

Varieties of English: varieties of literature. Some notes on Irish English and ELT

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show that the use of texts written in non-standard varieties of English, such as Irish English (or Hiberno-English), could be a valuable complement to language teaching and language learning. The paper concentrates on a number of linguistic features which are characteristic of this variety of English and which appear in the works of Irish writers. Special attention is paid to the work of Donegal author Patrick MacGill, and excerpts from his early novels are used as an example of Irish English writing.

Introduction

Traditionally, English Language Teaching (ELT) concentrated on the variety that is known as 'standard', 'standard' in this case often meaning the English written and spoken by educated speakers in England. In terms of pronunciation, as Trudgill and Hannah point out (2002: 2), this term referred to 'something much more restrictive, for the RP ('Received Pronunciation') accent which is taught to foreigners is actually used by perhaps only 3-5 percent of the population of England'. In terms of grammar and vocabulary, this generally meant following written models produced by English authors (see Short 1986). However, a more recent tendency has been to provide the student of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) with a more general and comprehensive view of the English language, by paying attention to other varieties of English around the world (such as American, Australian, Canadian, South African, etc.) As is well-known, this is now a common practice not only in ELT, but in language teaching in general, as both foreign language teachers and textbook authors are more conscious of multiculturalism and international forms of a language, and, therefore, attempt to offer the foreign language learner a more global view of the language, thus going 'against the standard ideology and belief

that there is one and only one correct form of the language, modelled on a single correct written form' (Kallen and Kirk 2001: 60).

Also, within this context of Foreign Language Teaching, the use of literature in the foreign language classroom has resurged as a valuable complement to language teaching and language learning, as 'literary texts are examples of language in use. They are instances of real communication in real social contexts' (McCarthy and Carter 1994: 135) and can be used to illustrate the cultural aspects associated with a particular community. (For a reflection on the debate over whether or not literature should be used in language teaching see Short 1986: 152-158.) Literary texts constitute, therefore, an important element in any foreign language programme. The inclusion of a variety of literatures in these programmes can not only just 'foster both processes of reflection and skills of analysis' (McCarthy and Carter 1994: 135), but it can do much to modify the student's perception of a fixed canon of texts, and their 'appreciation of different varieties of language, each with different values and socio-cultural functions' (Carter and Long 1991: 158). In this sense, the incorporation of Irish literature written in English in the EFL classroom will give the student the opportunity to become familiar not only with certain cultural references which are proper to Irish culture and society, but will also allow him or her to become familiar with the dialectal features that characterize this variety.

This paper focuses on the use of Irish Literature written in English as a complement to ELT. It discusses, first of all, the validity of literary sources as evidence of real spoken data, and then analyses a number of Irish English features which could hinder the foreign language student's understanding of certain texts written in this variety. The writing of Donegal author Patrick MacGill will serve to exemplify how literature can be used to illustrate both cultural aspects of Irish life in the past and the use of non-standard forms pertaining to Irish English.¹

Literature and dialect

When we decide to use literary texts as evidence of real spoken language we are often confronted with the question of whether the language portrayed in these texts can or should be really taken as a faithful representation of the speech used by the people depicted in them. In other words, can it be understood as a sort of

'transcription' of real life into written fiction, or should one be more inclined to believe, following MacArthur (1992), that 'the rendering of speech in a novel or play is an artificial process, and the conventions surrounding it are far removed from the real life manifestations of stylistic or regional varieties of a particular language'? There are very obvious differences between fictional and real-life discourse (Coulthard 1985). As Hickey (2003: 24) indicates,

if a corpus consists of non-fictional texts then one can rightly expect it to be representative of the varieties of English it claims to embody Where the texts are fictional, the matter is more complicated. In the latter case the language of the corpus may tell us more about the style of an author than about the type of speech he or she might have claimed to be representing.

Indeed, the use of literary data as a valid source of linguistic evidence can be seen as an incomplete and inconsistent source, and yet, it seems obvious that, as Labov (1972) put it, the analysis of literary dialect may be a valuable complement to the evidence of actual speech, provided that it is evaluated in relation to the real spoken language. By the same token, it can be argued that the study of literary dialect can be a useful way of reinforcing the teaching of a foreign language.

Non-standard forms of a language are often found in fictional dialogues and are employed as an indicator of social or regional differences which depict a character (Taavitsainen and Melchers 1999: 13). Literary dialects, in that sense, are just a reproduction of the type of language use that takes place in real conversation. In relation to Spanish literature, for example, Sitma and Lerner (1999: 2) claim that

por una parte, los textos literarios son exponentes de los distintos usos y aspectos de la lengua (gramaticales, funcionales, culturales) en un contexto auténtico y una rica gama de registros y dialectos ... encuadrados dentro de un marco social.

Indeed, those passages where literary characters engage in a pretended interaction contain authentic spoken discourse features which are perceived by the reader as examples of 'real spoken

interaction', and this is, in fact, a very important element in any type of fictional re-creation of conversation, because, as MacArthur points out, 'when the novelist writes a dialogue and creates his artefact, he is constructing a pseudo-conversation in which his characters appear to be interacting. If there is no similarity at all between conversation and written dialogue, readers will reject it as being far-fetched or absurd' (1992: 11).

In the case of literary representations of what is known as Irish English (henceforth referred to as IrE), the Irish literary tradition has shown many examples of representations of dialectal features which have sought to add to the depiction of characters and narrators as Irish. These, especially in drama, have often been used for comical purposes and therefore perceived by the audience as low types of language. A quick look at earlier representations of IrE in literature is enough to draw attention to the inaccuracy with which this variety was often rendered in the past. Many of the playwrights mentioned in Duggan (1937), Bartley (1954), and Bliss (1979) made use of exaggerated IrE features to ridicule and caricature the Irish characters that appeared in some plays. The figure of the stage Irishman was used by English and Irish writers alike. The first theatrical representation of an Irishman in English drama goes back to 1551 (see Bartley 1954: 9 and Bliss 1977: 9-11), and numerous depictions of the Irish were rendered in drama after that date. The speech that these characters were endowed with in the plays became known as the 'brogue' (see Joyce 1910, s.v. brogue 3), an artificial way of portraying the Irish way of speaking English which often had very little to do with the real features of the Irish English variety, and which, by the 19th century, had become institutionalized.

Different attempts to dignify the dialect were later made in Ireland by authors like Maria Edgeworth, Samuel Lover, John and Michael Banim, Gerald Griffin, Thomas Crofton Croker, Charles Joseph Kickham, and William Carleton, to name but a few. William Carleton, as McCafferty (2005) has pointed out, represents an important case study, as he was a member of one of the generations that were not so much acquiring Irish English as creating it and, therefore, was able to give a realistic portrayal of the language used by Irish peasants.

The use of IrE in the works produced by the writers of the Irish Literary Revival and the idea of an Irish National Theatre in

English has been dealt with by Clark (1917), van Hamel (1912), Taniguchi (1972), Bliss (1972c), Sullivan (1976, 1980), Kiberd (1979/1993), Zach (1988), and Hidalgo Tenorio (1996a,b; 1997). Goeke and Kornelius (1976: 45-46) allude to the paradoxical cultural and linguistic results of the Irish Renaissance, observing that

while the members of the Gaelic League tried to restore Gaelic as a living language, the dramatists of the revival, especially Synge, experimented with dialectal forms as a medium of literary speech. Many of these items were Irishisms taken from the spoken Anglo-Irish dialect and embedded in the literary language

and concluding that these 'language experiments' carried out by Lady Gregory, Synge, and others were highly coloured by the political and cultural situation and the attempt to find a national identity.

Of course, the contribution that the Irish Literary Revival made to the dignification of the IrE literary dialect also had important consequences. According to Garvin (1977), Somerville and Ross were the first to use IrE artistically, and their legacy could be taken as the anticipation of the Irish Literary Revivalists's exploitation of this form of English, which was 'perfectly Irish in essence', for literary purposes. 'Before them', Garvin (1977: 103) argues, 'Irish popular speech in literature was simply the brogue represented by misspelt words intended to reproduce the mispronunciation of standard English by derisory specimens of a lesser breed'. Certainly, authors like Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Synge also endeavoured to depict a type of English with Irish flavour which often resulted in unrealistic, albeit certainly poetic, portrayals. The Celtic Twilight's idealization of the Irish peasantry was totally rejected by James Joyce, even though his language has also been studied in relation to IrE (see Wales 1992).

Contemporary Irish writers such as Roddy Doyle, Brian Friel, and others still make use of different IrE features which can be identified by an Irish audience/readership and which add authenticity to their characters.

The value of MacGill's early novels

Irish writer Patrick MacGill came from a bilingual area in Donegal where the population ended up shifting from Irish to English. His

early novels, *Children of the Dead End* and *The Rat Pit*, are of particular interest for teaching purposes, because his rendering of IrE is full of realism. In contrast to the authors of the Irish Literary Revival, who, as was pointed out above, produced a more unrealistic rendering of this variety, MacGill's use of the language is employed as a tool to add more credibility to the fictional characters which appear in his novels. This author, whose first novel appeared in 1914, has in common with Carleton a special knack of depicting the type of language that he heard around him, and therefore, his novels can be taken as a faithful representation of the English of Donegal.

Apart from the IrE that both novels contain, they can offer the student a fascinating insight into life in rural Ireland at the turn of the century in a small community dominated by the *gombeen* man. They also give a graphic account of the hardships faced by those who were forced to emigrate to Scotland, where they worked in subhuman conditions in order to earn a paltry few pounds to help support the families they had left behind. As a social document, the novels are as relevant today as they were at the time of MacGill, and they offer a fascinating introduction to the world of the migrant Irish labourer. From a cultural point of view, they also provide the student with new insights into the history of this particular region of Ireland and can serve as an illustration of early 20th century Ireland.

Using literary corpora: Irish English literature and ELT

The use of literature as a didactic element in the foreign language classroom is closely related to recent attempts to integrate, or combine, cultural competence and communicative competence. 'Learning about a language also involves understanding something of the culture within which the language is embedded' (McCarthy and Carter 1994: 164-165). As was stated in the introduction, the literary component can serve as an instrument that helps students observe how communication works, and provides them with cultural referents and perspectives that will allow them to develop their own linguistic and cultural competence when they have to interact in the foreign language. Introducing our students to literatures written in different varieties of a language allows them to discover the diversity of cultures that are associated with that particular language. Using literary texts where other varieties of

English different to Standard English (StE) appear, makes the student of EFL aware of the heterogeneity of the English language. It also helps them understand that non-standard varieties of English are as valid as the so-called standard. However, as Asián and McCullough (1998: 53) have pointed out,

before introducing literary works written in non-standard varieties of English, teachers should make the students aware of the fact that non-standard vernaculars, which are generally perceived as low, easy, often comical kinds of language, are in fact as complex and systematic as standard languages.

I have selected a number of features of IrE which could considerably hinder the student's understanding of the texts. (The examples given here are illustrative: for a quantitative analysis of literary representations of these and other features, see Goeke and Kornelius 1976, Sullivan 1980, McCafferty 2003, and Hickey 2003.) These features can pose different types of problems for the learner mainly because (a) the surface forms are identical both in StE and IrE but different in meaning or use in IrE (as is the case of the reflexive pronoun, the use of *whenever* and *sure*, and, to a certain extent, the use of *do + be + V-ing*) and (b) the surface form is peculiar to IrE and requires further explanation (e.g. *be + after + V-ing*, embedded questions, etc.). Given that some of these features have also been found in the novels of other Anglo-Irish writers, extracts from their novels and plays are reproduced here, together with MacGill's examples, from the corpus that I have analysed in more depth elsewhere (Amador Moreno 2006).

The use of the reflexive pronoun

Generally speaking, reflexives in StE are built with another nominal element 'with which they are in co-referential relation (Quirk et al. 1972 [1989]: 211-213). However, in the examples shown below, the reflexive pronouns *herself*, *yourself*, *meself*, and *myself* are not used in co-referential relation to any noun or pronoun within the same sentence. In other words, none of these examples has a noun phrase acting as an antecedent, and this may well confuse the learner.

- (1) a. It's meself that does not know. (MacGill 1914: 23)

- b. I was despised by the youths who were older than myself. (MacGill 1914: 26).
- c. Can't you sit in...with the light lit and herself beyond in the room? (Synge 1986: 41).
- d. when she had yourself to look at (Yeats 1989: 78)

The use of the reflexive in IrE has been dealt with by many scholars (see for instance Stoney 1885: 70-71, Burke 1896: 780, Henry 1957: 120-121, or Sullivan 1980: 200, among others) and its occurrence in IrE is often put down to substratum influence from Ir. *féin*. The pronoun *féin* (and the suffixes *-sa*, *-se*, *-san*) is used in Irish as an emphatic form which is construed with the personal pronoun, as in *tú fein agus Tomás* 'you and Thomas' (Christian Brothers 1980 [1986]: 82-84). This use is still quite commonly found in current spoken English in Ireland (see O'Keeffe 2005: 358).

The construction after + V-ing

The use of *after + V-ing*, also known as 'the hot news perfect' (Harris 1984: 308, following J. D. McCawley), 'the PI' (Greene 1979, Harris 1984), or 'the retrospective I' (Henry 1957: 177), is probably the signature construction of IrE. It is also the most widely used feature to portray Irish characters in literature (which, of course, makes it all the more relevant for the case at hand). This structure is still currently employed in the English spoken in Ireland (Amador and O'Keeffe 2006) 'to report the conclusion of an action: it does so by way of reference to a state initiated by the conclusion of this action' (Henry 1957: 177).

- (2) a. I am after forgettin' that I came out to pluck bog-bine. (MacGill 1915: 66).
- b. Juno: He wore out the Health Insurance long ago, and he's after wearing out the Unemployment Dole, an' now he's tryin' to wear out me! (O'Casey 1980: 7)
- c. Amn't I after seeing the lone light of the star of knowledge shining from her brow. (Synge 1986: 83).

As in the case of the reflexive pronoun, the existence of this structure in IrE is due to direct contact with the Irish language: the construction *Bí (tá, beidh, etc.) + [preposition tar éis/i-ndiaidh] + verbal noun or verbal adjective* are among the structures available

to express the perfect tense in Irish. (Whereas the form *i-ndiaidh* is favoured in the Irish of Ulster, in southern dialects the form *tar éis* is preferred: see Todd 1989: 43). The *after* form contrasts with its counterpart *have + just + pp.*, which would be used in StE with the same meaning. This, therefore, would need to be explained to the students, because, as Asián and McCullough (1998: 47) mention, 'readers unfamiliar with H[iberno] E[nglish] tend to give this structure a "future-of-intention" interpretation', an assumption that can also be made by native speakers of English who are unfamiliar with this variety (see further McCafferty 2003).

Embedded questions

The use of embedded questions such as the ones in (3) below are also very common, not only in literary renderings of this variety but also in current spoken Irish English. These types of embedded questions can also be found in replies to yes-no questions, where the subordinating conjunctions *if* or *whether* would be expected to introduce the embedded question. Harris (1993: 168) gives the example of *He came to see would he set up a shop at the end of the road*, where the subordinators *if* or *whether* are missing and the word order of the subordinate clause is inverted.

From the point of view of written IrE analysis, plenty of sentences like those shown in (3) have been found in the literary works of Irish authors writing in English. The literary language of Beckett, Joyce, O'Casey, Synge, and several other authors has been found to contain numerous examples of this phenomenon, as shown in Clark (1917), Taniguchi (1972), Bliss (1972), Dolan (1984, 1985), and Wales (1992). This is highly significant because, although it could be argued that these authors' artistic rendering is unreliable as evidence of real IrE, this is precisely one of the features which can be still found in contemporary spoken (and sometimes also written) English in Ireland.

- (3) a. One day I asked who were the people to whom it went.
(MacGill 1914: 9).
b. I stood while outside wondering would I have a right to pass
on or to walk in and see you. (Synge 1986: 42).
c. I don't know is it here she is coming. (Yeats 1989: 76).

As has been pointed out in previous research, the direct correspondence between the IrE construction and the word order of

indirect questions in Irish seems to indicate that substratum influence is the main source in this case. In Irish, direct and indirect questions present the same word order (for further discussion see Filppula 1999).

The student of English who is familiar with the StE counterpart of the structure shown in (3c) above knows that when formulating indirect WH-questions, the verb-subject order of the original question is reversed. Thus, a direct question like 'When are you meeting him?' becomes 'She asked me when we were meeting him' in reported speech. However, in example (3c), we observe that the inverted word order of the original questions has been retained. Given that this is a common mistake of some EFL learners, this feature is particularly interesting because it makes the student aware of the similarities between the dialectal structure and the 'interlanguage' of some learners. In fact, and although the substrate account has often been summoned in this case to explain the existence of this feature in IrE, it could be argued that Second Language Acquisition hypotheses can similarly be called on to explain its occurrence in this vernacular.

The habitual form do + be + V-ing

The following uses of *do + be + V-ing* could be wrongly understood by the learner as examples of emphatic *do*.

- (4) a. So I do be trampin' about the roads with the sweat on me, and the shivers of cold on me at the same time (MacGill, 1914: 69)
- b. Sometimes, I do be thinkin' that the word 'hope' is blotted from me soul (MacGill 1915: 228).
- c. They do be cheering when the horses take the water well. (Yeats 1986: 78).

The origin of this feature is subject to much debate. Whereas some authors consider it to be a literal or nearly literal translation from the Irish consuetudinal form (see for instance Corrigan 1992: 102), others have argued for superstratal influence from Early Modern English (see Harris 1986). At any rate, its representation in literature has been very significant and it has served different purposes, as stated by Croghan (1990: 33):

Because brogue-write also sometimes exploited aspects of real Hiberno-English, structures such as the 'do-be' type which were regarded as violating British Standard English have been used in stage-Irish writing especially since Irish playwrights started using the genre in the 18th century. The 'do-be' bits of Hiberno-English also became symbols of deviancy.

Punctual whenever

In contrast to the habitual form, which seems to be in some ways a purely stereotypical feature of written IrE, the use of the subordinating conjunction *whenever* in the sense of *when* is currently heard in some varieties of Irish English today (especially in the Northern part of Ireland). As a result, it is not uncommon to find it in some novels rendering the type of English spoken in Ulster.

As Milroy (1981: 10-11) has pointed out, this conjunction is commonly used in StE together with a past-tense verb to indicate that the action happened repeatedly, whereas in Ulster there is no such implication (see also Joyce 1910, Harris 1993: 165, or Macafee 1996). In this sense, it could be safely assumed that the examples shown below contain a certain degree of ambiguity, given that the intended use of *whenever* in both utterances seems to refer to a onetime, momentary event rather than to a recurrent event or a conditional one.

- (5) a. Whenever he sat by the school fire he fell asleep.

(MacGill 1914: 16)

- b. Nearly all the scholars cried whenever they were beaten

(MacGill 1914: 16)

The history and functions of this feature have been dealt with by Montgomery and Kirk (2001), who point out (p. 242) that it is so common in Ulster, 'even on newscasts, that speakers from England sometimes notice it, and some natives have become aware of it as a shibboleth of Ulster speech'.

Discourse markers

The use of discourse markers such as *sure* is also interesting, given that it could easily be misinterpreted by students. The following excerpt (MacGill 1915: 105) is taken from one of MacGill's early novels, *The Rat Pit*. Given the relevance of the

context in which the discourse markers occur, the preceding turns are given in order to provide an illustration of their interactional significance:

- (6) – 'Who'll take a drink?' asked Micky's Jim, pulling a half-bottle of whisky from his pocket and drawing out the cork with his fingers. 'Good stuff this is, and I'm as dry as the rafters of hell ... Will ye have a wee drop, Willie the Duck?'
- 'No, *sure*,' answered Willie, who was sitting beside the weeping woman, his one leg accross the other, and his hands clasped over his stomach. 'I would take it if I hadn't the pledge against drink, indeed I would. Aye, *sure*! ...'
- 'Aye sure, be hanged!' Jim blurted out. 'Ye've got to take it, for it's die-dog-or-eat-the-gallows this time. Are you goin' to take it?'
- 'No, sure-'
- 'Why d'ye always say 'Aye, sure' and 'No, sure' when talking to a person?' asked Jim, replacing the cork in the bottle, which he now tried to balance on the point of his finger. 'Is it a habit ye've got into, Willie the Duck?'
- 'Aye, sure', answered Willie.

The use of the discourse marker *sure* in Willie the Duck's speech seems redundant, that is, it acts as a mere reinforcing element which emphasizes, to a certain extent, agreement or negation, but in fact, has nothing to do with what the learner may primarily identify as an adjectival form meaning 'certain, safe, secure', etc. (see for instance the entry for *sure* given in the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary*).

This and other structures used in Irish literature written in English can be explored in class, so that the student can learn to decode different messages expressed in IrE.

Conclusions

To summarize, I have drawn attention to a number of features which are proper to IrE and which characterize this variety. Given that their use in literature is not uncommon, it would be necessary to spend some time in class exploring their meanings in the novels or plays selected by the teacher. I have suggested MacGill's work

because his use of IrE is realistic and full of cultural references that can serve as an introduction to what life in rural Ireland was like.

In general, texts written in IrE can enable the EFL teacher to provide the students with an overview of the linguistic situation in Ireland prior to the arrival of the English language. Thus, a brief explanation of the status of the Irish language around the time of the Plantations would help them understand the combination of numerous factors that contributed to the shift from Irish into English and to the existence of this variety of English.

By introducing the EFL learner to these types of texts, we can help them acquire cultural referents that will become useful for them in their use of the language (particularly in the case of those learners who have plans to travel, live, work, or study in Ireland, or are already doing so there). The inclusion of Irish literary texts helps learners achieve communicative competence by allowing them to identify IrE patterns which are embedded in this particular variety. It is also a way of stimulating them to reflect, endowing them with the capacity to work out meanings for themselves and encouraging them to approach other varieties of English and, of course, other varieties of literature.

Note

1. The term *Irish English* is used here to refer to the English of Ireland in general. Much debate has surrounded the choice of an appropriate term which would accurately denote 'the varieties of English spoken in Ireland'. Thus, the alternative term *Anglo-Irish* was employed by scholars such as Burke (1896), van Hamel (1912), Hogan (1927), Henry (1957, 1960-61, 1977), Garvin (1977), and Wall (1986), among others. The controversial implications of this term, however, have been underlined by Croghan (1988: 105), who points out that the term *Anglo-Irish* has been applied to the Irish descendent of English colonists and to their literature and language, and, as a result, is often understood as having religious or ethnic connotations. A second option is the term *Hiberno-English*, which has also been used by many scholars and is in fact currently used as a synonym of *Irish English* by many authors. Again, Croghan (1988) points out that the use of the term *Irish English* could be slightly ambiguous, as it might appear to emphasize the influence of the Irish language only. However, as Hickey (2005) argues, the term *Irish English* is parallel to other terms used to refer to varieties of English around the world, and 'is readily understandable to scholars outside the field' (Hickey 2005: 2-3). See also Kallen (1999: 73-74) for a review.

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