Dublin and Middle English

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1 Introduction

The link in the title of this paper between the capital of the Republic of Ireland and the language of the Middle English period is justified on a number of counts. Even the most cursory glance at English spoken in Dublin today reveals a variety which is quite different from other forms of urban English in the Anglophone world. And there are a number of reasons why should one examine Dublin English in the context of late medieval English, three of which are listed below.

1) Dublin English is a highly idiosyncratic variety of English which has existed separate from the mainland of Britain since the late 12th century.

2) Dublin English offers insights into historical processes which are assumed to have taken place in the history of English and where the time depth is difficult to determine.

3) As opposed to English in other parts of Ireland, there is an unbroken continuity of English in the capital from the late Middle Ages so that one can with some justification link features of the present-day urban dialect with the initial forms of English taken to Dublin.

2 The settlement of Dublin

As opposed to England which experienced a change in location with the capital city during the history of its language, in Ireland Dublin has been the political and cultural centre of the country during the entire development of Irish English. After the initial invasion in the late 12th century\(^1\), the English were quick to recognize the importance of the city in the middle of the east coast for the government of the country. Shortly after their arrival the first adventurers took possession of the city. From this time onwards (1171) the city stood under the military and political control of the English. In the early years of the conquest the linguistic landscape of Ireland was much more diversified than later. At the beginning, i.e. in the late 12th, in the 13th and 14th centuries at least four languages must be assumed for Ireland: 1) native Irish, 2) English, 3) Anglo-Norman and 4) Latin in which, beside Anglo-Norman, many documents of the cities were written (Hogan 1927: 30f.). Later on both Latin and Anglo-Norman fell into disuse. Neither language survived in a spoken form after the 15th century.
The Anglo-Normans did not participate in the founding of Dublin. The oldest references to a settlement at the mouth of the Liffey are to be found in the 2nd century A.D. (Moore 1965: 9). The main task of constructing the city was carried out by the Vikings who erected a fortification and in the first half of the 9th century several buildings (Moore 1965: 10). After their arrival in the city the Anglo-Normans did not make any significant contribution to its architectural extension. The Anglo-Normans formed a rural aristocracy which was much more interested in the land of the Irish than in their cities. The areas which they occupied were chiefly in the east and south east.

Because of its favourable position in the middle of the east coast and with the central plain as its hinterland, Dublin was able to assert itself over other urban settlements in Ireland on river estuaries. As far as English is concerned, this fact is of some importance. The city was quickly occupied by the English after its conquest; in 1171 Henry II came to Ireland and issued the Charter of Dublin in 1172 (Dooley 1972: 68ff.). The English king entertained a legal advisor, the ‘king’s lieutenant’ who resided in Dublin and who represented the interests of the king. In later centuries this position developed into that of the ‘viceroy’ who quite naturally was posted in Dublin. Because of the relatively centralised government of the time (Wallace 1973: 30) the city of Dublin increased in importance. Above all the English language was able to stabilise its standing in the city. Out of the early administration of the Anglo-Normans in the 13th and 14th centuries there developed a permanent clergy and an English or Anglo-Norman speaking middle class. Evidence for the presence of these groups is to be found in such buildings as St.Patrick’s cathedral (Ossory-Fitzpatrick 1977 [1907]: 56) and Christ Church in Dublin.

The area around Dublin, which was delimited early on, received the name ‘Pale’ (Moore 1965: 14; Curtis 1957: 245). Notwithstanding the relatively small population of Dublin it remained the centre of English in Ireland. The question as to whether Anglo-Norman or English was the language of the English in Dublin, or rather what the relationship between both languages was, is irrelevant. For the establishment of linguistic continuity among the English in the city the main concern was to what extent the English differed from the native Irish. What is noticeable in this connection is the number of decrees specifying the use of English for official purposes (Hogan 1927: 29). These decrees should be seen in connection with the re-Gaelicisation of the country which set in in the 14th and 15th centuries. The area of the Pale was not untouched by the expansion of the rebellious Irish tribal leaders (Moody and Martin, eds., 1967: 159). A military victory over Dublin was never attained. Rather what occurred was an ever increasing Gaelicisation of the originally English section of the population of Ireland and of Dublin. But this was by no means total and did not lead to a break in linguistic continuity in the capital. Some authors speak of the substitution of English in Dublin, e.g. Henry (1958: 58ff.) but the evidence which they give is the apparent swing around from a variety (seen in the main literary document from the early 14th century, the Kildare Poems) with many characteristics of the west and south-west dialects of English to one which is more reminiscent of the East Midland variety of English of the time. But this was a gradual transition and did not seem to entail a break of any kind. There is no social or political upheaval — just a recession of English influence — which might point to such a break. It is true that English in Dublin did adopt more modern forms which had become current on the mainland of Britain, for instance it has adopted (more or less) the post-Great Vowel Shift pronunciation of English vowels but this does not necessarily imply that an older variety was replaced by a newer variety. The replacement scenario would really only apply to the dialect of Forth and Baryl in the south-east of Wexford and probably to the dialect of Fingal north of Dublin.
The view, propounded by older authors, such as Leo Henry and Alan Bliss, that the history of English in Ireland divides into two periods is, however, true of the rest of the country and is supported by external factors. Up to 1601, when the English were victorious over the united Irish forces in Kinsale in the south-west of the country, the re-Gaelicisation of the country was almost complete, but with the exception of the Pale. Under the Tudors and Stuarts (Moody and Martin, eds, 1967: 174ff.) English control over Ireland was re-asserted. This entailed the introduction of new varieties of English into Ireland. With the plantations (above all in the 17th centuries, Mitchell 1976: 192ff.) new English settlers came to Ireland who did not speak the older variety of Irish English and thus contributed to its demise. For the city of Dublin, however, one can speak of a superimposition of newer strands of English. The fact that older forms of English did not die out there is evidenced by the eastern band of the country — from Dublin down to Waterford — which is to this day dialectally separate from the rest of the country.

3 Languages in medieval Ireland

Middle English and Anglo-Norman are both to be found from the beginning of the settlement of Ireland from Britain in the late 12th century. A reliable assessment of their relative weight must take into account the ethnic composition of the newcomers, their internal relations and their relative social position in Ireland. The original settlement of Ireland brought with it Welsh, Flemish, Anglo-Norman and English settlers (Cahill 1938: 160). The leaders of this group were unequivocally the Normans as these were the military superiors of the others.

The English had a greater status vis à vis the Welsh and the Flemings (also present among the newcomers) as they were the representatives of the majority language of England. Leaving Welsh and Flemish aside one is left with Anglo-Norman and Middle English in late medieval Ireland. The linguistic traces we have of these two languages allow certain conclusions as to their status in the centuries after the invasion.

The Normans were initially the superiors among the ethnic groups in Ireland but due to the fact that they settled in rural Ireland and hived themselves off from their related rulers in England, they quickly assimilated to the local Irish adopting the language of the latter, influencing this considerably in the process.

English was represented by different varieties due to the diverse regional origins of the English followers during the original invasion/settlement and this fact perhaps led to a compromise written variety arising in the 14th century which is intermediary between dialect features of various forms of Middle English.

4 Early English in Ireland

The earliest attestations of ‘Medieval Irish English’, as the language of this time is termed by older authors such as Hogan (1927: 5) and Henry (1958: 62), are contained in a manuscript in the British Museum, MS Harley 913, and are known under the title Kildare Poems (after the presumed place of composition: the county of Kildare south-west of Dublin) and for which there are editions by Wilhelm Heuser (1904) and Angela Lucas (1995) and comments in Hickey (1993). There are some 16 poems in English along with material in French and Latin. It is generally assumed that the Kildare Poems date from the early 14th century. The language of the Kildare Poems should not, however, be equated uncritically with early Dublin English. The view of the present
author is that the *Kildare Poems* were probably composed by native speaker(s) of Irish using English, for them a written H-variety. The language of the *Kildare Poems* is fairly unremarkable by Middle English standards but shows a certain amount of phonological interference from Irish (Hickey 1993).

There are two other attestations of early Irish English which are of greater relevance here. The first is the dialect of Forth and Bargy in the south-east corner of the country (Hickey 1988) and the second that of Fingal, an area immediately north of Dublin. Both dialects are highly deviant and recorded in glossaries from the later 18th / early 19th centuries and in brief literary parodies from the 17th century respectively. Again it would be beyond the scope of the present paper to go into details, suffice it to say that there are clear parallels between both Forth and Bargy and Fingal on the one hand and early attestations of Dublin English on the other. Within Dublin there are some documents which stem from municipal sources and which are useful for looking at the language of the capital before 1600 (see Henry 1958: 58–75 and Hogan 1927: 15–36) as will be discussed in the following section.

5 The conservatism of Dublin English: Phonology

The first texts for Dublin English are available from the middle of the 15th century. In all cases one is dealing with documents of the city administration. These were composed in Latin or French up to 1451 (Hogan 1927: 30; Henry 1958: 64 mentions the year 1447) and afterwards in English. These first texts show phonological characteristics which are also to be found in the dialect of Forth and Bargy. These can be listed in tabular form as follows (see Hogan 1927: 31 as well).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vowel raising before nasal + stop cluster</th>
<th>stone ‘stand’</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>Stop deletion after nasals</td>
<td>strone ‘strand’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>High vowels in unstressed position</td>
<td>folli ‘follow’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>Final devoicing of alveolars in unstressed position</td>
<td>beyont ‘beyond’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>Short vowels in open syllables2</td>
<td>nose /noz/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.</td>
<td>Affricates after high vowels in certain words</td>
<td>byge /bɪdʒ/ ‘buy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f.</td>
<td>The substitution of [ʍ] by [φ]</td>
<td>fite [fɪt] ‘white’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g.</td>
<td>Non- etymological [h] in syllable initial position</td>
<td>hall ‘all’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i.</td>
<td>The raising of Middle English /e/ to /i/</td>
<td>tin ‘ten’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These features are typical of Irish English in the period before the zenith of re-Gaelicisation at the end of the 16th century. All of them are to be found in the *Kildare Poems* and most of them are also contained in the documents of Forth and Bargy (with the exception of (e) Short vowels in open syllables (Hickey 1997a) and (h) Non-etymological /h/ in syllable initial position). The latter feature could be due to an Anglo-Norman scribal tradition (and which is responsible for spellings like *hour* and *honour* in Modern English). But this does not explain the occurrence of non-etymological *h* in initial position with a quantifier (the Anglo-Norman examples are confined to nouns). The feature in (a) probably owes its origin the lengthening of Old English short vowels before clusters of a nasal and a stop with later deletion of the latter but there are instances — most notably *mon* ‘man’ — in which the raising took place without a following cluster. Feature (f) is really a retention of the afflicated stem-final consonant which derives from the Old English form.

The attestations for the dialect of Fingal, which is much closer to Dublin than
Forth and Bargy, are too few and too uncertain to be examined with regard to the nine features just listed. Nonetheless, three features are to be found in texts representing Fingal speech which definitely show the Irish character of the dialect.

(2) g. The substitution of [w] by [φ]
j. The substitution of [s] by [ʃ] in the environment of high vowels
k. The fortition of dental fricatives: /θ, ð/ to stops (dental or alveolar)

The two last features are worthy of comment here. The substitution of [s] by [ʃ] and the fortition of the dental fricatives /θ, ð/ would appear to be among the most conservative features of Irish English and hence go back to the medieval settlement along the east coast of Ireland. Both these features are attested for the early 14th century in the Kildare Poems, at least if one assumes that spellings like fallyt (= fellip) ‘falls’, growit (= growip) ‘grows’, sayt (= sayp) ‘says’ represent the closing of the dental fricative to a stop. Again from the Kildare Poems one can quote forms like grasshe (= grass), hashe (= has) (Heuser 1904: 74) which indicate that the narrow-grooved [s] was replaced by the wide-grooved [ʃ], here indeed after the a low vowel. Later this would appear to have been particularly common in the environment of high vowels (and is linked to the realisation of palatalised /s/ in Irish) but for the early period there would not seem to have been phonotactic conditioning on the shift in articulation.

The ubiquity of these two features is confirmed by their early appearance in literary parody: stereotypes of varieties of Irish English have a long pedigree and their occurrence can be traced back to the late 16th century, to Richard Stanyhurst’s Description of Ireland in Holinshed’s Chronicles (1586). No less writers than Shakespeare and Ben Jonson attempted to represent Irish English in their plays. Shakespeare did so in the figure of Captain Macmorris in the Four Nations Scene in Henry V (see Shakespeare, 1995), whereas Jonson dedicated a small piece to a (ridiculous) portrayal of Irish English, The Irish Masque at Court (1613/1616), see Jonson (1969). The basis for his linguistic characterisation are certain features of Irish English which had become established by then and indeed had become obvious to English observers (which would imply that they were of considerable vintage to have become stereotypical of Irish English outside of the country). For instance virtually every instance of /s/ is written as sh, i.e. [ʃ], and all cases of initial wh- [w] are rendered orthographically as ph- or f-, deriving from Irish /φ/ [φ]. Jonson also indicates all ambidental fricatives as t which stands for either [t] or [ɾ] (it is not possible to say which going on his orthographic evidence).

(3) For chreeshes sayk, phair ish te king?
   ‘For Christ’s sake, where is the king?’
   Peash, ant take heet, vat tou shaysh, man.
   ‘Peace, and take heed, what thou sayest, man’

The Irish Masque at Court

Although the eleven features of the first period, given in (1) and (2) together, did not necessarily continue into the second period there were certainly other features, above all in the area of vowels, which can be guessed at from prescriptive remarks on Dublin English in the 18th century. At the time at which the glossaries of Forth and Bargy were being collected (late 18th century) Thomas Sheridan (the father of the playwright Richard
Brinsley Sheridan) wrote a grammar — *A rhetorical grammar of the English language* (1781) — in which he also comments on the pronunciation of English in Dublin (by the middle classes). From his remarks one can construe a picture of at least the more salient of the features of the Dublin dialect of this period. These are established conservative features of Dublin English which Sheridan compares to other more recent characteristics of English. As one is obviously dealing with dialectal conservatism it would seem to be justified to use this to project back into the period before the 18th century. In (3) below some vowel values are offered which illustrate the kind of features which Sheridan remarked upon.

(4)  a.  IE /a:/  SBE /ɛ:/  matron
    b.  " /æ:/ + r/  " /a:/  part
    c.  " /aɪ/  " /ai/  time
    d.  " /ɛː/  " /iː/  leave

(IE = Irish English; SBE = Southern British English)

5.1 The Great Vowel Shift and Dublin English

The examples in (4) show that the Great Vowel Shift was only partially implemented by the late 18th century. Indeed if one looks at Irish loan-words such as *bácús* /bækəs/ ‘bakehouse’ and *faoitín* /fəitɨn/ ‘whiting’ one can recognise a stage of English in Ireland which was the source for these loans and which had no trace of the vowel shift.

These considerations lead to a phenomenon which is of significance in the entire history of English in Ireland: this is the historical layering which led to more mainstream pronunciations being introduced over time. In some cases lexico-stylistic variants developed with the older pronunciations ranging on the lower end of a scale of vernacularisation. An example of this is provided by the words *owl’* /aul/ and *bowl’* /baul/. These are survivals of older pronunciations which show a back offglide [u] to the velarised [h] and the deletion of the post-sonorant stop. In present-day Dublin English these forms have additional meanings which set them off from the connotationally neutral *old* and *bold* respectively.

(5)  a.  The bowl’ Charlie  ‘The bold Charlie (with sneaking admiration)’
    b.  The owl’ car  ‘The old car (said affectionately)’

Under (6) the more salient features of present-day Dublin English, some of which can be quite definitely traced to the varieties of English spoken in the capital after the arrival of the first settlers there in the late 12th century are listed.

(6)  1)  vowel breaking, vowel nasalisation
    clean  [kliːən],  fool  [fuəl]
    2)  extreme /au/-fronting, /ai/-centralisation
    town  [tuən];  time  [təjən]
    3)  dental / alveolar stops in the THINK and THIS lexical sets
    4)  post-nasal alveolar deletion:  pound  [pewən]
    5)  *t*-glottaling as a stage in lenition:  city  [stɪʔi],  [stɪhi]
6) /ɔ/ in the STRUT lexical set, e.g. Dublin [dʊblɪn]
7) Deletion of syllable-final /r/ (recessive nowadays)

For reasons of space these features cannot be discussed in detail (see the treatment from a contemporary perspective in Hickey 1999). However, a couple are especially relevant to the theme of the present article. The breaking of long vowels into sequences of two syllables with a /j/ or /w/ as hiatus (depending on whether the input is a front or back vowel) is a feature which is already attested for the Dublin municipal records from the 15th century. Henry (1958: 70) mentions this without, however, building the bridge to contemporary Dublin English. The deletion of post-nasal alveolar stops is also attested at the earliest stage of Irish English and would appear to have been typical of medieval Irish English in general (it is also found in the records for Forth and Bargy from the early 19th century).

The continuing existence of /ɔ/ is evidence of the independence of Dublin English from more mainstream forms of southern British English which began to show an unrounding and lowering of Early Modern English short /ɔ/ by the mid-17th century.

6. Morphology

There are a few conservative morphological features in Dublin English. The most prominent is the retention of an older second person plural nominative pronoun — ye — which is quite acceptable in the supra-regional standard of the south of Ireland.

(7) Second person plural nominative pronoun ye
Also: Youse < you + {S} and yez < ye + {S}

On the other hand both the form youse deriving from you plus the regular plural ending {S} and the combined form yez from ye plus {S} are stigmatised and more typical of strongly local varieties of English in the capital. Youse and yez can be taken to be productive formations reached by morphological analysis of other regular plurals. In historical forms of mainland English these seem not to be attested and, for instance, do not occur in such extensive corpora of late Middle / early Modern English correspondence as that compiled by Terttu Nevalainen and Helena Raumolin-Brunberg (see Nevalainen 1997).

7. Syntax

The most striking syntactic characteristics of Dublin English are from the area of aspect (Kallen 1989, Hickey 2000). At least three types can be distinguished:

1) Immediate perfective
   He’s after breaking his leg. after + V-ing
   Tá sé tar éis a chos a briseadh.
   [is he after his leg COMP breaking]

2) Resultative perfective
   a. They have the boat built. O + PP
   b. Tá an bád tógáilte acu.
[is the boat built at-them]

c. They have built a boat with the money. PP + O

3) Habitual perfective

a. She does be worrying about the children. do + be + V-ing
b. She bees worrying about the children. bees + V-ing

Type 1) is obviously a calque on Irish and can be omitted from the present discussion. Type 2a) would appear to have two sources. On the one hand the word order Object plus Past Participle corresponds to that of earlier forms of English; on the other hand it is also that of Irish (see 2b) so that we are probably dealing with a case of convergence. Note that in present-day Dublin English there is conscious contrast between a word-order with the past participle before the object and one after it. Semantically, the order ‘object plus past participle’ implies than an action was planned and carried out — hence the term ‘resultative perfective’ — the order ‘past participle plus object’ does not imply such a distinction and is aspectually unmarked as in other varieties of English.

The habitual perfective is an established feature of all vernacular varieties of Irish English. The differences between varieties lies in its manifestation of which there are two forms. The first is seen in (3a) where an inflected form of do is followed by be and a continuous form of the lexical verb in question. This structure may well have been inherited from earlier varieties of English as it has well-known parallels in south-west English and may have been supported by a refunctionalistion of periphrastic do from the 17th century onwards. The structure in (3b) is definitely of older vintage. Authors on Irish English generally maintain that the use of an inflected form of be for an habitual occurs in the north of the country and the use of an inflected form of do for the same purpose is characteristic of the south. This is basically true but inflected be is found on the east coast as well as P. W. Joyce noted at the beginning of the present century (Joyce 1979 [1910]). Here we are dealing with an archaic usage going back to Old English been and which was inherited in the south from the earliest forms of English on the east coast and which in the north is a transported feature from the period of intense Scottish settlement in Ulster in the 17th century.

8 Vocabulary

The sources of non-standard vocabulary in Dublin English are twofold: (1) from the Irish language or (2) from archaic and/or regional forms of English which were available in the capital. The Irish loans are nothing like as copious as in rural parts of the country and are later anyway and so fall outside the brief of the current article. This leaves one with a considerable number of words which represent archaic or regional usage which have survived in Ireland. For instance the adjectives mad and bold retain earlier meanings of ‘keen on’ and ‘misbehaved’ respectively. In some cases the words are a mixture of archaicism and regionalism, e.g. cog ‘cheat’, chisler ‘child’, mitch ‘play truant’. Other terms, which have an obvious rural source, as with Middle English hames, ‘pieces forming collar on a horse’, now used figuratively as ‘complete failure, mess’, have gained a general currency in Irish English as a whole (Dolan 1998: 137).

Still further one can notice semantic extensions which have taken place in Ireland as with yoke with a general meaning of a thing/device. An additional feature here is the confusion between words which are complementary in meaning: ditch is used for dyke. Bring and take, rent and let, borrow and lend are often interchanged as are teach and learn (on a lower stylistic level), a usage found in Shakespeare as well.
In some instances a particular pronunciation of an English word adopts connotations not found elsewhere, e.g. eejit /iːdʒɪt/ for idiot has more the sense of ‘bungling person’. The vintage of these items is not always clearly ascertainable but it is safe to say that only a fraction go back to the very beginning of English in Dublin. There are nonetheless items which do show this age, for instance japers, jakers, a general expression of incredulity, and which probably derives from Middle English jape ‘practical joke’, itself of unknown origin.

9 Conclusion

In conclusion one can say that there are clear traces in phonology, morphology, syntax and perhaps vocabulary of survivals from Middle English in the vernacular speech of Dublin. Clearly, many features have disappeared, e.g. initial voicing as in zitch ‘such’ or the lowering of /e/ before /r/ as in sarve/zarve. Furthermore, due to historical layering, with the superimposition of more standard varieties of English, those instances where the Great Vowel Shift was not implemented have been ironed out and with that has come the demise of hypercorrection which up to the 18th century was a feature of educated usage such as [priː] and [kɒniːvɪː] for prey and convey respectively, as noted by Sheridan. In the area of phonology the vintage of Dublin English is to be seen at its clearest. There are features, as outlined above, which have been retained for over 700 years and which convey a special sound profile to this unique urban dialect.

Notes

1 The date of 1169 has been agreed upon by tradition, a historiographical tradition which was established by Gerard of Wales (Giraldu Cambrenis 1146-1223) who wrote two works based on two journeys to Ireland in the 1180’s, Topography of Ireland and Expugnatio Hibernica ‘The conquest of Ireland’.

2 It is doubtful — going on the evidence in the Kildare Poems — whether Irish English underwent the process of Middle English Open Syllable Lengthening. If at all, then this only applied to the low vowel /a/, see the analysis in Hickey (1997a). This differential application to low vowels only is something which confirms the thesis of Ritt (1994) that the most open vowels are those which were most prone to Open Syllable Lengthening in varieties of Middle English.

3 John Ray A collection of English words not generally used (1674) notes the vocalisation of velar [l] before /d/ in words like caud (cold) and aud (old) (Ihalainen 1994: 202). This is a step further in the same development of velarisation with final vocalisation as attested in standard forms such as talk, chalk, etc. in Modern English.
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