Identifying dialect speakers
The case of Irish English

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Abstract. The identification of dialect by non-native speakers is a matter which has consequences for forensic linguistics. When the dialect in question is furthermore a national variety for which there are stereotype conceptions of its form then additional aspects become relevant. In the present paper an attempt is made to first outline the popular conceptions and misconceptions of Irish English and then offer a more differentiated picture of the varieties found on the island of Ireland. The distinction between the north and the south is viewed linguistically and questions of stigmatization of certain features within Ireland are addressed. In conclusion a catalogue of features for the south and the north is offered which could be used to determine how genuine statements are that such and such a speaker has or had an ‘Irish accent’.

1 Introduction

The variety of English, or rather group of varieties, which one can subsume under the heading ‘Irish English’ has become of relevance to English authorities involved in the prevention of terrorism in recent years. The deplorable bomb attacks which have been made on the English mainland in the past have frequently been accompanied by telephone messages from the perpetrators who are reported to have Irish accents. Indeed the majority of bomb warnings in England, hoaxes or genuine, are said to be given by speakers with an Irish accent. The present discussion will thus address the problem of specifying objective phonetic criteria for identifying Irish speakers of English.

Matters of terminology. Before delving into details, it is necessary to clear the ground terminologically. There are a number of terms used for the varieties of English spoken in Ireland. The oldest and least appropriate is Anglo-Irish. This term is quite unacceptable linguistically. To start with it literally implies an English variety of Irish as the modifier ‘Anglo-‘ is used with reference to the head ‘Irish’. Even granting the interpretative inversion as an Irish variety of English, the term is not objective enough for linguistic use. It has been consistently applied in the past to Protestant inhabitants of the Republic of Ireland with strong leanings towards England. Furthermore it is applied to literature written in English by writers born in Ireland.

The second term is ‘Hiberno-English’. This compound rests on the Latin term for Ireland, Hibernia, literally ‘land of winter’, which goes back to a misconception by the Romans about the seasons which obtained in the Ireland of that time. The difficulty with ‘Hiberno-English’ is that linguists not involved with Irish matters are not likely to understand it unless it is explained to them. The plainer and more straightforward ‘Irish English’ is hence preferable, further terminological differentiations being introduced later if necessary.
Let me make a further remark on terminology which is necessary before offering a description of Irish English. The term *variety* is currently used by linguists to the virtual exclusion of *dialect* as the latter strictly speaking refers to a geographically defined variant of a language and additionally was found in older linguistic literature to designate the most conversative rural form of a language, ignoring such important factors in language use as sociolinguistic variation, particularly in urban communities. The word *variety* is presently favoured as it does not imply any commitment to a linguistic model or to a mode of language study. When required, the term can be modified to be more accurate in one’s description of forms of language.

After saying this, after assuaging my linguistic conscience so to speak, I must confess that I will use the term *dialect* for the remainder of the present paper as it has the advantage of being readily understandable to all. If one bear’s in mind the reservations which linguists have about a too diffuse application of the term *dialect* one can retain it for a general discussion such as that offered here. Furthermore I employ the term *standard* in a sense which for a variety linguist might be too loose. It should be understood to be a moderate form of Received Pronunciation and is used as a reference point when talking of sound segments which have a deviant realisation in Irish English.

1.1 Grounds for identification

Having hopefully cleared any open questions of approach, I can now move to the matter at hand. The task of identifying dialect speakers is one which lay people carry out without reflecting on it. They most certainly do not verbalize what they intuitively recognize acoustically. However, the linguist who does this runs a risk of not seeing the wood for the trees. In describing the phonetic features of a dialect, one may miss a central aspect for the non-linguist, i.e. that only some of these features are used in dialect identification, let alone imitation. This leads to the matter of acoustic salience.

1.2 Questions of salience

The question which needs to be asked here is whether for lay people certain features are acoustically prominent. If that is the case these then can lead to the formation of a cliché image of a dialect. There would appear to be grounds for assuming that this is the case. Consider the image which other English speakers have of Cockney with its diphthong shifts to be seen in pronunciations like [rɔi?] for [rait]. Evidence for the correctness of this assumption can be found in the imitation of dialect speakers by others. In the case of Cockney, non-Cockney speakers would seem to latch onto diphthongal shift as a salient feature of this form of British English.

For Irish English there exist phonetic clichés as well. Two of these would appear to be (i) the centralized onsets for the standard English diphthongs /ai/ or /au/ and (ii) the realization of standard /ʌ/ as /u/, yielding pronunciations like [ɔiʃ], [haus] on the one hand and [but] on the other. The /u/ for /ʌ/ is really only a feature of lower-class Dublin and is a special instance within the varieties of Irish English. The [ai] for /ai/ is common among rural and lower-class urban speakers of the east, south and south-west coast of the Republic but not found elsewhere. What is relevant is the fact that neither feature is characteristic of the supraregional, largely urban standard of the south or north.

The consideration of acoustic salience within the features of a dialect raises the next question of where speakers obtain their image of a dialect from. For the mainland
English this can be due to experience of Irish speakers in England, for instance in the Merseyside area or parts of London such as Kilburn. They are usually from the South so that specifically southern features may play a role in the identification of Irish English. Additionally the media may be another source of dialect exposure, if only indirect, for the English. Here there is an equal distribution of southern and northern speakers, in fact the representation may be tilted in favour of the north, given the extent to which the troubles in Northern Ireland dominate current affairs in present-day England. For the Irish themselves the formation of phonetic stereotypes has certainly to do with conceptions of stage Irish English which has a long tradition and which originally derives from Irish characters in seventeenth and eighteenth century English drama, whether stemming from Irish or English writers (Blunt, 1967; Duggan, 1969 [1937]).

1.3 Delimiting characteristics

While acoustic salience and the establishment of phonetic clichés is interesting in its own right, particularly from a cultural and sociolinguistic perspective, its usefulness for forensic linguistics is limited as it is not too reliable and frequently removed from actual dialect features.

What one requires for forensic purposes is a description of the delimiting characteristics within a set of dialects. It is even more satisfactory if these are unique delimiting characteristics. Before looking at these, one must briefly consider the language situation in Ireland.

1.4 The division of Ireland

A basic distinction can be made between northern and southern Irish English which roughly correlates with the political division of the country (Heslinga, 1962). There are historical reasons for this division to be found in the plantation of Ulster by settlers from Lowland Scotland who started emigrating to northern Ireland in the latter half of the seventeenth century after the Cromwellian defeat of the Irish and the subsequent large-scale land confiscation and redistribution among willing British craftsmen, traders and farmers, indeed not infrequently as a reward for mercenary service (Moody and Martin, 1967; Beckett, 1966). These origins of northern Irish English are to be seen most clearly in the variety known as Ulster Scots (Gregg, 1972) still spoken in rural parts of Antrim and to some extent in the centre of the province, especially in county Tyrone. The south of the country was unaffected by Scottish immigration and the varieties of English which developed there stem from the first forms of English brought to the east coast of Ireland in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries and which showed features of south-western Middle English (Hickey, in press). A later wave of Anglicisation of the south set in in the seventeenth with more settlers from England (though not from Scotland) as a result again of land confiscation and banishment of most of the native Irish to the poorer and less fertile west of the country. Given the linguistic divide which separates north and south in Ireland, I will treat the features of these areas separately with an ensuing consideration of possible mixed accents.
2 Features of Southern Irish English

2.1 Plosivisation of dental fricatives

A fricative realisation of the initial sounds in *think* and *this* is very much an exception in the South of Ireland. Instead the sounds are manifested as dental stops, i.e. [t] and [d] respectively. This applies to all but a few varieties of the South which may go further, so to speak, and use alveolar stops at the beginning of such words as *think* and *this*.

This alveolar realisation is quite stigmatised in the South and rural speakers are frequently ridiculed by imitating their speech using alveolar rather than dental stops, e.g. [tɪŋk] and [dɪs] for [ʈɪŋk] and [ɖɪs] (Filppula, 1991). The ability of speakers to imitate this clearly shows that they make a distinction between a dental and an alveolar place of articulation.5

The dental stop realisation of /θ/ and /ð/ may well be a contact phenomenon going back to Irish (Bliss, 1972) where the two coronal plosives are realised dentally, i.e. /t/ and /d/ are manifested phonetically as [t] and [d] respectively as in tá ‘is’ [ʈαː] and dún ‘castle’ [dʊn]. Recall in this connection that there was considerable Irish-English bilingualism up to the late nineteenth century before the radical decline in the numbers of Irish speakers (Bliss, 1976, 1977). Hence the suspicion that many features of Irish English derive from contact phenomena would seem to be founded.

The obvious plosivisation of English dental fricatives leads to the frequently found but erroneous statement that Irish English is characterised by dentalisation. This is an observation which shows typical underdifferentiation on the part of external observers. I repeat that there is a clearly audible difference between [t] and [t] for speakers of Irish English, i.e. pairs like *thank* and *tank*, *thinker* and *tinker* are by no means homophones for the majority of the Irish.

2.2 Lenition of /t/

The normal alveolar stops of English have a further characteristic which is particularly Irish. In weak positions they are reduced to fricatives. The sound thus produced is an apico-alveolar fricative which can, following a convention introduced in Hickey (1984a), be transcribed by placing a superscript caret below the relevant stop symbol, giving for instance [t] as in *put* [pʊt]. The fricativisation of alveolar stops does not apply to dental stops, i.e. to those sounds which correspond to dental fricatives in mainland English, so that the contrast of word final and intervocalic /θ/ # /t/ in standard English is realised as [t] # [t] as in *both* [bəʊt] # *boot* [buːt].

Recall that lenition is a weakening of articulation. For consonants it manifests itself in the tendency to either become voiced, if originally voiceless, or fricatives, if originally plosives; combinations of these two developments are also attested. As a general phonetic feature lenition is part of the makeup of the sound system of Irish and has spilt over into Irish English, most probably due to sustained language contact.

In Irish English lenition is seen most clearly in the weakening of alveolar stops /t/ and /d/ to fricatives. The resulting segments are apico-alveolar fricatives, that is they are formed by using the tip of the tongue as active articulator and are thus clearly distinguished from the fricatives /s/ and /z/ which have the tongue blade as active articulator. This can be seen with the minimal pair: *kiss* # *kit*. 
Note further that the [t] sound is not a flap which is an uncontrolled ballistic movement. [t] is definitely not an affricate either (stop followed by fricative and in German /ts/, English /tʃ/), but a controlled fricative articulation with the tongue tip as active articulator. Bear in mind that t-lenition would appear to be confined to southern Irish English and not to be found in either mainland English (with the exception of Scouse in Liverpool) or extra-territorial varieties of the language.

A word now on the phonotactics of the [t] sound. It occurs in intervocalic position or between a vowel and pause, i.e. word finally. These are positions of weakening as the consonant is not flanked by a further consonant on either side. Hence a preceding or following consonant blocks this lenition, fact [fækt], hitlist [hɪtlɪst] where the [t] is both released and non-released respectively but in both cases still a stop.

Bearing in mind the search for unique delimiting characteristics for a dialect one should remark that while dentalisation is not exclusively Irish (it occurs in forms of American English, notably urban Black English in the north-east of the United States), the combination with t-lenition is quite unique.

As the dental plosives are frequent and instances of t-lenition are common, the features should be identifiable in the shortest stretch of speech, e.g. in a brief telephone warning. However, given the restricted frequency range of telephone lines, the acoustic difference between the higher frequency /s/ and the somewhat lower frequency [t] may not be clear but the point for the identification of an Irish accent is whether /t/ in weak position is realised as an identifiable fricative or not.

2.3 Realisation of <wh>

In general one can say that Irish English is a conservative variety of English. Those features which it has developed independently are by and large due to contact with Irish over the centuries as has just been pointed out. One of the conservative features which is both acoustically prominent and statistically frequent in Irish English speech is the use of a voiceless approximant [ʍ] for /w/ in those words spelt with wh (Hickey, 1984b). As an identification feature this is of little value as it is so common among other varieties of English, e.g. in Scottish English or many forms of American English and was still found in older varieties of RP according to phoneticians active early in the present century like Daniel Jones.

2.4. Realisation of /l/

A less obvious characteristic of Irish English is the lack of a velarised /l/ in syllable-final position. Here Irish English has the same alveolar allophone which it has in syllable-initial position. This applies to the whole of the country, north and south, with the possible exception of truly bilingual speakers (with Irish and English) who may have a velarised [l] as a transfer phenomenon from Irish, e.g. in like [laɪk] as /l/ before the diphthong /ai/ is always velar in Irish (Hickey, 1986a).

2.5 Phonological processes

So far I have considered the realisation of individual segments in Irish English. There
are, however, a number of phonological processes which could be used to identify speakers. These may not be registered by non-linguists reporting on an accent but can be easily ascertained if a stretch of speech is examined by a linguist.

1) Epenthesis. The first process to consider is *epenthesis*, more strictly *vowel epenthesis*. This consists of the insertion of an unstressed centralised vowel in so-called heavy clusters, i.e. those which consist of two sonorants. Examples of such clusters are /rm/ and /lm/. A condition on epenthesis which may apply is that the sonorants in question not be homorganic. Thus one has pronunciations like [frɪlm], [æəm] and possibly [aiən] if the prohibition on epenthesis in homorganic clusters does not apply.

2) Metathesis. The second major process found in Irish English phonology is *metathesis*. This consists of switching around the linear sequence of two sounds. The motivation for this historically may be the avoidance of heavy clusters as with epenthesis. Examples of commonly metathesised forms are pattern [pætən], modern [mɒdən], lantern [læntən]. The syllables of metathesised segments are never stressed and contain short vowels, preferably in combination with /t/ as in *secretary* [sɛkərəti].

The appearance of metathesis in Irish English is something which can be traced back to Irish where it is abundantly attested both in the history of the language and in present-day variation.

2.6 Preference for pronunciation variants

If general segmental or suprasegmental characteristics are indecisive in speaker identification one could imagine having recourse to other areas of phonology, for instance, to that of pronunciation variants. An example of what I mean would be the preferred use of a stress pattern such as the initial stress in *harass* and *harassment* as opposed to [hɔˈræs] and [hɔˈræsmənt].

This is a simple instance. There are, however, variants which can be attributed to a general preference in Irish English. Here are two concrete examples of what I mean. Irish English prefers /s/ to /ʃ/ in those words where this variation is tolerated. Thus one has appreciate, issue, Christian with /s/ as opposed to /ʃ/. Where voiced and voiceless sibilants can vary there is a preference for voiceless variants. This results in pronunciations like *version* [vəːʃən] and *parse* [paːs] although proper names tend be lexicalised so that one has *Asia* [əˈsɪə] rather than [eɪʃə] for [eɪʃə].

2.7 Vowel quality in Irish English

A feature of Irish English which is intuitively recognised by the non-Irish is vowel quality. Two general statements can be made about Irish English vowels. The first is that there are rhotic where historical /r/ is present and the second is that they have a more monophthongal quality than those of RP-like variants of mainland English. In addition the post-vocalic /r/ is velarised giving a ‘dark’ quality to many syllables as in *hurt, dark, cork*. This velarisation of /r/ is quite distinct from the retroflexion found in the north.
3 Features of Northern Irish English

The term ‘Northern Irish English’ refers to the varieties spoken in the state of Northern Ireland established with the partition of the country in 1921 (Moody and Martin, 1967). The term Ulster is used synonymously by many to refer to Northern Ireland. However, Ulster is the name of an historical province in Ireland which comprises nine counties, only six of which are contained in the state of Northern Ireland, hence the further term ‘the six counties’ used by the southern Irish in preference to the official English designation ‘Northern Ireland’. The remaining three counties of Ulster, Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan are part of the Republic of Ireland though linguistically there are quite close to Northern Ireland in the characteristics which hold for their varieties of English.

Turning to a linguistic description of Northern Irish English one can begin by a general statement on accent. Whatever about the segmental features of Northern Irish English, it has a very distinctive prosody. This manifests itself most clearly in the fall in pitch on stressed syllables (Jarman and Cruttenden, 1976), the highlighting of which is realised in the South (and in most varieties of English for that matter) by lengthening of the stressed syllable. It is this fall which is probably responsible for the lowering of short high front vowels as in: He was hit by a bullet. This feature is so salient that it alone can suffice for the recognition of a Northern Irish speaker.

For the segmental speech of speakers from Northern Ireland the most easily identifiable features are:

1. retroflexion of /r/
2. lowering of short front vowels
3. lack of distinctive length differences with vowels
4. fronting of /u/ to [u]

3.1. Retroflexion of /r/

Let me start with that most standard of dialect indicators among varieties of English, post-vocalic /r/. Northern Irish English is clearly a rhotic dialect and this feature is one which those speakers who attempt to approach something like RP retain longest.

Syllable-final /r/ is different in both parts of the country so that one can tell a speaker just on his/her pronunciation of the word north alone. While in the southern /r/ is velarised in post-vocalic position, it is retroflex in the north so that one has [nɔrθ] in the south and [nɔɾθ] in Ulster.

3.2. Vowel length

As mentioned above Northern Irish English has its origins in the language which the planters from Lowland Scotland brought with them from the seventeenth century onwards. A feature which is shared with many varieties of Scottish English to this day is the lack of contrastive length in the vowel system. This applies in particular to those forms of English in the North known as Ulster Scots. Although the latter is largely a rural form of English the lack of distinctive vowel length which characterises it is also found...
in urban varieties of English in the north. The distinction between vowels is thus reduced to a matter of quality so that a pair of words like *bid* and *bead* are distinguished by a more central versus a more peripheral vowel articulation. In those cases where quality considerations are indifferent homophony often arises as it *cot* and *caught* both [kɔt].

The vowel shortening only applies to high and mid vowels. All short low vowels are lengthened in accordance with the phonetically open nature of such segments. This results in pronunciations like [baːn] for *ban*, [baːg] for *bag*, etc. with a long central low vowel.

3.3. Fronting of /u/

A further feature of Scottish origin in Northern Irish English is the fronting of /u/ to a mid high vowel [uː]. In the case of /uː/ one has shortening which leads to homophones like *fool* and *full*, both [fʊl] phonetically.

Religious affiliation and accent. Unfortunately for the forensic linguist there are no single differences between accents of Catholics and Protestants in the North, ie there are no generally accepted shibboleths which could be used by third parties for linguistic identification. Nonetheless tendencies have been noted which are restricted to one of the two religious communities. Todd (1984:167f.) remarks that Catholics have frequent palatalization of laterals, nasals and of the sequence /hj/ (= [ɕ]) along with lip-rounding and vowel elision. Of these features the palatalization can be viewed as a quasi-prosodic transfer from Irish which has become established in the community with Republican sympathies.

4 Mixed accents

After this review of both northern and southern Irish English features the question may be legitimately asked: are there instances of mixed accents, of north and south or of either of these and mainland English accents? The answer to this is not so easy. Perhaps one can start by some general remarks on accents and speaker attitudes.

In the south, RP-like accents are not generally regarded as worthy of emulation. They are associated with those members of Irish society with an English orientation, normally members of the upper middle class, traditionally known as West Brits. In fact there is a common ridiculing of RP-like accents as *grand* with a retracted /aː/ vowel as opposed to the normal centralised /aː/ of Irish English [grand] (Hickey, 1986b).

While speakers with RP-like accents are regarded as lacking an Irish orientation those with a northern accent are seen as not associating themselves with the Republican south and so northern accents are not considered worthy of emulation either, despite the fact that the counties Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan which share many linguistic features with the north are located within the Republic. Their status is, however, peripheral for most southerners, particularly for urbanites as those counties contain no cities.

The status of southern accents in the north is a somewhat different matter. For Protestants it is of no relevance but for many Catholics, particularly in the West of the province around Derry, southern accents have a certain prestige and some features may be adopted or at least a toning down of Ulster characteristics may be observed.
5 Negative definition: The absence of mainland English features

Up to this I have been considering the particular features of Irish English. There is, however, another approach to speaker identification which could be useful on occasions. This concerns the absence of features which are common in many varieties of mainland English. Let me single out three of these to illustrate what I mean.

1) Glottalisation of /t/. The realisation of /t/ as a glottal stop [ʔ] is a long recognised feature of popular London speech but it is also widely found elsewhere in Britain for intervocalic or word-final /t/. This does not hold for Irish English either in the north or south. The south has a fricative [ɾ] in these positions while the north frequently has a flap, cf. butter [bʌtə] versus [bʌtə]. There are no corresponding forms like [bʌʔə] or [ɾəʔə], i.e. glottalisation is not a permissible manifestation of lenition in Irish English with the possible exception of lower class urban varieties in the east of the country, notably in Dublin.

2) H-dropping. This is a phenomenon which is regarded as endemic in all kinds of urban mainland English nowadays. It is totally lacking in Irish English both in the north and the south, the two varieties maintaining all instances of historical /h/. In connection with this topic one should note that hypercorrection is not common in Irish English, at least not of the kind found frequently in mainland English, such as pronouncing /h/ in words like hour or adding it as in attested cases like [hɔvˈviəsla]. Nor is the distribution of /u/ and /v/ a problem for the Irish as the /ʌ/ is present in all those lexical instances in which it occurs in standard English.

3) Linking and intrusive /r/. These two features are typical of non-rhotic dialects of English. The first is a sandhi phenomenon where a final /r/ is treated as intervocalic if followed by a vowel-initial word as in far away. Intrusive /r/ is paradoxical for speakers of non-rhotic English as it contradicts just this quality. It is often quasi-lexicalised as in words like idea and China. It is not to be found in Irish English, northern or southern, where the only instances of /r/ are those which are historically justified.

6 Conclusion

All the points mentioned so far concern the phonological makeup of Irish English. Of course features from other linguistic levels could equally be considered in establishing dialect affiliation. In morphology one could mention phenomena such as the distinct form for the second person plural, either ye or yous. In syntax there are very many deviant constructions which derive from the attempts of the Irish to render the aspectual distinctions of their former native language in English. Thus structures like He’s after stealing the money or The gun went off on me show both the Irish perfective aspect (he has just completed something, namely to steal money) as well as the expression of the relevance of an action to an individual, realised by the preposition on followed by a personal pronoun. However, it should be sufficient to examine the phonetic qualities of speech closely to attain firm linguistic evidence for identification of putative speakers of Irish English and furthermore to help localising speakers as from the north or south of the Ireland.
Notes

1. This was still used up to at least the fifties as seen in the well-known monograph by Henry (1957).

2. This view may in fact be a folk etymology. The word can be interpreted as meaning ‘land of the Ewerni (Iverni)’ an early Celtic tribe in Ireland (Lockwood, 1975:16f.).

3. Some authors like Henry (1977) would like to distinguish between Hiberno-English as the set of varieties of English which derive from originally Irish (i.e. Gaelic) speakers and Anglo-Irish as the set which stems from those speakers who originate in England or Scotland in the case of English in Northern Ireland. One of the major difficulties with this distinction is that the second term is already used for a number of purposes outside of linguistics and is not entirely neutral.

4. Descriptions of southern Irish English from varying standpoints and from different times are available in Barry (1982), Bliss (1984), Hogan (1927, 1934) and Sullivan (1976). Collections of articles are to be found in Dolan (1990), Harris, Little and Singleton (1986), O’Baill (1985) and O’Muirithe (1977) while Aldus (1976) provides a comprehensive though now somewhat out-of-date bibliography.

5. There is in fact a common belittling reference to such a rural speaker as ‘a [dɪs], [dɛm] and [dɔz] man’.


References

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