
‘What strikes the ear’
Thomas Sheridan and regional pronunciation*

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Abstract The role of the elocutionist and grammarian Thomas Sheridan in the rise of sociolinguistic censure is considered in the present contribution. Sheridan’s attitude to non-standard features in both southeastern British English and Irish English in the late 18th century is examined to see how prescriptive notions of language use seemed to be fleshed out during this time. The negative comments by Sheridan on the speech of his fellow Irishmen is considered in some detail to see to what extent prescriptive remarks such as these can be used to gain a glimpse of regional pronunciations in the late modern period. To this end, a comparison with similar statements made by Walker and Kenrick is offered. The possible influence of Sheridan’s strictures on the development of Irish English during the 19th century is also considered.

Judging by the number of publications by different authors during the eighteenth century and by the success they achieved with their writings, this was the period in which public concern with correctness in language as a social qualification takes a firm foothold in English, Scottish and Irish society. The general concern with putative correctness has its roots in earlier debates about standard English, above all among the writers of the Augustan period. Prominent among these was Jonathan Swift, to whom later writers refer and to whose authority they appeal. Robert Lowth in the preface to his famous grammar of 1762 writes: ‘Swift must be allowed to have been a good judge of this matter (i.e. the imperfect state of our language – RH); to which he was himself very attentive, both in his own writings, and in his remarks upon those of his friends: he is one of the most correct, and perhaps the best of our prose writers’ (Lowth 1995 [1762]: vi).1

But Augustan writers like Swift appear to have been concerned with changes in English because these separated the language from that of their predecessors and would render their own writings linguistically obsolete to later generations. Lowth is somewhat different in his stance. In his grammar he talks of expressing oneself ‘rightly’ but he also stresses the notion of ‘propriety’ which was definitely a social concept. The idea is foregrounded that incorrect, i.e. non-standard, grammar is offensive to educated, middle-class ears, especially those of the capital London and its environs. With that two issues become topical: (i) regional pronunciations of English and (ii) uneducated, or ‘vulgar’ usage. In earlier centuries, we have indications of the regional origin and accents of public figures.
For instance Sir Walter Ralegh (1554-1618) was from Devon and we know from contemporary remarks that he spoke with a southwest English accent. What is new in the eighteenth century is the social censure of regional accents which were seen as signs of poor breeding and education and generally to be avoided.

There is an added issue here which concerns the attitude and reaction of people from the regions to centralist notions of linguistic propriety. The first major reaction comes from Ireland, others from Scotland and the north of England were to follow. It might at first sight seem strange that an Irishman should be among the first to adopt, in print, an openly prescriptive and corrective stance on the English language. But this is only an apparent paradox. Given that eighteenth-century Dublin was a major city of Great Britain but an outpost at the same time, it is understandable that some Dubliners may well have internalised centralist notions of correctness and indeed, in a rush of over-assimilation, sought to be more English than the English themselves.

1 Thomas Sheridan

The Irish individual in question is one Thomas Sheridan who was born in 1719, grew up in Dublin and died in London in 1788. Sheridan enjoyed a diverse career as actor, lecturer and writer. Significantly, he was the godson of Swift and produced *The Works of Swift with Life* (18 volumes) in 1784. As a dramatist Sheridan is known for one play, *Captain O’Blunder or The Brave Irishman* (1754), which he wrote in 1740 as an undergraduate. He was also manager of the Smock Alley theatre in Dublin (Sheldon 1967) where he worked for some years. However, the plays of his son Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816) were better known in his day and were regularly produced in London at Covent Garden and at the Drury Lane Theatre.

The interest which Thomas Sheridan latterly showed in correctness of language goes back at least to his book *British Education: Source of Disorders*, which appeared in 1756 shortly after he had left Ireland for England (see remarks below), and in his 1761 book *A Dissertation on the Causes of the Difficulties which Occur, in Learning the English Tongue*. This combined interest in education and in correcting what he perceived as unacceptable usage may well be something which he inherited from this father. Thomas Sheridan senior (1687-1738) was a clergyman and educator who established his own school in Capel St., Dublin where pupils were trained in the classical languages.

In the present context, Thomas Sheridan junior is important as the author of *A Rhetorical Grammar of the English Language* (1781) which contains a section on the Irish pronunciation of English. He is also the author of a successful *General Dictionary of the English Language* (1780, 2 volumes) and an earlier *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* published in the same year as Lowth’s grammar – 1762 – and by the same publishers – R. and J. Dodsley in London. Probably on the grounds of these linguistic interests, Sheridan developed a close friendship with the lexicographer Samuel Johnson.

The opinion of the latter on the work of Sheridan throws an interesting light on English-Irish attitudes of the time. Dr. Johnson saw it as a distinct disadvantage for Thomas Sheridan to be Irish and pronouncing on English (Beal 2004b: 331). This contrasts strongly with the English attitude towards Swift, who was so often
held up as a paragon of English style. But Swift was a Protestant dean who had worked in England and only occasionally wrote on specifically Irish matters. Sheridan, on the other hand, was a Catholic actor, minor playwright and self-appointed arbitrator of correct English usage.

2 Elocution

Sheridan’s interest in language surfaces in his middle years with the publication of his lectures on elocution. There is a connection between this initial concern and his later pronouncements which will be the subject of discussion below. Let me show this by considering what was meant by elocution in late 18th century Britain and Ireland. To start with one can locate elocution in classical Latin writings as one of the five so-called ‘offices’, or sections, of rhetoric: (1) invention, analyzing a topic and collecting material for it, (2) disposition, arranging the material for a speech, (3) elocution, finding appropriate words for the topic, the speaker and the audience, (4) pronunciation, oral delivery of a speech and (5) memory, committing the contents of the speech to memory.

Elocution seems to have been mainly the domain of oratory and concerned with good style and expression. But the meaning altered over time, as recorded in the definition given in the Oxford English Dictionary:

elocution /ˈeləkʃən/ n. Late Middle English [L. elucutio(n-), f. elucut- past participle stem of eloqui: see ELOQUENT, -ION.] 1 Oratorical or literary expression; literary style as distinguished from matter; the art of appropriate and effective expression. Late Middle English. 2 Eloquence, oratory. Latin 16c to Latin 18c. 3 The art of (public) speaking, esp. of pronunciation, delivery, gesture, and voice production. English 17c. 4 Manner or style of speaking. English 17c. M19.

There is a discernible shift in emphasis by the 17th century. Elocution as the third office of rhetoric came to refer to effective public speaking: pronunciation, gesture and voice quality are singled out here. It is not surprising then that elocution came to be associated with actors given their professional concern with speaking in public and Sheridan himself was originally an actor. Consider also cases like that of Sarah Siddons (1755-1831), a successful tragic actress and acquaintance of Sheridan’s dramatist son, Richard Brinsley, who engaged her in Drury Lane in 1782. The following year she was engaged to teach elocution to the children of the royal family.2

Returning to Sheridan, we can see that he was concerned with establishing serious academic underpinnings for elocution. He found in the work of the 17th century philosopher John Locke assumptions which improved the credentials of elocution. Locke believed that ‘words are the signs of ideas, tones, i.e. spoken language, the signs of passions’. As elocution was taught by reciting previously composed material in public, it was clearly associated with ideas and hence to be taken more seriously. The opinion was adopted that the way to teach individuals to speak well was to train them in reciting written material. This stance characterised elocution within educational systems in the English-speaking world and still does inasmuch as it is still a school subject.
3 Sheridan’s influence

It is known that Sheridan travelled widely throughout the British Isles, lecturing on elocution and ‘correct’ English, notably in Scotland. The question of language, specifically of the differences between Scottish and southern English usage, had become an increasingly sensitive issue there, something which is apparent in the works of Buchanan, such as his *British Grammar* (1762) and his *Essay Towards Establishing a Standard for an Elegant and Uniform Pronunciation of the English Language, Throughout the British Dominions* (1766), where the term ‘British’ carries distinct political overtones, all the sharper given the union of the English and Scottish parliaments in 1707 (Beal 2004a: 96).

Sheridan had a considerable influence on authors in Britain, notably on his main rival, London-born John Walker who in 1791 published *A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language* much in the vein of Sheridan’s works and in which he compares his own dicta to those of his Irish colleague (see the many discussions in this respect in Beal 2004a, e.g. p. 129). Sheridan’s influence on Walker should not be underestimated. Not only did the latter include Sheridan’s admonitions to the Irish, Scottish and Welsh (see his reprint of Sheridan’s original comments, Walker 1815: 13-19) but he adopted wholesale the prescriptive remarks which the former made about regional pronunciation in general. Walker seems to have had the greater success[^1] and his dictionary was reprinted repeatedly until the beginning of the twentieth century (over 100 times between 1791 and 1904 to be precise, Beal 2004a: 171). Walker was very detailed in his discussion of pronunciation variants in English, far more than Sheridan and the 15th edition of his dictionary contains a preliminary section, ‘Principles of English Pronunciation’, which is nearly 70 pages long (Walker 1815: 21-90).

Many authors quickly recognised that among the rising middle classes there was a market for works on elocution and they jumped on the bandwagon with alacrity. A good example is Stephen Jones who produced a work somewhat conceitedly entitled *Sheridan Improved: A General Pronouncing and Explanatory Dictionary of the English Language* which by 1798 was already in its 3rd edition. Apart from John Walker just mentioned, Sheridan had other rivals who produced works of the same type as he did, indeed in one case with the same title, and almost at the same time. For instance, William Kenrick produced *A New Dictionary of the English Language* in 1773 in London and brought out *A Rhetorical Grammar of the English Language* in 1784 only three years after Sheridan’s work of the same name. There were not just imitators but detractors as well, for instance, there is an anonymous book entitled *A Caution to Gentlemen who use Sheridan’s Dictionary* which, given the title, scarcely needs any comment.

John Walker also had his imitators and improvers. In 1836 B. H. Smart brought out *Walker Remodelled. A New Critical Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language* and followed this with *The Practice of Elocution* in 1842.

4 Correcting the natives

As is only to be expected, elocution is not just about teaching what is ‘correct’
pronunciation but in censuring what is deemed by authority to be ‘base’, ‘vulgar’, ‘rude’ or just ‘provincial’. The censures of the elocutionists can be used by linguists today to glean information about regional and/or colloquial pronunciation of their time. In his *A Rhetorical Grammar of the English Language* (1781) Sheridan inserted an appendix entitled ‘Rules to be observed by the natives of Ireland in order to attain a just pronunciation of English’ (Sheridan 1781: 137-55). This also contains a number of remarks on the ‘mistakes’ which the Irish make when speaking English. At one point he offers a list consisting of two columns with Irish and English pronunciations respectively. Here there can be no doubt about Sheridan’s prescriptive intentions.

Sheridan does not hold back with criticism of regional accents in parts of Britain either: ‘With regard to the natives of Scotland as their dialect differs more, and in a greater number of points, from the English, than that of any others who speak their language, it will require a greater number of rules, and more pains to correct it’ (Sheridan 1781: 146). He is unashamedly censorious, but kindly offers suggestions for curing the unacceptable speech habits of the Scots. Here the goal is quite clear: provincial pronunciations are to be abandoned and those of educated southeast England are to be adopted. The Welsh are taken to task as well, this time for the devoicing of consonants in initial and medial position, e.g. *fice* for *vice*, *seal* for *zeal*, *ashur* for *azure*, etc. and again the goal is to weed out such provincialisms from their speech and so make it acceptable in educated circles in and around the capital.

Before looking at Sheridan’s comments in detail, it might well be asked what basis for making such pronouncements he may have had, given that he was born and reared in Ireland, a place where exposure to educated southeastern English usage would have been minimal.

Despite Irish birth and upbringing, Sheridan can claim to have had exposure to educated southeastern English usage of the mid 18th century. After attending his father’s school in Dublin, he went to Westminster College in London before returning to Ireland to attend Trinity College Dublin. He later became actively involved in the management of Smock Alley Theatre in Dublin, but in 1744 he travelled to London and competed as an actor with David Garrick, whom he persuaded to come to Dublin for the season in 1745-6. In the following years he managed of Smock Alley but following riots in 1747 and 1754 he retired from acting and management and went to England where he began to publish his works on education and elocution.

5 Sheridan’s strictures and 18th century Irish pronunciation

In the appendix to his grammar Sheridan compares the pronunciation of Irish English with southern British English. He is fairly accurate in his description and in the representation of vowel quality. The Irish English forms which he quotes are those in which ‘well-educated natives of Ireland differ from those of England’ (1781: 146). By this group Sheridan is referring to the Protestant middle and upper class given the fact that at the end of the 18th century only Protestant could be meant by the attribute ‘well-educated’ in Ireland. At this time the middle class of the city was prospering (see Moody and Martin, eds, 1967: 232ff. and Johnston 1994 [1974]: 77ff. for descriptions of Dublin at this time). This social group enjoyed
more independence from England than ever before (up to the ‘Act of Union’ which came into force in 1801, Johnston 1994 [1974]: 164ff., Ó Tuathaigh 1972: 29ff.). Dublin at this time (Craig 1969) enjoyed a certain political freedom and this would have minimised the direct influence of southeastern British English on the Irish pronunciation of English.

Although one can determine Sheridan’s group of speakers fairly easily, it is not so apparent just what he regarded as the standard English which he refers to and who is supposed to have spoken it. In the preface to his grammar he talks of ‘our pronunciation’ (1781: xxii) and refers to Johnson with regard to spelling (1781: xxiii). He further notes that the pronunciation of English by the people in Ireland, Scotland and Wales can deviate from a standard without offering any more specific information on what he regards this standard to be. His praising remarks (1781: xix) on the correct pronunciation of the ‘Augustan Age’ in England (Sheridan was after all the godson of Swift, Croghan 1990), are of little help. From this one can only conclude that Sheridan was a prescriptivist and assumed educated southeastern English, the variety of ‘polite’ society in London and the Home Counties, as a yardstick with which to compare Irish English of his time as well.

5.1 Sheridan’s system of pronunciation

In the following paragraphs the system which Sheridan used (Sheldon 1946) for indicating regional pronunciations of English is explained and the extent to which it can be viewed as a window on Dublin English in the 18th century is discussed. However, it would be misleading to interpret his references as only relating to educated Dublin usage of his time. Many of his strictures concern pronunciations which were common in Britain at the time. For instance, the lowering of /e/ to /a/ before /r/, the raising of /æ/ to /e/, especially after velars, and the realisation of short vowels before /r/ are all issues which are relevant to varieties of English in Britain during his time.

Notwithstanding this general relevance, one can recognise that Sheridan’s motive in his description was to show the Irish just how wrong their pronunciation of English was so on several occasions the detail which one would like concerning local features is not given because it does not seem to have been pertinent to Sheridan goal’s of demonstrating to the Irish the wrongness of their phonetic ways. Furthermore, what Sheridan mentions is obviously what ‘struck his ear’ which does not mean that he registered all non-standard features of late 18th century Dublin English. He is singularly silent about non-standard consonantal features, of which there are many in present-day conservative Dublin English (Hickey 2005: 34-45) and so probably in that of his time.

In order to describe the special features of Dublin English Sheridan employs a system of notation in which the five vowel graphemes (and y) are used together with a number (from 1 to 3) as a diacritic to denote possible vowel values in Irish English (Sheridan 1781: 151). In the original the number is actually placed over the vowel. For technical reasons, it is placed here as a superscript digit to the right of the vowel letter. In his text, Sheridan organises the vowel values into three columns as follows:
Sheridan also offers some notes in which he explains his transcriptional system:

All improper diphthongs, or, as I have called them digraphs, I mean where two vowels are joined in writing, to represent any of the simple sounds in the scheme, are changed in the second column into the single vowels which they stand for; as thus

\[
\begin{array}{llll}
\text{First} & \text{Second} & \text{Third} \\
a & \text{ha}^1t & \text{ha}^2te & \text{ha}^3ll \\
e & \text{be}^1t & \text{be}^2ar & \text{be}^3er \\
i & \text{fi}^1t & \text{fi}^2ght & \text{fi}^3eld \\
o & \text{no}^1t & \text{no}^2te & \text{no}^3ose \\
u & \text{bu}^1t & \text{bu}^2sh & \text{b}lu^3e \\
y & \text{love-ly}^1 & \text{ly}^2e \\
\end{array}
\]

The ‘final mute e’ is added to certain words in Sheridan’s pronunciation system in order to disambiguate the transcriptions.

It needs to be stressed here that Sheridan was working within a tradition for describing and classifying vowels which already existed. For instance, Samuel Johnson in his dictionary of 1755 used the same system to describe the three \(<a>\) vowels which he recognised, ‘the slender, open and broad’, i.e. the sounds as in \(\text{face, father and all} \) respectively (Johnson’s examples, see discussion in ‘A grammar of the English tongue’, Johnson 1755 [no page numbers]). Sheridan’s table of vowels are assumed to represent values from educated southeastern English usage of his time against which he then compared Irish (and Scottish) pronunciations.

The phonetic values of the above vowels in educated southeastern English usage are not known in all cases. For instance, the vowel \(a^3\) cannot be decided upon precisely. It is true that /au/ before /l/ in the early modern English period (Dobson 1968: 603ff.) went to /o:/, but it is not certain just how close this vowel was, it may well have been closer to /a:/: The vowel \(a^2\) did not have the value which it now shows in non-regional varieties of present-day British English, i.e. /æt/. It is known that ME /a:/, the historical precursor of this vowel, was raised and that by the early 18th century it was probably in a range between /æ:/ and /e:/ (this is the area in which the vowel can be located according to the rhymes of Swift, for instance).

The vowel \(u^1\) implies a value as /ʌ/ although this interpretation leads to unexpected values in Dublin English. The reasons are as follows: Sheridan gives two short vowels for \(u\). As one of the two is /ʊ/, the vowel in \(\text{bush}\), the only other possibility of \(u^1\) is /ʌ/, especially as Sheridan used \(u^1\) for transcribing unstressed vowels.

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
a. & \text{nation} \quad \text{na}^2\text{shu}^1\text{n} \\
b. & \text{chorus} \quad \text{ko}^2\text{ru}^1\text{s} \\
\end{array}
\]
In this case he equates the unrounded and lowered vowel /ʌ/ with the unstressed schwa /ə/, a lack of distinction which is the rule with many commentators and lexicographers in the 18th century.

Sheridan also recognised different short vowels before /r/ which is obvious from the following examples.

(3)  
a. /ʌ/:  stir, stuʃr, bird, buʃrd  
b. /e/:  birth, beʃrth  
(Sheridan 1781: 152)

This distinctiveness of vowels is typical of more conservative varieties of English and its presence in local Dublin English to this day is evidence of the conservative nature of the latter form of English, cf. [beʃ(t)](t). This distinction is not part of the supraregional standard of English in either present-day Ireland or England.

5.2 Vowel values

Sheridan’s ‘Rules to be observed by the natives of Ireland’ also contains a number of remarks on the ‘mistakes’ which the Irish make when speaking English. At one point he offers a list consisting of two columns with Irish and English pronunciations of keywords respectively. Many forms are instances of hypercorrection. William Kenrick (1773: 34), writing a little later, mentions the hypercorrect use of /ʌ/ by northern English (and Irish) speakers in words which show, and always did show, the high back short vowel, e.g. bull. He also comments extensively on the use of /e/, /ɛ/ in words which had ME <ea> and chides others for recommending this pronunciation in some words (Kenrick 1773: 40f.). This vowel value showed considerable variation, cf. Johnson (1755 [no page numbers]) who mentions in the preface to his dictionary that ‘Ea sounds like e long, as mean; or like ee, as dear, clear, near’, a remark which shows that for him mean was still [meːn]. While such mid-front pronunciations were replaced by a high front value soon afterwards in England, the older pronunciation survived much longer in Ireland and still exists in rural varieties and as a vernacular option for urban speakers.

Some of the words quoted by Sheridan seem to be lexicalised exceptions to general English sound shifts. For instance, Sheridan quotes ‘drought’ as having the pronunciation droʃθ /drʊθ/ in Ireland, but there is no further evidence for the non-diphthongisation of Middle English /ʊ/ to /au/ at this late stage of early modern Irish English.

When discussing late 18th century pronunciation and when comparing Irish and English usage at this time it is necessary to be explicit about what varieties are being referred to. On the Irish side, the matter is relatively simple, as Sheridan clearly states that the strictures he articulates refer to the speech of ‘the gentlemen of Ireland’. This a fairly clear reference to educated Irish usage centred around Dublin as the main English-speaking city and centre of education in late 18th century Ireland.
On the English side, however, the matter is not quite so simple. To determine just what Sheridan thinks is the English pronunciation worthy of emulation, one can best let him speak for himself. In the preface to his *Rhetorical Grammar* of 1781, Sheridan is at some pains to be explicit about what his yardstick of pronunciation actually is.

It must be obvious, that in order to spread abroad the English language as a living tongue, and to facilitate the attainment of its speech, it is necessary in the first place that a standard of pronunciation should be established, and a method of acquiring a just one should be laid open. That the present state of the written language is not at all calculated to answer that end, is evident from this; that not only the natives of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, who speak English, and are taught to read it, pronounce it differently, but each county in England has its peculiar dialect, which infects not only their speech, but their reading also. (Sheridan 1781: xvii)

After this lament for the lack of uniformity in spoken English across the regions of Britain and Ireland Sheridan continues to remark on the variation to be found in social groups which enjoy higher positions in society.

It is well known, that there is a great diversity of pronunciation of the same words, not only in individuals, but in whole bodies of men. That there are some adopted by the universities; some prevail at the bar and some in the senate-house. (Sheridan 1781: xix)

The above statements are a preamble to his main objective, that of specifying the yardstick of pronunciation which he favours, namely that of the early 18th century, specifically that of the reign of Queen Anne (1702-1714), the last of the Stuarts.

There was a time, and that at no very distant period, which may be called the Augustan age of England, I mean during the reign of Queen Anne, when English was the language spoken at court; and when the same attention was paid to propriety of pronunciation, as that of French at the Court of Versailles. This produced a uniformity in that article in all the polite circles; (Sheridan 1781: xix-xx)

This provides him with a baseline from which to criticise the changes in English which had taken place between that time and his own.

Many pronunciations, which thirty or forty years ago were confined to the vulgar, are gradually gaining ground; and if something be not done to stop this growing evil, and fix a general standard at present, the English is likely to become a mere jargon, which every one may pronounce as he pleases. (Sheridan 1781: xx)

In keeping with the Augustan tradition, Sheridan is concerned with fixing the language and protecting it from the pernicious effects of variation and change.

When we reflect, that no evil so great can befall any language, as a perpetual fluctuation both in point of spelling and pronouncing, it is surely
a point to be wished, that a permanent and obvious standard of both should at some certain period be established; and if possible, that period should be fixed upon when probably they were in the greatest degree of perfection. (Sheridan 1781: xxiii)

Against this background it is now possible to examine some of the pronunciations listed by Sheridan which have changed since his time and which offer evidence for what he regarded as acceptable usage and what was subject to his disapproval.

18c IrE /u/: In the late Middle English period there was some fluctuation between /o:/ and /u:/ (Dobson 1968: 681ff.). Some words which later appear with /o:/ show /u:/ in Sheridan’s list. These are instances of the failure of /u:/ to diphthongise before /r/ (Dobson 1968: 688ff.).

(4) a. doʊɾe /duəɾ/ ‘door’
b. floʊɾe /flʊɾ/ ‘floor’
c. coʊɾse /kʊɾs/

18c IrE /e/: The lack of raising of ME <ea> is a well-known characteristic of vernacular Irish English, both north and south, and is still found in present-day vernaculars (Milroy and Harris 1980). This feature and the use of /a:/ in words like patron, matron (see below) is pointed out by Sheridan as the chief ‘mistake’ in the Irish pronunciation of English. From the point of view of earlier English, i.e. late Middle English, one has a collapse of the distinction between /e:/ and /e:/ but no further shift to /i:/: least /leɪst/, deal /deɪl/, beet /beɪt/.

Sheridan’s group of speakers would seem to have been aware of this feature of Irish English and it is understandable that, in attempts to avoid the local pronunciation, they engaged in hypercorrection by shifting all instances of /e:/ to /i:/, even where this was not justified etymologically.

(5) a. prey /preɪ/ → pree
b. convey /kənvɛɪ/ → convee
c. bear /beər/ → beer (Sheridan 1781: 143)

This hypercorrection was noted by other authors as well. For instance, Maria Edgeworth in her Essay on Irish Bulls (1802) remarked that ‘There are Irish ladies, who, ashamed of their country, betray themselves by mincing out their abjuration, by calling tables teebles, and chairs cheers!’ (Crowley 2000: 136).

18c IrE /ʌ/: Sheridan indicates that the /ʌ/ vowel was to be found in the Dublin of his time in words like the following.

(6) a. puʌlɪt /pʌlɪt/ b. puʌldɪŋ /pʌldɪŋ/
b. buʌʃ /bʌʃ/ c. buʌl /bʌl/
d. puʌʃ /pʌʃ/ e. puʌl /pʌl/
All but the first of these words have /ʊ/ in (southern) Irish English and British English today. Bearing in mind that Sheridan’s speaker group was that of ‘well-educated natives’ one can safely assume that the above instances are cases of hypercorrection parallel to the unconditioned shifting of /e:/ to /i:/ mentioned in the previous paragraph.

18c IrE /a:/ Similar to the lack of shift for historical /e:/ to /i:/ one also finds that /a:/ is not always raised to /e/: patron /paːtən/, matron /maːtrən/. Sheridan remarks that forms such as those just quoted have the same vowel as in father. Unshifted ME /a:/ was obviously a salient feature of 18th century Irish English and appears abundantly in parody literature, e.g. in George Farquhar’s The Beaux’ Stratagem (1707) as seen in the following extract.

FOIGARD Ireland! No, joy. Fat sort of place (= [plaːs]) is dat saam (= [saːm]) Ireland? Dey say de people are catcht dere when dey are young.

Swift’s rhymes also show that /a:/ was an educated Irish pronunciation in the early 18th century. The censure of this pronunciation probably followed on the raising of the /a:/ to /e:, e:/ in southern England some considerable time before Sheridan. Swift was likely to have maintained a pronunciation, at least in rhyming verse, which was conservative even in his time.

How by heroes of old our chiefs are surpass’d
In each useful science, true learning, and taste.

Verses on the Battle of the Books

Why should the first be ruin’d and laid waste,
To mend dilapidations in the last?

Ode to Doctor William Sancroft

This realisation has been lost everywhere in Ireland as a result of later superimposition of more standard pronunciations. Occasionally, one has spelling pronunciations like status [staːtəs] or data [daːtə] which is not a remnant of the former situation, however.

18c IrE /i:/ References to an /i:/ pronunciation in cases where English has /ai/ are not very numerous in Sheridan. For instance, he gives the following form: Mi3kil /miːkəl/, compare English Mi2kil /maɪkəl/ which he also quotes. However, this may be a transfer of the vowel value in the Irish form of the name, Micheál /ˈmʲiːhəl/, despite the medial stop in English.

Alternation among high vowels A notable feature of vernacular Irish English from the 17th century onwards, is the interchange of short high vowels. In the dialect glossaries some words are attested with both /i/ and /u/. In Sheridan’s list there is some evidence for the use of /i/ for /u/, e.g. in inion /ˈɪnjən/ ‘onion’. This form is confirmed by Joyce (1979 [1910]: 100).
5.3 Conditioned realisations

/e/ after velars Sheridan’s list of words contains the following forms.

(7) a. *kehtar* /ketʃ/ ‘catch’
    b. *gehtar* /geʃar/ ‘gather’ (Sheridan 1781: 144)

They are indicative of a raising of short /æ/ (from Middle English /a/) after velars. This raising would seem to have been general in varieties of English and there is lexical evidence of this in words like *ketch* ‘double-masted yacht’ and *keg*, a variant of *cag* from Old Norse *kaggi*. This raising is also found in Ireland before the 19th century and is recorded in the glossaries for the archaic dialect of Forth and Bargy in the south-east corner of Ireland which died out in the early 19th century. Indeed a general raising would help to account for the tendency in present-day supraregional Irish English to avoid the use of /e/ and lower the vowel to something near the cardinal vowel /a/. Nonetheless, a raised realisation of /æ/ is still common in south-western varieties of Irish English and more generally in all vernacular varieties – including Dublin English – in the position before /-r/, e.g. *part* [pəːt], *car* [kær]..

Diphthongisation before /l/+C The diphthongisation of back vowels before /l/C is a typical phonological process of the Middle English period (Prins 1974: 147; Wełna 1978: 193). It presupposes the velarisation of /l/ as the diphthong can only have arisen through the back migration of a [ᵻ] off-glide before velarised [H] into the nucleus of the syllable in which it occurred.

The matter is not quite straightforward for Irish English as this today shows a generalised alveolar [l] in all syllable positions (except for newer varieties of Dublin English, Hickey 2005: 77). This is probably a more recent development, stemming ultimately from the use of a non-palatal /l/ for English /l/ in all positions by speakers of Irish during the period of greatest language shift between the mid 17th and the late 19th century (Hickey 1986a).

The first indications of the velar diphthongisation of back vowels is to be found in the 15th century (Wełna 1978: 192ff.) so that it is quite possible that the diphthong in question was already present in Irish English in the first period (before the 17th century). Other English authors note this, e.g. John Ray in *A collection of English words not generally used* (1674) mentions the vocalisation of velar [I] before /d/ in words like *caud* (cold) and *aud* (old) (Ihalainen 1994: 202).

Sheridan gives two forms with the diphthong. These show that Middle English proceeded from /old/ to /ould/ and further to /au/ in Ireland as it also did in Scotland: *cowld* /kauld/ ‘cold’, *bowld* /bauld/ ‘bold’. In Dublin English, the /l/ is still retained, i.e. it is not vocalised as a result of diphthongisation.

Lowering of /e/ before /r/ This is a phonological process which is widely attested in Irish English historically and is indicated by Sheridan in the word *saːrʧ* /saːrtʃ/ ‘search’. Given the relative shortness of Sheridan’s list one can assume that the
non-standard forms which he quotes are merely intended to be representative of the pronunciation and not exhaustive. If this is correct, one can further assume that this lowering before /r/ was a general feature of Irish English up to the 19th century (it is attested in many literary documents). It has been entirely removed by later superimposition of more standard pronunciations and cannot be used as a diagnostic for present-day Irish English.

This lowering of /e/ before /r/ can be regarded as a feature transported from England to Ireland by English speakers moving to the latter country. There is no tendency for such a phonetic shift in Irish so that transfer during language shift (Irish to English) can be excluded. Furthermore, the issue of just what words in English should have /ar/ rather than /er/ is one which was discussed widely by the composers of pronouncing dictionaries (see remarks below).

**Vowel lengthening before voiceless fricatives**
The long vowel in a word like last, path or staff has its origin in a lengthening of inherited /a/ which occurred in the south of England and which, along with other isoglosses, divides the country in two (Wakelin 1977 [1972]: 86f.). The occurrence or lack of this lengthening is one of the major defining features for general southern Irish English vis-à-vis the dialects of the east coast (from north of Dublin down to Waterford) which stem from late medieval settlement by the English. Short vowels before voiceless fricatives have been remarked on by some authors, cf. Hogan (1927: 63). Sheridan’s material is not so clear on this matter. He quotes the word wrath and the adjective wroth ‘angry’ with long and short vowels respectively in English but a short and long vowel in Irish English.

(8) a. wrath IrE wra¹th /ræθ/ Eng wra³th /rɔθ/
    b. wroth IrE wra²th /rɔθə/ Eng wro³th /rɔθə/

Here the difficulties with Sheridan’s English reference accent are most apparent. He would seem to favour a conservative southeastern variety, that of ‘polite society’ as he specifies in his preface, but just what group in England had retraction, rounding and lengthening of /æ/ after /w/ in wrath along with a short vowel before /θ/ in wroth is unclear.

**Lack of rounding of /a/ after /w/**
The rounding and retraction of short /æ/ in a position after /w/ or /hw/, but not before velars, e.g. wander, what but wag, probably started in the 16th century and was adopted into more standard forms of English in the 17th century (Prins 1974: 149f.). Sheridan shows that this rounding had not occurred in Dublin English by the end of the 18th century: squa¹dron /skwɔdrən/ = swo¹dron /skwɔdrən/ and is still not found in popular Dublin English.

**Cluster simplification** In the relatively short word list Sheridan offers two words, already attested in earlier Irish English, which show a simplification of clusters: lenth /lɛnt/ ‘length’ and strenth /streŋt/ ‘strength’. The typical instance of such simplification in present-day English, namely nasal and stop in word-final position, as in ground, band, is not given. It may well be that reduction of clusters in this
position was too salient a feature of popular Dublin English and hence avoided by his speaker group. Final cluster reduction is, however, well-attested before the 18th century and is still a marked feature of popular Dublin English.

Dentalisation before /r/ Of all the features of late 18th century Dublin English that of dentalisation before /r/ is explained most clearly by Sheridan. In his remarks on /t/ (1781: 35) he notes that the Irish ‘thicken t (and d) so that they say betther for better and utther for utter’. It is clear subsequently that he is talking of dentalisation: ‘this faulty manner arises from the same cause that was mentioned as affecting the sound of the d, I mean the protruding of the tongue so as to touch the teeth.’ He furthermore recognises that there is a morphological alternation of alveolar and dental stops in the comparison of adjectives: ‘thus though they (the educated Dublin Irish, RH) sound the d right in the positives loud and broad, in the comparative degree they thicken it by an aspiration; and sound it as if it were written loudher, broadher (1781: 29). This pronunciation has been and still is very widespread in vernacular forms of English throughout all of Ireland.

5.4 Word stress

From Sheridan’s system of vowel quantity notation there would seem to have been a correlation between quantity and stress placement in early modern Irish English. Consider first the manner in which accent is noted by Sheridan:

‘The accent is placed throughout over the letter on which it is laid in pronunciation; over the vowel, when the stress of the voice is on the vowel; over the consonant when the stress is on that as thus—

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consonant subscript</th>
<th>Vowel subscript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>stu1v</td>
<td>be2’re</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lu1v</td>
<td>he3’re</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bi1z’zy</td>
<td>gro2’ne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la1ftu1r</td>
<td>so2’shal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The syllables of words are divided according to the mode of pronouncing them; that is, all letters which are united in utterance in the same syllable, are here kept together also in writing, and separated from the rest; ...

(Sheridan 1781: 155)

Statements such as the above have to be interpreted in modern terms to make sense. Sheridan would appear to view all consonants which follow on a short vowel as belonging to the same syllable. His superscript stroke indicates the end of the syllable. This device is usually superfluous, however. With the following forms, for instance, the superscript digit indicates a long vowel and an interpretation via syllable structure is not necessary.

(9) a. IrE: ze2‘alous /ze:las/ Eng: ze1’llus /ze:lus/ 
b. IrE: ze2‘alot /ze:lat/ Eng: ze1’llut /ze:lut/ 

Long vowels occur in Sheridan’s list in final position where English has a short
unstressed vowel, cf. cla\textsuperscript{1}mou\textsuperscript{r} /kla:m\textsuperscript{ar}/ – cla\textsuperscript{1}mur /kla:m\textsuperscript{ar}/. Furthermore, one also finds that words of three syllables with a short stressed middle vowel have a long vowel in Sheridan’s speaker group (Sheridan 1781: 146).

(10) a. IrE: ende\textsuperscript{2}avour /ɛnd\textsuperscript{e}v\textsuperscript{ur}/ Eng: ende\textsuperscript{1}v\textsuperscript{ur} /ɛnd\textsuperscript{e}v\textsuperscript{ar}/
   b. IrE: mali\textsuperscript{3}cious /mæ\textsuperscript{l}iʃ\textsuperscript{ə}s/ Eng: mali\textsuperscript{1}sh\textsuperscript{us} /mæ\textsuperscript{l}iʃ\textsuperscript{ə}s/

This vowel length is a conservative trait as is the lack of accent shift to the front of words which is also attested by Sheridan.

(11) IrE: mischi\textsuperscript{3}evous /mɪʃi\textsuperscript{ə}vəs/ Eng: mi\textsuperscript{1}s\textsuperscript{h}ivous /mɪst\textsuperscript{ə}vəs/

Some of his transcriptions show deviations in the supposedly English forms. For instance, he contrasts long and short vowels in Irish and English pronunciation which in the latter only have long vowels today.

(12) a. IrE: che\textsuperscript{3}ar\textsuperscript{f}ul /tʃɛr\textsuperscript{f}ul/ Eng: che\textsuperscript{1}r\textsuperscript{f}ul /tʃɛ(r)\textsuperscript{f}ul/
   b. IrE: fe\textsuperscript{3}ar\textsuperscript{f}ul /fɛr\textsuperscript{f}ul/ Eng: fe\textsuperscript{1}r\textsuperscript{f}ul /fɛ(r)\textsuperscript{f}ul/

5.5 Features not proscribed by Sheridan

In dictating modes of pronunciation, Sheridan may not have been very successful. We know that his famous playwright son, Richard Brinsley, had a distinct Dublin accent. In her reminiscences of famous individuals she knew, Fanny Burney (1752-1840) imitates the Irish accent of the playwright by referring to his pronunciation of kind as [k\textsuperscript{a}ind], indicated orthographically as koind.

But Sheridan appears to have been selective in his censure. The centralised diphthong of the PRICE lexical set would appear to have been a feature of educated middle-class usage in 18th century Dublin. But it apparently only became a stereotype in the following century. By the end of the 19th century, English authors, such as Kipling, when trying to indicate an Irish accent in writing, used the oi spelling to indicate the centralised diphthong onset as in wo\textsuperscript{1}ld Oir\textsuperscript{1}land.

There is an important generalisation here: elocutionists like Sheridan seemed to have proscribed pronunciations which were salient for them (Hickey 2000). Those that were not were ignored. Naturally, they also ignored features where regional pronunciations coincided with educated southeastern English usage. What happened occasionally is that the latter changed but the regional pronunciation did not, leaving it distinct from later standard usage. A case in point is the length of the vowel in the SOFT lexical set.

In southern forms of English both early modern /æ/ and /ə/ were lengthened before voiceless fricatives, thus giving familiar pronunciations today like path, staff, pass all with long /æ/. Lengthening before the back vowel resulted in pronunciations of words such as cost, cloth, off, soft with /o/. This second lengthening was reversed in 19th century southern English, but it was retained in east coast varieties of Irish English, typically in Dublin where it is still to be found today.
The stigmatisation of long /ɔ:/ in the SOFT lexical set is something which was already registered by Walker, especially before /θ/ (Walker 1815: 38) where he regards it as characteristic of ‘innurate speakers, and chiefly those among the vulgar’. This view is strengthened throughout the 19th century, with a degree of vaciliation at the beginning of the 20th century and the final assertion of the short vowel in southeastern English usage (Beal 2004a: 141f.). But here as in other instances, Dublin was left behind. Having adopted the long vowel during the 18th century, it has kept it to the present-day. Interestingly, varieties of English outside Dublin do not have this lengthening so that there is a split in Ireland between Dublin [sɔːft], [kɔːst], [ɔːf] and non-Dublin [sɔf], [kɔst], [ɔf].

There are a couple of other pronunciation features which Sheridan did not censure. One of these would appear to be traceable to the effect of the Irish language on English in Ireland. Sheridan favoured the assimilation of /tʃ/ to [ʃ] as in tune [ʃun] whereas it is condemned by his English counterparts. In this, as Beal (2004: 147) rightly notes, Sheridan was favouring a particularly Irish pronunciation.

5.6 Summary

By and large one can say that Sheridan’s prescriptive comments on late 18th century Dublin English provide a useful glimpse of what pronunciation must have been like at the time. Especially in the area of vowels, Sheridan provides information which corroborates findings for present-day local Dublin English. The area of consonants was not dealt with in any great detail by Sheridan – something which has been typical of the elocutionary tradition since then – so that confirmation or refutation of such typical present-day features as t-lenition is unfortunately not forthcoming from Sheridan’s rhetorical grammar.

6 Developments in the 19th century

It is interesting to consider the long-term effects of the proscriptions embodied in Sheridan’s works. To assess these one must consider the situation in 19th century Ireland and see what has happened to the pronunciations of his time which he chose to censure.

Here one can distinguish different situations. There are features which have disappeared entirely. An example of this is ‘CATCH raising’, i.e. the pronunciation of the word as /ketʃ/. The raised pronunciation, especially after velars, was common in both Britain and Ireland in the later 18th and the 19th century, indeed well into the 20th century when it disappeared after World War Two (the vowel raising has, if anything, been reversed so that a pronunciation closer to /a/ is to be found in RP nowadays, Bauer 1994: 110-21). There are many attestations of this raising up to the early 20th century when Sean O’Casey used it to indicate local Dublin pronunciation.

Sheridan (1781: 144) illustrates this by writing gather as gether and catch as cetch. A similar raising would seem to have applied to low back vowels in certain environments. Sheridan remarks that words like psalm, qualm, balm are
pronounced as if written *psawm, quawm, bawm* (Sheridan 1781: 141), a feature attested elsewhere in historical documents of Irish English. Both types of raising have disappeared without trace or comment from Irish English.

Another feature, destined to disappear in the course of the 19th century, is ‘SEARCH lowering’, indicated in Sheridan by *sa1rch /sارت]/ which he explicitly contrasts with English *se1rch /سارت]/ (Sheridan 1781: 145). This lowering before /r/ was a general feature of Irish English up to the 19th century. It is also found in many dialects of English and can be seen in names like *Derby, Berkshire, Hertfordshire* and is responsible for pronunciations like *dark* and *barn* in present-day English. The lowering has been entirely removed from Irish English by the superimposition of later more standard pronunciations and cannot be used as a diagnostic for present-day Irish English.

Sheridan showed a preference for some words with long /a:/ before /r/, e.g. *merchant* which Walker thinks should be pronounced with /e:/ (Walker 1815: 330). He remarked that /ar/ in words like *service* and *servant* is ‘still heard among the lower order of speakers’ (Walker 1815: 30). However, these words survive with /ar/ into the late 19th century in Ireland as seen in many dramas such as those by Dion Boucicault (1820-1890) writing in the 1860s and 1870s, see Hickey (2007, Chapter 5).

Beal (2004a: 131) discusses Walker’s attitude to Sheridan on this point. Walker rightly recognises that Sheridan was old-fashioned. His preference for the low vowel in such words is an instance of lag where Dublin pronunciation in the latter half of the 18th century was simply not keeping up with developments in England where a raised vowel, /e:/, was diffusing rapidly through the lexicon. In addition, as Beal (2004a: 132) rightly notes, Walker was likely to have been an innovator on the fringe of polite society and seeking to become part of it.

If a feature was not removed from Irish English in the course of the 19th century, it may instead have been regulated to a vernacular mode with a more standard pronunciation representing default usage. Consider the case of what I call ‘BOLD diphthongisation’ (see 5.3 *Conditioned realisations* above). Sheridan examples – *cowld /kauld/ ‘cold’* and *bowld /bauld/ ‘bold’* as well as others – were still quite common well into the 19th century. However, what happened in supraregional forms of Irish English is that the standard English pronunciation with /o:/ was adopted and the forms with /au/ were confined to vernacular varieties. In addition a lexical split took place whereby a world like *old* with the diphthong, i.e. [aul], implies personal attachment, affection as in *I’m afraid the aul car has finally cracked up.*

7 Conclusion

The aim of Thomas Sheridan in the late 18th century was to point out what he regarded as unacceptable features in provincial accents. How these were determined is not entirely clear, but certainly features which for whatever reason had become salient, the object of negative social comment and linked to vernacular varieties, were certainly among the preferred targets for criticism by Sheridan and other elocutionists who followed. A high degree of arbitrariness would seem to
have been typical then and now. There are no clearly stated reasons why Sheridan should have denounced some features but failed to mention others.

The writer Thomas Sheridan was in a way like John Walker, his British counterpart: he was an outsider to polite English society and just the sort of individual who would adopt emerging pronunciations in the language around him. Compared to Walker he was, however, more conservative given his Irish background and in some cases, see the example of merchant with older [ar] rather than more recent [er], he recommended pronunciations which Walker did not. In common with Walker and other prescriptivists who followed him, Sheridan shared a strong conception of acceptable English, a socially preferred variety, based on non-local southeastern English usage with which vernacular forms were unfavourably compared (Mugglestone 2003). This is a specific development of the 18th century and can be seen by comparing the age of Swift, the beginning of this century, with that of Sheridan towards the end of the century. In the intervening decades a sea change had taken place: concerns about the immutability of the English language had given way to concerns about what social groups spoke in what way. The avenue of sociolinguistic assessment and censure had been opened up and was never to close again.

Notes

* My thanks go to two anonymous reviewers who provided a number of useful and justified criticisms of an earlier version of this article, specifically regarding the need to view Sheridan and his pronouncements in a wider English context. Shortcomings in the final version are, as always, my own responsibility.

1 Lowth also owes a debt to earlier grammarians, those of the previous century who were concerned with general principles of language and he states: ‘Grammar in general, or Universal Grammar, explains the Principles which are common to all languages’ (Lowth 1995 [1762]: 1). Here we have an echo of 17th century authors such as Wilkins and their notions of a philosophical language (Barber 1975: 137-41) though Lowth is much more practical and concrete in his approach.

2 Later a link between quality education and elocution became explicit and elocution became an established academic discipline. Again consider a case like the American Hallie Quinn Brown (1850-1949), who was an educator and elocutionist and instrumental in the setting up of women’s clubs for African Americans. In 1893 she was appointed professor of elocution at Wilberforce University, Ohio where she had studied as a young woman.

3 One could speculate why Walker’s rather than Sheridan’s pronunciation guide was to survive into the 19th century (Sheldon 1947). One reason could well be that educated individuals in Victorian England (Phillipps 1984) were not inclined to use the work of an Irishman as a yardstick of correctness in their own language.

4 See Mugglestone (2003: 44f.) for some comments on the possible influence of Walker and Sheridan on the pronunciation of English by the natives of Ireland.
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