation should be analysed to explain not only the reasons which motivate language change, but the actual language system. Language contact inevitably leads to bilingualism, nonetheless Ireland’s linguistic situation is now relatively established and no longer dependent on bilingualism, except in the Gaeltacht (the Irish-speaking areas). It seems inconceivable that the Irish language will ever be restored as the mother tongue of the Irish people, yet the Irish language is “the sedimented sand deposited on the bottom of a lake” (Weinreich, 1953: 11) known as Hiberno-English.

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