Suprasegmental transfer
On prosodic traces of Irish in Irish English

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Introduction

The interaction of two languages invariably leads to interference. It is also obvious that interference is a phenomenon which is not confined to a single linguistic level: for example, morphological interference does not occur to the exclusion of syntactic interference, either as a result of diachronic language contact or in a foreign language environment. But what has to my knowledge not been looked at so far (cf. Bliss 1971, 1972, 1979) is whether more than one linguistic level is responsible for the appearance of one interference phenomenon. For the present article I am concerned with the combined role of prosody and syntax in interference, specially with regard to the transfer phenomena in Irish English which stem from Irish (see Hayden and Hartog 1909; van Hamel 1910; Hickey 1984b on syntax, Joyce 1910; Hogan 1927; Henry 1957, 1960 for general treatments and Aldus 1976 for a bibliography).

To clarify the situation of Irish English here a brief historical note is called for. English has been in Ireland since the late middle ages, above all on the East coast of Ireland, as a consequence of the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in 1169 (Curtis 1919; MacIntosh and Samuels 1968). The geographical distribution of English within Ireland has varied in the centuries since the coming of the English (see Sullivan 1976 for the sociohistorical background). Above all, in the West of the country the foothold of English has been least strong. Not until the middle of the last century, after the decimation of the Irish-speaking population during the Great Famine, 1845-1850 (de Fréine 1965, 1977), did English succeed in making serious inroads in the rural parts of the Western seaboard. To this day English has not entirely displaced Irish as a language of day-to-day communication, although the number of native speakers has dropped drastically; to-day there are approximately 30,000 speakers of Irish as a first language in three main areas in the North, West and South-West of Ireland respectively. During the long period when English occupied only a secondary status in Ireland various transfer phenomena entered the variety of English spoken in Ireland. Many of these remained, later to become distinctive features of the English in of Ireland, while others were either dropped entirely or have disappeared from the supra-regional variety of English in the Republic of Ireland (i.e. in the South) (Hickey 1984a: 233f.; on the north, see Adams 1964; Barry 1981, 1982) and are now only to be found in the contact areas in the West of the country. The phenomena discussed below are characteristic both of the standard variety of English in the Republic of Ireland and of the rural contact areas. Examples of the phenomena from the latter source have been found by the present author during field work in the West of Ireland and in many tape-recordings of rural Irish English used for an investigation of the phonology of Irish English (Hickey 1984c).
Defining suprasegmental transfer

To talk of suprasegmental transfer is to touch on a very wide area of interference which is evident to anyone listening to a foreigner speaking the former’s language. Normally, such transfer goes under the label of ‘foreign accent’ and is not the object of description, investigations into the phonology of transfer being mainly segmental.

Furthermore suprasegmental transfer is not something which is regarded as belonging to the investigation of diachronic language contact, as it depends so strongly on the spoken word. Nonetheless, suprasegmental transfer from one language to another can be recognized in later stages of the second language when one examines the prosody of the latter, particularly in combination with further aspects of individual contact phenomena such as their syntax.

When I refer to prosody in the following I mean the number of syllables, particularly of stressed syllables in a phrase. By a trace of Irish in Irish English I mean a syntactic construction in the Irish English which is definitely a transfer phenomenon from Irish and which is furthermore identical in the number of stressed syllables with the construction in Irish which served as a model for transfer. A simple exam of this is seen in (1).

(1) a. He doesn’t like linguistic at all at all.
   b. Ní taitníonn an teangeolaíocht leis ar chor ar bith.
   c. [not like the linguistics with-him on turn on any]

Of interest here are the italicized portions of the above sentences. In Irish the phrase is an amplification of the negation evident from the first word of the sentence. In English such amplification is possible with the phrase at all. What is peculiar is the doubling of at all in Irish English. Why should this have occurred? After all, the phrase at all is already sufficiently emphatic from a semantic point of view. A plausible answer is that during language contact the Irish used the phrase at all as an equivalent to Irish ar chor ar bith but that the prosodic structure of the latter phrase exerted pressure on second language speakers of English to find an equivalent in English to the Irish phrase which had a similar prosodic structure, i.e. of the type [i - i - i - i]. This was achieved by a simple doubling of the English phrase at all as this already had the structure [i - i].

Productive transfer: a test analysis

The above type of prosodic transfer is idiomatic and non-productive. But many of the putative instances of prosodic transfer are part of productive structures which may vary in person, number etc. as long as the prosodic shape of the structure is not altered again consider an example.

(2) a. How is yourself?
   b. Cé chaoi a bhfuil tú féin?
   c. [which way is you self]

The question in (2) a is the equivalent to Standard English How are you? The transfer from Irish has in this case affected several aspects of English. To begin with: the third person singular of Irish (or rather the unmarked copular) is matched by the third person singular in English. The form of the pronoun used in Irish English is reflexive, this matching the use in Irish. The form of the pronoun used in Irish English is reflexive, this matching the use in Irish. The functional equivalence of Irish tú féin with English yourself
might seem to offer a sufficient explanation for the occurrence of interference. However the transfer also shows a prosodic component: both the English and Irish reflexive pronouns have the following prosodic pattern \([\_{\_} - ' ' \_\_]\. Here one comes up of cause against the question of primary cause. Both the function and the prosodic pattern of the English reflexive pronoun would account for the transfer from Irish. As both co-occur in (2) and constructions like it, it is not possible to maintain that either the functional or the prosodic aspect was responsible. One can merely point to the parallels between the Irish and the Irish English structures on both levels.

Habitual aspect

Irish has a complex aspectual system which is in its extent comparable to that of, say Russian. As opposed to the latter language the aspectual distinctions of Irish are not achieved by the use of morphologically different verb forms but by certain syntactic constructions. One of the most common aspectual distinctions in Irish is that between the habitual and the non-habitual. This distinction is arrived at by using the normal form of a verb for the non-habitual and a form of the copula verb \(\text{bí}\) along with a non-finite form of the full verb for the habitual. With the copula itself the distinction can also be made by using two separate forms. As the distinction is semantically clearest with the copula it is pertinent to start with it here. Consider the following two Irish sentences.

(3) a. \(\text{Tá sé abhaile}\)
b. \(\text{Is he at-home}\)
c. ‘He is at home’
d. \(\text{Bíonn sé abhaile gach oíche}\)
e. ‘Is-habitual he at-home every night’
f. ‘He does be at home every evening’ (Irish English)
g. ‘He is always at home in the evening’ (Standard English)

In (3f) one can see that the habitual present of Irish is rendered in English by using the verb \(\text{do}\) as an auxiliary with \(\text{be}\) as a non-finite form. The Irish English rendering is a deliberate manipulation of English syntax to achieve an equivalent to the Irish construction. What is interesting here, from the point of view of the present investigation, is the stress pattern of the construction in (3f), where the form of the verb \(\text{do}\) carries primary stress: \(\text{He does be… [\_{\_} - ' ' \_\_]}.\) Here the primary stress falls on \(\text{does}\) which then corresponds prosodically to the Irish construction: \(\text{Bíonn sé… [\_{\_} - ' ' \_\_]}\). Note that the stress pattern is not identical in both languages, but the placement of the primary stress is. From this fact one can drive the general principle for which more evidence with be offered presently:

(4) In suprasegmental transfer there must be a correspondence between primary stress and major syntactic category with interference forms.

This condition is fulfilled by (3)f above. The syllables with secondary stress are irrelevant here. There can be an unequal number of syllables with secondary stress in the original and interference forms. Again this is the case in (3)f. The sentence starts in English with a pronoun and in Irish with the verb as Irish it is a single-stress form \(\text{bíonn}\). In English a compound form consisting of \(\text{do}\) in a conjugated form and \(\text{be}\) as a non-finite verb-form. For the conveyance of the habitual in Irish English the form of \(\text{do}\) is central, i.e. syntactically major, and it is this which is stressed, thus offering corroboration of (4).
Topicalization

Among the most prominent features of Irish English syntax is the system of topicalization which it does not share with Standard English. To illustrate this let me begin with Irish. Here word-order is rigid: Verb+Subject+further arguments, in that order. Should one wish to emphasize a verbal argument then this is done by creating a new dummy main sentence, placing the element to be emphasized within it and relativizing the original sentence. Allow me to illustrate this procedure with an example.

(5) a. Chuaigh mé go Gaillimhe inné
     b. Went I to Galway yesterday

Is a normal declarative sentence in Irish; if I wish to topicalize the directional adverbial phrase go Gaillimhe ‘to Galway’, then this is done by fronting.

(5) c. Is go Gaillimhe a chuaigh mé inné
     d. Is to Galway that went I yesterday
     e. I went to Galway yesterday

As opposed to English, Irish does not make use of stress but of fronting for rhematic purposes. In Irish English as might be expected topicalization by fronting is frequent. Consider the Irish English equivalent of (5):

(5) f. ‘It’s to Galway I went yesterday’

Here one has a construction which is syntactically almost identical with the Irish original. However, the latter has a single verb form, the copula is, which does not have an accompanying pronoun. In Irish English the corresponding form, from the point of view of position in the sentence, is it’s.

Now the structure of the Irish sentence, seen in terms of stressed and unstressed syllables, is [i' - i' - i' - ...]. The Irish English equivalent has the same prosodic structure. It is not possible in Irish English to undo the contraction of it and is at the beginning of the sentence, i.e.

(5) g. *It is to Galway I went yesterday

is not in Irish English equivalent of (5)c. This can be accounted for prosodically. If it’s resolved as it is one obtains two approximately equally stressed syllables at the beginning of the sentence, i.e. the prosodic structure [i' - i' - i' - i' - ...] which no longer corresponds suprasegmentally to the Irish original.

This interpretation of the obligatory contraction of copula and pronoun receives support when one considers similar constructions in the past tense. Here contraction is equally obligatory. Consider the following Irish sentence and it Irish English equivalent.

(6) a. Is dona a bhi sí nuair a thug said cuairt
     b. Is bad that was she when relative gave they visit

uiirthi
     on-her
c. Stand. Engl.: ‘She was poorly when they visited her’.
d. Irish Engl.: ‘Twas poorly she was when they visited her’

In Irish a single form of the copula is used for topicization purposes irrespective of what tense the verb of the non-topicalized sentence which serves as input is. As with (5)f it is no possible to undo the contraction at the beginning of (6)d as the prosodic correspondence between the original Irish structure and the Irish English structure would no longer be present.

Sentence coordination

A further feature of Irish English which marks it off from more standard varieties of English is the use of parataxis where English has hypotactic structures introduced by a relevant adverb. Taking the following sentence as an example:

(7) a. I went for a walk and it raining

which corresponds to a more Standard English sentence with while or although, i.e. *I went for a walk although it was raining*. This type of structure has an exact equivalent in Irish; consider (7)b:

(7) b. *Chuaigh mé ag siúl agus é ag cur báistí*

c. Went I at walk and it as put rain

From the gloss in (7)c it is fairly obvious that Irish syntax is responsible for structures like that in (7)a. What is interesting here is that the prosodic structure of Irish would also seem to have been transferred into Irish English. Although the sentence in (7)a is deviant seen in terms of Standard English, one can still pronounce it as if it were a sentence of English. In doing so one does not place primary but secondary stress on the pronoun *it* and coordinator *and*.

(7) d. I went for a walk, and, *it* raining

But this is definitely not the stress pattern of the Irish English structure. In this variety of English both *and* and *it* must carry primary stress, i.e.

(7) e. I went for a walk *and* *it* raining

This prosodic pattern can be traced back to the Irish structure which evidently functioned as a source. Here the coordinator and the pronoun carry primary stress:

(7) f. *Chuaigh mé ag siúl *agus* *é ag cur* *báistí*

This unstressed syllables are irrelevant here (in keeping with the condition in (4) above): *agus*, ‘and’, is disyllabic but contains only one stressed syllable. The corresponding form in Irish for ‘raining’ is a phrase *ag cur báistí*, but which only contains one stressed syllable: *[eɪg ˈkærə ˈbaːʃi]*.
Prepositions and contrastive prosody

A peculiarity of Irish which has been transferred to Irish English is the use of prepositions to express the relevance of an action expressed by a verb. A similar device exists in German which is described traditionally as the *datives ethicus*. Let me start with a German example.

(8) a. *Mir ist das Geld ausgegangen*

b. To-me is the money gone-out

The function of the dative form *mir* in (8)a is to show the relevance of the action to the person the pronoun refers to. That is, with (8) I can express that I either own the money or was responsible for spending it correctly and that I was affected by its being used up. The same type of device exists in Irish, which uses a form which combines a preposition and a personal pronoun:

(9) a. *Chuaigh an airgead amach orm*

Went the money out on-me

In Irish English this device has a simple equivalent: the prepositional pronouns of Irish are resolved into a preposition and a personal pronoun. The equivalent of (9) is thus:

(9) c. ‘The money went out one me’

A certain aspect of such constructions is of special relevance here: the prepositional pronoun is never stressed in Irish. When the use of a prepositional pronoun is not literal is cannot generally be stressed. The stress is removed by stressing the sentence element which immediately precedes the prepositional pronoun, irrespective of what lexical class this belongs to:

(10) a. *Chuaigh an airgead ’ amach orm*

b. *Cad é an ’ ainm air?*

c. What it the name on-him

d. ‘What’s his name?’

This lack of stress in Irish has been transferred to Irish English Here the element preceding the preposition and the pronoun is stressed with a corresponding lack of stress for those two final sentence elements:

(11) a. The money went ’ out on me

b. What’s the ’ name on him?

Note however that if a prepositional construction comes from Irish and if it is stressed in Irish then it is also stressed in Irish English. For example the preposition *ann*, literally: “in-it”, is used idiomatically in Irish to denote existence or a state : the prepositional pronoun however is always stressed. The loan structure in Irish with “in-it” has the preposition stressed as well.

(12) a. *Is droch lâ atâ ann*
b. Is bad day that is in it

c. ‘It’s a sad day that is in it’

The transfer of the stress pattern of such prepositional constructions from Irish has led to distinctions arising in Irish has led to distinctions arising in Irish English which are unknown in more standard varieties of English. Consider the following sentences.

(13)  

a. Thit an dréimire orm  
b. Fell the ladder on me  
c. ‘The ladder fell down on me’

In (13)c the words on me show no stress in accordance with the Irish original. From the point of view of its syntax his sentence is ambiguous in English as it can be interpreted literally, i.e. “I was hit by the falling ladder”. In Irish English, however, this interpretation is possible only if the sentence final personal pronoun is stressed, i.e.

(13)  

d. The ladder fell down on me

Thus stress is contrastive here. This is not an isolated case, however, but applies to a number of constructions, for example in the following sentences:

(14)  

a. You could be caught with them  
b. You could be caught with them

In the first case (stress on the form before the preposition) the meaning is “You could be caught along with them” and goes back to an idiomatic use of leo, literally: ‘with-them’, in Irish. In the second case (them carries the stress) the meaning is that which one would expect in English, i.e. “You could be caught along with them”.

Questions and answers

Up to now I have simply made a distinction between stressed and unstressed syllables. But it is obvious from the observation of spoken English that other aspects of its prosody are different from more standard varieties of English. To conclude this paper I would like to look briefly at a further type of prosodic transfer which is found in Irish English. Again, as usual, I start from Irish. As there is no word in Irish for yes or no the verb of a question with or without a negative adverb must be repeated in affirming or negating a question.

(15)  

a. An itheann tú a lán glasraí?  
b. Do you eat a lot of vegetables?  
c. Ithim Yes (literally: ‘I eat’)  
d. Ní ithim No (literally: ‘Not I eat’)

If the verb phrase of the question is complex, only the auxiliary verb is repeated in the answer:

(17)  

a. An mbeadh tú in ann canadh?  
b. Could you sing?  
c. Bheadh Yes (literally: ‘I would’)


There are cases where the auxiliary verb is monosyllabic. When this is so a characteristic fall-rise intonation is employed which lengthens the monosyllable and renders it as prosodically prominent as a disyllabic verb form. Consider:

(17) a. An raibh tú riamh sa bhPólainn?
    b. Were you ever in Poland
    c. Bhí Yes (literally: ‘I was’)

In contact Irish English, i.e. in those areas where Irish and English are spoken alongside one another, the use of verbs in affirming or negating sentences is common. Here one also finds the fall-rise contour of Irish which indicates that verbal usage is not an overgeneralization within English but an interference phenomenon from Irish.

(19) a. Can you speak Irish?
    b. ‘I can’

References


