

# Varieties of English: an examination of an Irish English speaker

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to compare a southern Irish English speaker who lives in New Zealand with what literature in the field portrays as typical speech for the Irish variety of English.

This paper does not discuss the historical or contemporary reasons for why Irish English is as it is today. This paper has limited its analysis to the reasons why the native Irish speaker of English differs from other norms, and comments only on differences. The southern Irish English variety has unique phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactical features, as well as a distinguishing intonation and stress pattern. Only phonological differences are examined here. Four main aspects of Irish English are investigated; the /w/ ~ /hw/ contrast; the contrast of /t/ with /θ/; the STRUT /ʌ/ and FOOT /ʊ/ vowels (the GOOSE vowel will only be looked at in the context of a variable with STRUT and FOOT); and the PRICE /ai/ and CHOICE /ɔɪ/ diphthongs.

The analysis of these sounds shows evidence that there are competing influences on an individual's conscious or subconscious phonological choices; pride in one's language and heritage might compete with one's aspiring social status and professional ambitions. Together these could be further influenced by the linguistic environments one has been in or in which one currently finds oneself. These competing forces lead to some expected but also some unexpected departures from other norms.

## Introduction

The term *Irish English* will be used throughout this paper to identify the variety of English spoken as the mother tongue of the majority of people in Ireland. There are other terms such as Anglo-Irish and Hiberno-English which are often used interchangeably with Irish English. These terms will not be used in this paper. Irish is the term used to refer to the indigenous language of Ireland.

Literature concerning the Irish variety of English is widespread. I limited my research to literature that was directly applicable to the southern Irish English variety of today and, in particular, to information concerning the areas being discussed in this paper. Contemporary descriptions of southern Irish English which are more than 50 years old were disregarded for this review.

'There is no such thing as a set of codified norms defining a standard Irish English accent', or so Harris (1991:39) says. Wells (1982) stipulates a quite extensive inventory of the features that make up southern Irish English. Trudgill and Hannah (2002) agree that there are qualities of Irish English that are distinguishable from other varieties, and Kallen (1997b) postulates a similar argument. Whether these features are enough to form evidence of a standard is difficult to say, and whether the people of Ireland conform to this standard is another question entirely.

Harris (1991, 1993) continues to push the question of a standard from a grammar perspective and suggests that many qualities of Irish English 'do not correspond to institutionalized norms' (Harris 1993: 139). These so called non-standardized norms form the bases of what many people would intuitively identify as Irish English. Filppula (1991) makes a case for the 'extended *now*' perfect in quite some depth; Trudgill and Hannah (2002), Harris (1993), and Wells (1982) all give a comprehensive overview of the tense-aspect idiosyncrasies. Odlin (1997) looks extensively at the use of clefts, as does Harris (1993), suggesting a broad use of these features, particularly in areas such as Kerry.

The phonological features mentioned by Kallen (1997b) include the contrast between /hw/ and /w/; there seems to be little debate about this feature. The complex lexical and allophonic distribution of the FOOT and the STRUT groups on the other hand seem to have many realizations. Kallen (1997b) simply suggests [ɔ̃] for the STRUT group; Trudgill and Hannah (2002) further this and state the FOOT vowel is realized as the GOOSE vowel, and the STRUT vowel is realized as a rounded [ɔ̃ɪ]. Wells (1982) posits the contrast between the STRUT and FOOT vowels to be highly complex and suggests [ə-] [ɔ̃] [ɣ] [ə] [ʌ] [ʊ] [u:] as possible variants, with a complete lack of contrast and on occasions a complete merger.

Kallen (1997b: 23) refers to the 'general non-use of [θ] and [ð]' in southern Irish English; Hannah and Trudgill (2002) say that

/θ/ ~ /t/ and /ð/ ~ /d/ only sometimes have a loss of contrast, and /tʰ/ and /dʰ/ are used throughout. This confusion between the dental and the alveolar place of articulation is discussed in great length by Ó hÚrdail (1997), who draws the conclusion that it is younger speakers who predominantly under-differentiate between /t/ and /θ/ (by 'under-differentiate' Ó hÚrdail means merge), and that this language change is not established or even settled.

Wells (1982) and Trudgill and Hannah (2002) both confirm a tendency to neutralize the PRICE ~ CHOICE contrast in favour of the PRICE diphthong.

## Methodology

Róisín was born in Kenmare in County Kerry. Her parents are southern Irish English speakers who do not speak Irish. Her last year of junior school was spent at an Irish-speaking school in Cork, and six out of seven years of secondary school were at an Irish immersion school in a Gaeltacht area. The choice to be educated in Irish was Róisín's; she was the primary instigator of this educational language preference. After secondary school Róisín lived in Dublin for three years before immigrating to New Zealand in January 2003. Róisín considers herself a young educated professional from a good high class background. She is currently working as an ESOL teacher, a career she wants to pursue.

The speaker was taped in three different ways: in conversation, reading a passage from a book (Appendix A), and reading a word list (Appendix B). The three styles were chosen for different reasons. The first style is intended to create a relaxed and spontaneous environment in order to maximize the potential for natural speech; the second is designed to encourage the speaker to allow the natural melody of the language to shine through in a repetitive and controlled manner; and, lastly, the list of words was chosen to isolate and compare vowel sounds. While the passage of reading and word lists were recorded, I left the room in order to reduce any pressure the speaker might feel.

Each of these styles has its advantages and disadvantages. Any speaker put in front of a tape recorder is likely to modify the way they speak for many different reasons. For this speaker in particular, the reading style proved to be the most uncomfortable style. The reading was stilted; the speaker appeared quite nervous and recorded herself twice. The word list, rather than exposing the

differences in sounds, narrowed the differences. The list was compiled in two different ways. The first was in a completely random order. This is because the speaker is an ESOL teacher, and I assumed that if the speaker saw the words in minimal pairs, being used to teaching minimal pairs, she might make a difference on the recording where no difference actually existed in natural rapid continuous speech. Secondly the words were put into minimal pairs. Neither style proved to be more advantageous than the other.

In analysing the data, I chose a quantitative approach, and the tables below represent the results.

## Results

Only 33% of the time does the speaker render *wh*-words with [hw]. It appears from the sample data that the speaker uses [w] more often with *when*.

*Table 1. Comparison of /w/ and /hw/.*

Word	[w]	[hw]
what	7	3
which	5	4
while	0	4
when	16	1
where	2	3
whether	1	0
why	1	0

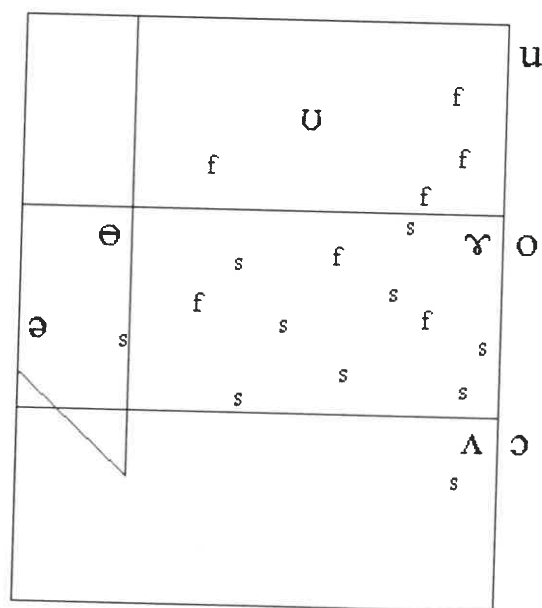
Table 2 below shows that /ð/ is never realized as [d] but always as [ð] in this speaker's dialect. The contrast between the two is clearly demonstrated. Therefore this aspect of speech was not analysed further. However the same can not be said of /t/ and /θ/ which are realized in a variety of ways, with parallel distribution of [t<sup>h</sup>] and [θ].

Table 2. Comparison of /t/ with /θ/.

Word	[θ]	[t <sup>h</sup> ]
south	1	0
thousand	1	1
thought	1	1
month	1	0
north	1	0
through	1	0
thing	8	0
think	6	3
theology	1	0
three	3	0

Turning to the FOOT and STRUT vowels, Figure 1 shows the back segment of a vowel quadrilateral displaying various realizations of the FOOT and STRUT lexical sets. The notation 'f' indicates the actual realization of a vowel that is usually considered to be a FOOT vowel and 's' indicates the actual realisation of a vowel that is usually considered to be a STRUT vowel.

Figure 1. Comparison between STRUT /ʌ/ and FOOT /u/ vowels.



Tables 3 and 4 show that the largest number of realizations of CHOICE and PRICE words fall in their abstract categories. It is important to mention that the two PRICE words in the [ɔi] column from the word list are *violent* and *violin*, which are well known typical exceptions even among speakers who make a clear differentiation (Wells 1982).

Table 3: CHOICE /ɔi/ and PRICE /ai/, results from conversation.

	[ɔi]	[aɪ]	[ai]
CHOICE /ɔi/ 1 word	1	0	0
PRICE /ai/ 69 words	4	13	51

Table 4. Results from word list.

	[ɔi]	[aɪ]	[ai]
CHOICE /ɔi/ 6 word	4	2	0
PRICE /ai/ 18 words	2	3	13

## Discussion

Women in the Kerry Gaeltacht tend to move over and back or in and out of the two languages alternately: they mingle them, rather than separate them, in animated conversation. This does not mean that they can not keep them apart if they so wish but that, in fact, they do not normally do so. (Henry 1977: 23)

Given Róisín's linguistic history, I was expecting many more distinctively southern Irish-English features to show in her speech, especially because she had spent six years at an Irish immersion secondary school in a Gaeltacht area. Her time in Cork and Dublin had been limited by comparison, and she had only lived in New Zealand for just under two years when this study was undertaken.

Despite these facts, Róisín's Irish English accent, even by her own reckoning, has undergone extensive 'neutralization'. Róisín, while proud of her Irish heritage, is also proud of her professional achievements and her social standing, a possible reason for conscious or subconscious neutralizing of any extreme features in her accent.

Róisín did make a distinction between /w/ and /hw/ but she was not consistent. Only about a third of the time did she realize *wh*- words with /hw/. It would appear that it is a diminishing feature. This reduction of /hw/ to /w/ is an increasingly popular feature of Dublin English (Wells 1982). Róisín did spend three years in Dublin just before she moved to New Zealand and /hw/ is not a part of New Zealand English. Her language contact with these other varieties of English could have affected her speech.

There is clear evidence of opposition of /θ/ and /t/ in Róisín's speech. There were only three occasions when Róisín under-differentiated. Wells (1982: 429) suggests that this type of speech is 'restricted to the speech of sophisticates or of those making a conscious effort at elegance'. It is clear from conversations with Róisín that she considers herself to come from a better family from the better side of town. This could be a reason for the differentiation or it could be that as an ESOL teacher Róisín has trained herself to make a difference.

Róisín's STRUT, FOOT, and GOOSE vowels were very difficult to differentiate. Indeed she seemed to realize /ʌ/ in a variety of ways, sometimes as close back, and sometimes as very open and very back. There was also a tendency to shift to the centre ground and produce a schwa, particularly with the high frequency word *but*. This vowel was mostly realized as [ə], sometimes as [ʊ], and occasionally somewhere in between – but never as [ʌ].

Wells (1982) suggests that the Dublin accent preserves the contrast in all situations except before /l/ where [ʊ] is used. This would make *dull* and *pull* homophones. In the word list Róisín did make a distinction, producing [ʌ] for *dull* and [ʊ] for *pull*.

Other pairs that Wells (1982) records Mac Éinrí (1975) as citing as homophones were not homophones for Róisín, with the exception of *look* ~ *luck* and *took* ~ *tuck* which, while not entirely homophones, could be said to be near-homophones. The /ʌ/ vowel in *luck* and *tuck* was raised and a little forward; *stud* ~ *stood* were the opposite, with the vowel in *stood* /ʊ/ a little lower and more back. The vowel [ʌ] tends to be the choice of more refined speech and according to Wells (1982) is associated with high status. It was surprising, then, not to hear it more. It might be that [ʌ] is the target but that Róisín is overcompensating, which creates a great deal of diversity.

The contrast between /ai/ and /ɔi/ is maintained in most places. There were occasions when Róisín pronounced [aɪ] with some lip rounding; this gave a slight sound of [ɔi] but the contrast was still strong. This slight lip rounding occurred with the pronoun *I* and in the words *Irish*, *my*, *time*, *like*, and *trying*. Towards the end of the free conversation, there were three occurrences where [ɔi] was used where [ai] would have been expected: *my*, *smiled*, and *decided*. In the whole of the free conversation I could only identify one CHOICE word — *enjoyed* — which would have been pronounced with [ai] if the contrast with PRICE was not maintained, but it was pronounced with the rounded CHOICE vowel.

In the word list, opposition was clearly maintained. The word *voice* experienced some neutralization, but it was weak and hardly noticeable. Wells (1982) stated that *violent*, *violet*, and *violin* would all have [ɔi] realizations. He puts this down to an imitation of spelling. These words were mixed in with other PRICE and CHOICE words in the word list, and interestingly the word *violet* was pronounced with [ai] but *violent* and *violin* both had [ɔi]. *Boil* was also in the word list. On the recording Róisín clearly says [bɔil] but later when the tape player had been put away she asked me 'would I [bail] the kettle for you?'

Róisín clearly makes a distinction between these two sets, both in natural rapid continuous speech and also in the controlled word list. However, it seems that the opposition is not established, and there does seem to be some fluid movement between the two realizations. Wells (1982) and Trudgill and Hannah (2002) both say that the neutralization heads in the direction of [ai], but this would not seem to be the overriding case with Róisín; rather, she seems to move in the direction of [ɔi] as the neutralized sound.

### Conclusion and implications

Intuitively one can tell that Róisín is a speaker of Irish English. More particularly it is clear that she is not from Northern Ireland. Identifying the aspects of her speech that reveal her linguistic roots is not difficult. Broadly speaking, her accent shows a high degree of aspiration. Her syntax very occasionally shows typical Irish English features, for example, the use of the present progressive where other varieties would not use it:



- (1) I'll see something and maybe I'm describing it and I have the Irish word but I won't have the English word so I'll be stopping and going.

She also uses *would* far more and with a wider range of uses than is to be expected in other standard varieties:

- (2) There was a few Irish people in there that I would recognize and they see me coming in.

Róisín does render a range of the Irish English features in her speech, but they are not widespread. I did not, for example, hear any evidence of clefting as described by Odlin (1997) or Filppula (1999). Róisín's partner is also from County Kerry. Despite this, I observed no codeswitching into Irish or the use of Irish loan words when they chatted. Neither did I observe any marked change in intonation or stress pattern that was considered to be typical of Irish English. Particularly with consonants it seems that Róisín makes a clear choice to realize a more neutral pronunciation. It appears easy for Róisín to differentiate between typical Irish consonant sounds and their more neutralized counterparts. Her range of vowel sounds, on the other hand, seems much more mixed. This could be due to multiple factors, e.g., according to Róisín, people who speak with a rural or provincial accent may be considered less intelligent than their city-sounding counterparts.

Róisín has lived in New Zealand for nearly two years, an influence not to be underestimated. While this study does not allow for a detailed description of Róisín's intonation and stress patterns, she did show signs of high rising terminals, which very possibly reflect a New Zealand English influence. This influence is highly unlikely to be limited to only her intonation.

Róisín is also an ESOL teacher and success in her professional life depends on obtaining and teaching a norm quite different from the typical vowel sounds of the southwest of Ireland. These complications plus the transient nature of these vowel sounds in Irish English are very possible reasons for the mixture in Róisín's vowel system.

More investigation is needed to give a full comparison of Róisín's speech with that typical of Irish English. In particular a comprehensive examination of vowels, consonants, morphology,

lexicon, syntax, and intonation are needed. Comparison with several other speakers of Irish English would also be advisable to produce a thorough report.

## Appendices

### *Appendix A: Reading*

She looked round at the lake beside which she was standing. Ringed in by big mountains, with a long, narrow valley stretching away to the west, and water meadows at its southern extremity the Tierness in the North Tyrol is surely one of the loveliest places in the world, and an ideal spot for such a school as the Chalet School. Here Joey Bettany's sister, Madge, had established herself at the end of the previous April, beginning with nine pupils — Joey, Grizel, and Simone Lecoutier, and six Tyrolean girls who came from the summer chalets which have grown up round the lake — and ending the first term with just twice that number.

[E. Brent-Dyer. 1998. *Jo of the Chalet School*, p. 5. London: Collins.]

### *Appendix B: Word list*

Diphthongs: /ai/ and /ɔi/

eye	nine	guide	pie	boil
divine	sight	style	bile	fight
vice	voice	line	ride	I'll
aisle	isle	oil	violent	violin
violet	soil	toy	noise	

Monophthongs: /ʊ/ and /ʌ/ and /ʊ:/

put	cut	good	luck	rook	Ruck
cook	look	putt	gut	book	Ruck
stud	stood			could	cut
flood	good			look	luck
pub	sub			put	putt
tub	grub			took	tuck
nut	cut				
full	pull				

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