Lenition in Irish English

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Abstract. Consonant weakening (lenition) is a feature of both Irish and Irish English which reaches back far in the histories of both languages. Its manifestation and its system status is quite different in both cases so that any simple transfer theory will fail to account for lenition in Irish English. The present paper will be primarily concerned with describing the phonological conditions for consonant weakening in Irish English and with putting it in the broader perspective of similar phenomena in other varieties of English and finally with addressing the question of its genesis within Irish English, above all in the south of the country. Attention with be paid to its distribution in urban and rural varieties of the Republic and to its extent in colloquial and less-received registers of Irish English.

Introduction

There is general acceptance that the term ‘lenition’ refers to phonetic weakening, i.e. an increase in segmental sonority diachronically or occasionally as a morphological device as in Irish and other Celtic languages. Lenition is a phenomenon which is common in many languages which usually manifests itself as a shift from stop to fricative or a shift from voiceless to voiced with obstruents. Lenition normally consists of several steps and historically a language may exhibit a shift from stop to zero via a number of intermediary stages. Clean cases of lenition are represented by say the Germanic sound shift (stop to fricative), West Romance consonantal developments such as lenition in Castilian Spanish or more dialectal phenomena such as the *gorgia toscana* (Rohlfs, 1949; Ternes, 1977) or lenition in Canary Spanish (Oftedal, 1986).

If one now looks at English in this light then one finds that lenition applies to alveolars in various varieties. These represent a favoured phonetic site for lenition. The shift of labial stops to velars is almost unknown and velar fricatives, if present, are retentions of sounds which died out in the standard in the early modern period as in the case of forms of Scottish and Ulster English.

Alveolars in English can basically undergo three types of alternation summarized below, the general terms indicate sets of varieties within which these realizations are frequently found.

(1)  
- Received Pronunciation: Plosive
  - American English: Tap
  - Cockney: Glottal stop
  - Southern Irish English: Fricative

It is difficult to say whether these represent lenition in the classical sense. Glottalling involves the removal of the oral gesture from a segment, and in the case of pre- or
post-glottalization can indeed be a case of reinforcement inasmuch as it adds a phonetic gesture to a segment already present. Tapping is lenition as it is a temporal reduction in the articulation of a segment. As an uncontrolled ballistic movement it is shorter than the alveolar stops which it replaces.

There are further differences between tapping, glottaling and frication. Tapping can only occur with areolars (labials and velars are excluded). Furthermore, it is only found in word-internal position and only in immediately post-stress environments. As tapping is phonetically an uncontrolled articulation it cannot occur word-finally (sandhi situations excluded) and cannot initiate a stress syllable.

Glottalling can in principle apply to labials, alveolars and velars but for those varieties of English best known for it, i.e. popular London, it is most characteristic of alveolars as in bottle [bɒ?], butter [bʌ?ə]. For the matter at hand I will not be concerned with tapping or pre-/post-glottalization but concentrate on the third alteration in alveolar stop realization, frication.

1 Lenition and fortition

Now lenition often goes hand in hand with fortition. This can be due to chain effects in a set of sound changes. Thus in the Germanic sound shift, voiceless stops are fricated but voiced stops are fortified to voiceless ones seeing as how this slot became empty on the shift of the original voiceless stops to fricatives.

Independent of chain effects, the weakening of segments in favoured sites for lenition can be mirrored by fortition in corresponding strengthening environments. Consider the following phenomenon in this connection.

A peculiarity of Irish English syllable onsets concerns the process known as yod deletion (general: Wells, 1982:206ff.; Irish English: Hickey, 1984a). Here the yod before long stressed /u:/ is dropped under certain conditions. Two factors are in the main responsible for determining yod deletion: place of articulation and stress placement. Yod is never deleted after labials or velars. When it is deleted after alveolars then only where these immediately precede the vowel of a stressed syllable.

(2) a few [fju:]  
   b cue [kju:]  
   c venue [ˈvɛnju:]  
   d news [nuz]  
   e lute [lu:t]

Assuming that the principle of maximal onset favours minimal sonority before the stressed vowels then the deletion of the glide /j/ in the initial cluster C + /j/ represents a decrease in sonority. Note that yod is not deleted in Irish English (in contrast to varieties of American English) after alveolar stops as it is assibilated to /ʃ/ or /ʒ/ (tune [tʃu:n], duke [dʒu:k]) and there is no process of sibilant deletion in Irish English.

Now if yod deletion is motivated by pre-stress fortition then it would be deleted in unstressed syllables. But this is clearly not the case.

(3) a numerous [ˈnjuːrəʊs]  
   b numerical [njuˈmɛrəkəl]
c nutrients [ˈnʌtrɪənts]
d nutrition [ˈnjuːtʃən]

These forms would appear to vindicate the view that unstressed syllables have a global realisation rule for yod which is independent of position relative to the stressed syllable of the word.

2 Weakening of alveolars

The fortition of stressed syllable onsets is correlated by the lenition of stressed syllable codas. This is what I term mirror-image sonority. That this is valid in principle in Irish English phonology can be shown by looking at a further phenomenon which is peculiar to this variety of English. Alveolar stops are not always realised as stops. In certain positions a fricative realisation is found. This involves apico-alveolar fricatives, viz. segments which agree entirely with /t/ and /d/ except that they are continuant. For this I use the symbols [\] and [\] respectively (Hickey, 1984b) as the International Phonetic Association has no symbols for these sounds; note that they are firmly distinguished from the lamino-alveolar fricatives /s/ and /z/.

(4) a kit [kɪt]  
b kiss [kɪs]

Note further that fricative articulation where the structural description for its realisation is met is obligatory, contrast this situation with that of post-stress dental fricatives where stop or fricative realization is optional for many speakers of more standard varieties of English in Ireland.

When one examines the distribution of [t] and [d] in Irish English closely one can establish that it is primarily determined by stress placement.

(5) a top [tɒp]  
b pot [pɒt]  
c Italy ['ɪtəli]  
d Italian ['ɪtəliən]  
e tight ['taɪt]  
f titanic ['tætɪnɪk]

While with the forms in (5a) and (5b) one could argue that the distribution of stops and fricatives is determined by position in a word that in (5c) shows that position relative to the vowel of the stressed syllable is the determining factor.

Note that fricative realisation of alveolar stops is not restricted to a position in the coda of a stressed syllable as one might imagine from the forms in (5b) and (5c) above. Any alveolar stop which is not in the onset of a stressed syllable and which matches the weakening environment is realised as a fricative.

(6) a titillate [ˈtɪlɪteɪt]  
b assimilate [əˈsɪmɪleɪt]
2.1 Conditions for weakening

Now the conditions which govern $t$-lenition involve two parameters which constitute a weak environment. *Weakness* in Irish English is defined by position relative to stressed nucleus as mentioned above and secondly by the sonority values of flanking segments. What is necessary is an open environment to the left and right. ‘Open’ must be interpreted here in a phonological sense so that stops and fricatives are regarded as non-open, whereas sonorants may classify as open.

(7) a pact $[pækt]$  
b past $[pa:st]$  
c pant $[pænt]$  
d pelt $[pelt]$  
e part $[pa:ɔt]$ ~ $[pa:ɔt]$

The weakest environment in Irish English is that of vowels or zero. This accounts for put $[pʊt]$ and putting $[pʊtɪŋ]$ and would furthermore account for the differential behaviour of sonorants, i.e. /r/ which does not involve oral closure may have lenition but /n/ and /l/ are excluded from this on the grounds of alveolar contact during their articulation: pert $[pɔrt]~[pɔrt]$ but pent $[pɛnt]$ and pelt $[pɛlt]$.

**Syllable location.** For $t$ to be lenited it must be located in a syllable coda. This excludes it in obvious cases like *tin*. Furthermore with many speakers for $t$ to be lenited it must be located in a post-stress position. For there it is not sufficient to specify simply that it should not immediately precede a stressed syllable (i.e. be part of its onset) as pronunciations such as *litigation* $[ˈlɪtɪɡeɪʃn]$ (*$[ˈlɪtɪɡeɪʃn]$) attest. In this case and in words like *Italy* $[ɪtəlɪ]$ the /t/ forms the coda of one syllable and the onset of the following syllable. Given the shortness of the present paper I will not discuss the question of ambisyllabicity in any detail here. Suffice it to say that the /t/ in *Italy* is ambisyllabic (given the preceding short [i] which cannot on its own constitute a syllable rhyme in English) and that ambisyllabicity is not enough to block $t$-lenition (*Italy*) but pre-stress position often is (*litigation*).

**Phonotactics.** One should furthermore remark that $t$-lenition is governed by the phonotactics of Irish English in general. Here as in other varieties of English then is a prohibition on sequences of two fricatives. Instances where the restriction on two fricatives is flouted in present-day English can be seen in the following examples.

(8) a sphere; sphinx  
b fifth; fifths; heaves

However in (8a) one is dealing with classical loanwords and in (8b) there is a morpheme boundary between the fricatives in the syllable-coda of each word.

The process of yod absorption discussed above leads to phonetic affricates as in *attune* $[əˈtʌn]$. The stop onset of this complex segment does not experience lenition even if in terms of stress it meets the structural description of $t$-lenition because of the
superordinate phonotactic prohibition on sequences of two fricatives as can be seen from a word like saturation which has the realization [sætʃu'ıːəʃən] and not *[sætʃu'ıːəʃən].

**Syllable sequences.** When remarking on word pairs like kit and kiss it was stated that [t] and [s] are clearly distinct in Irish English. While this is true, the presence of [s] can affect the realization of /t/ as [t]. The conditioning is as follows. If the syllable immediately /t/ in a weak environment begins with /s/ (but not another fricative) then t-lenition is blocked for many speakers. Consider the following instances in which there is a seemingly inexplicable blocking of t-lenition in the first two words but not in the third despite identical stress placement and weakening environment.

(9) a community [kə'mjuːnɪtɪ]  
    b solicitor [sə'listər], *[sə'listər]  
    c obesity [o'baɪsɪtɪ], *[o'baɪsɪtɪ]  
    d pivoted [pɪ'ved]

This is a type of allophonic dissimilation which is widely attested in other languages. In English there are instances such as Latin purpura which is borrowed as purpel in Old English. Other phenomena such as Grassmann’s Law in Sanskrit which prohibits two aspirated consonants in the same lexical root can be seen as parallel cases.

### 2.2 Lenition as a cline

Finally one should note that lenition is in fact a cline of phonetic weakening. For the supra-regional variety of Southern Irish English it encompasses only one sound [t]. However in more colloquial urban varieties of the east coast (including Dublin) there are other attested points on a scale.

(10) t → t → h ~ ? → 0

   button → but → water → water → what

The removal of the oral gesture as seen in glottal realizations of /t/ can result in either a fricative or glottal stop. The latter is less frequent and practically confined to lower-class Dublin speech.

In one or two words, a lenition stage is lexicalised. Thus the colloquial pronunciation of Saturday, even with speakers who do not lenite beyond [t], is commonly [sæhərdə] (this may well have been influenced by Irish Sahairn ‘Saturday’ which has an internal [-h-]).

The particular manifestation of lenition depends not only on register or sociolinguistic factors as indicated above. It is also something which varies according to style of speech. One tends to find it less in more formal situations such as in reading or word-list styles.

### 3 Lenition from a broader perspective

Having dealt with the manifestation of t-lenition in southern Irish English let me look at it
from a broader perspective. Consider the outset of lenition in Irish. Here it chiefly consists of the frication of stops and is a morphologically conditioned phenomenon and has been for well over a millenium. The grammatical character is evident in the fact that in one and the same environment one can have a lenited or non-lenited segment, the occurrence being determined by such categories as case, number, person, etc.

Now what has happened in Irish English? Lenition has been transferred from Irish but, of course, the morphological conditioning is lacking. The result is that it appears erratically. This is the case in the Forth and Baryg material (glosses and some poems from the end of the 18th / beginning of the 19th century). There are forms to be found like bhlock for ‘black’ and brough for ‘break’ which show sporadic lenition of labials and velars.

The question which arise here is: what happens to a language variety which has defunctionalized lenition as English apparently did in Ireland during the extensive period of bilingualism before the present century? In the long term one of two situations arises: either the lenition is dropped or it is regularized. Regularization can take one of two forms: lenition is either spread across the board or it is fixed for certain words, i.e. it is lexicalised.

Consider for a moment the position in a variety of English known to have been affected by Irish English, the local dialect of Liverpool, Scouse. It is characteristic of working-class speakers to show a degree of frication of /p, t, k/ in weakening environments such as in word-final position (Knowles, 1978). Scholars such as Wells (1982) generally ascribe this to an independent development in Scouse. But one could also postulate that this is a relic of the former situation in Irish English. It is agreed that the Scouse frication is typical of that section of the community which is directly derived from Irish immigrants, furthermore the Irish immigration into the Merseyside area took place chiefly in the first half of the 19th century. This was a period in which Irish in Ireland was relatively strong (in the pre-Famine period). Furthermore the Irish who were forced to emigrate were the economically disadvantaged which is tantamount to saying the Irish speakers or poor bilinguals. The latter group would of course have spoken a variety of English which was strongly affected by their native Irish and would thus have been likely to show lenition as a transfer phenomenon.

If this is the case then why is general lenition of all stops not a characteristic of modern Irish English? Recall that in the supraregional variety of present-day Irish English lenition only applies to alveolars. The explanation could be as follows. As of 1850 when the population of native Irish speakers in Ireland had been decimated as a result of the Great Famine in the late 1840s, the position of English strengthened accordingly. With this the influence of English increased and the least resistant idiosyncratic features of Irish English can be taken to have been replaced by more standard pronunciations.

One can now account for t-lenition in Irish English. Recall that t-glottaling and t-flapping would suggest that the alveolar point of articulation represents the favoured site for weakening, at least for varieties of English.

Consider the situation with non-coronals: the lenition of /p/ to /f/ would have lead to considerable homophony as in cup ≠ cuff. T-lenition introduced a new sound but it did not lead to homophony.

The weakening of velar stops to fricatives would have introduced a new sound and but this is a process which is practically unattested for English. Those varieties which show /x/ such as Ulster Scots and forms of Scottish English have this as a relic and not an innovation as remarked above.
3.1 Feature retention and relic areas

The mention of relics would suggest classifying the Scouse situation as feature retention after the severing of ties with the source group of varieties, in this case Irish English. Now I do not want to labour the Scouse case too much, as stop frication is recessive in this variety, but it does have parallels. Here are two cases, one from English and one from German.

**The High German consonant shift.** It was long thought that the High German consonant shift started in the upper German area and spread towards the lower plains in the north. However, recent research by Theo Vennemann has shown that in fact the consonant shifts (notably affrication and devoicing) were features of the Franks who pressed into the south of Germany bringing this feature of their speech to the Germans in the more mountainous south. A later spread of standard German from the north led to the replacement of Frankish pronunciations in the north but not entirely in the south. Hence the present-day distribution is due to the superimposition of standard forms, more in the north than in the south and not to a dissemination of these features from south to north.

**Initial fricative voicing in the south of England.** The voicing of initial fricatives in the south of England which can be seen in a few standard pronunciations like *vat* and *vane* is a general feature which going on some misspellings in Old English (*uif* for *five* for instance) could reach back into the 10th century. The present-day distribution in the mid south and south west may look like an areal feature which still shows its inherited geographical distribution. However, the non-contiguous areas with initial voicing (some as far east as Kent) and the known spread of varieties from the London area without initial voicing point to a former distribution far greater than the present-day one. It is the superimposition of non-southern varieties which has disguised the original extent of initial voicing in the south of England.

3.2 Regularization of lenition

Regularization of lenition in present-day Irish English is mostly by phonetic exceptionaless (/t/ is always lenited in the appropriate environment). The supraregional variety of the south does show a degree of lexicalization of lenition as in the pronunciation /sæhde/ for *Saturday* mentioned above or in instances of stop deletion in immediately post-stress syllables as seen in /reknæiz/ for *recognize*. The latter type of weakening is of the same kind as produces syncope in words like *family*, known from most varieties of English.

The above interpretation of lenition has two advantages: it offers a sociolinguistically plausible explanation of the Scouse situation and more importantly it accounts for the situation in present-day Irish English where lenition has been maximalized to cover all instances of alveolar stops in weakening environments (basically intervocally or before a pause) and lexicalized – as /h/ – in a small number of further cases (*Saturday*).

Of course this situation does not apply to all varieties of Irish English. In urban varieties of the east coast, above of Dublin, lenition has been extended to embrace both alveolar lenition (as in the supraregional variety) and to have a manifestation as glottaling for alveolars in some instances. There is a cline involved here which is determined by social affiliation in Dublin.
(11) a middle class upwards \textit{t}-frication
b lower classes \textit{t}-frication and glottaling

(glottaling tends to occur intervocalically with \textit{t}-frication word-finally)

There would appear to be a folk perception of \textit{t}-glottaling as a feature of lower-class urban dialects of Irish English as in such caricaturing phrases as /\textit{j}ə \textit{v}ə \textit{w}ə \textit{w}ə/ for you know what I mean where less localized varieties of Irish English the interrogative would be realized as /\textit{w}ə\textit{v}ə/.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion one can say that an acceptable interpretation of lenition involves an understanding of both its function in Irish and the effect which the transfer to English has had, especially as the conditioning of Irish is, of course, absent. The treatments of this so far by scholars in the field, such as Henry and Bliss have been unsatisfactory. Henry in his 1957 monograph, \textit{An Anglo-Irish dialect of North Roscommon} is unsystematic in his description and analysis. Bliss on the other hand is simplistic in his conception of transfer. He repeatedly claims that transfer occurred on a one to one basis, sound A in Irish is transferred and substitutes sound B in English. This stance makes no reference to the status of those segments which are involved in transfer. Indeed closer inspection of transfer phenomena in Irish English shows that the process would seem to be located on a more general plane. Consider \textit{t}-lenition again for a moment. The actual sound which results from this process, an apico-alveolar fricative does not occur in Irish. How then can this be interpreted as the result of transfer? The answer lies in the generality of the phenomenon. Lenition would seem to have been carried over into English from Irish as a general phonological directive to weaken segments in favoured phonetic sites. This general directive has led in Irish English to a segment which is not present in Irish but which illustrates the same principle of lenition just as well as the instances in Irish itself, namely a weakening in the phonetic nature of segments, chiefly a shift from stop to fricative.

References

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