Irish English in early modern drama: 
The birth of a linguistic stereotype

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A number of dramatic texts are scrutinised here for the linguistic analysis of Irish English in the early modern period. A broad range of different plays by authors from the late sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries are examined to determine if the non-standard spellings contained in these texts reflect genuine features of spoken Irish English at the time of writing. The analysis shows that some of the features which the textual record reveals have disappeared entirely while others have been confined to specific varieties in certain phonotactic environments while yet others persist in general Irish English today. The texts considered are furthermore useful when determining the earliest attestations for known features of Irish English.

1. Introduction

At the very end of the sixteenth and throughout the seventeenth centuries, English authors began to produce dramas which contained portrayals of non-English individuals. These portrayals are generally negative, satirising individuals who were regarded as less cultivated than the English of the time with whom they were implicitly contrasted. Such writing is connected in no small part to Elizabethan and Jacobean notions of the value of English culture and the lower cultural status attached to those outside England. Elizabethan satire also rests on the notion of ‘Four Nations’ – England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland – and in particular uses characters from Scotland and Ireland in order to provide comic relief within English plays. Among the earliest writers to do this is Shakespeare in Henry V. In this play he created four characters, officers in the king’s army, and contrasted their personalities and speech in the Four Nations scene. There are a number of features which can be identified in the speech of Captain Macmorris (the Irishman in this scene) and which re-occur in later portrayals of the Irish well into the later modern period (see remarks in 2 below).

Parodies of non-English are found in dramas both on the level of contents and of language. Certain obvious features which were putatively typical of the non-English group being parodied were availed of to characterise their speech. This practice led to the birth of a linguistic stereotype which is central to the history of Irish English.

For the present chapter the features used by English drama writers to satirise the Irish will be examined in detail. The discussion will also be put in the broader context of how non-standard language is represented in writing (Taavitsainen and Nevanlinna 2000), i.e. it will look at how a tradition of portraying non-standard English became established in the seventeenth century. There is a considerable body of literature which focuses on this general topic. There are early treatments, above all Eckhardt (1910-11), Lawrence (1912), Duggan (1969 [1937]) and Bartley (1954) with Bliss (1979) a more recent study which
forms a bridge in the Irish context between scholars working in the first half of the twentieth century and those active at present. Blake (1981) is a similar study of some decades ago which looks at the broad English context, while Taavitsainen, Melchers and Pahta (eds, 2000) is a wide-ranging examination of the practice of representing non-standard English in literature in general and is the most recent book-length study of this subject.

1.1 The rise of the stage Irishman

When parliamentary rule in the middle of the seventeenth century ended the English king, Charles II, was restored to the English throne (1660). Cultural life in England after the return of Charles experienced a re-awakening, something which is clearly seen in the re-opening of the theatres in England. It led to a blossoming of drama, particularly comedies, and many of these had Irish characters in them. A type of dramatic character arose which later became known as the stage Irishman. To ensure that the Irish nature of this character was clearly recognised on the stage, English authors attempted to represent the speech of the Irish figures in their dramas. [Given the number of Irish figures who appear in English plays from the Restoration period onwards, there has been no shortage of manuals in which prominent features of Irish English are described, e.g. Blunt (1967). Blunt has a chapter on ‘Irish’ (1967: 75-90) in which he gives a series of guidelines to those prospective actors unfamiliar with an Irish accent of English. Other works which contain dialect descriptions for actors are Molin (1984) and Wise (1957). In such cases phonetic transcription is rare, rather some system based on English orthography is used.]

The figure of the stage Irishman (Duggan 1969 [1937]) has a long pedigree in English drama and in fact somewhat predates the Restoration period in England. The stereotypical picture of him is as an excitable, eloquent and pugnacious individual, with a fair portion of national pride. These are features which literary critics such as Kiberd (1980) see as consistent with the subsequent portrayals of the stage Irishman. His function as a foil within English literature is of significance and continued through the centuries, see Kosok (1990: 61-70) and the various references in Morash (2002). In the plays considered below, which have a mixture of Irish and English characters, the latter comment on the eccentricity of the former. For instance, in Captain O’Blunder the English sergeant comments on O’Blunder’s lack of logical thinking as when he suggests shooting the enemy and then flogging him. This illogicality is a feature of the so-called ‘Irish bull’, a short anecdote which satirises the putatively contradictory nature of Irish thinking (Edgeworth 1802).

1.2 The limits of reconstruction via satire

Documents illustrating Irish English from the early modern period fall into two distinct types, both of which are available from the seventeenth through to the nineteenth century.

(1) a. More or less genuine representations of Irish English by native Irish, frequently anonymous writers.
   b. Stretches of texts by English writers where the non-native perception of Irish English is portrayed.
Such texts can serve as general guidelines for the more salient features of Irish English (see Sullivan 1976, 1980 who supports this view). In essence, the difficulty is that one must rely on eye dialect. The orthography of English is not necessarily suitable for rendering the idiosyncrasies of Irish English and indeed one cannot assume that a non-native speaker’s attempt at caricaturing Irish English will be satisfying and accurate, though it may well give indications of what features of a dialect were salient to non-native ears, so to speak.

Furthermore, phonetic details cannot be indicated by spelling and so these will not be recoverable via the textual record. For example, the distinction between dental and alveolar stops, an essential one for varieties of Irish English to this day, cannot be represented with the orthography of English, though the use of a stop rather than a fricative can be, and was, indicated in spelling.

2 The late sixteenth century

Shakespeare’s historical play Henry V dates to 1599 and was printed in the 1620s. In the well-known Four Nations scene Shakespeare contrasts the manners and speech of a representative of each nation in the British Isles, i.e. England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The Irishman is Captain Macmorris who speaks on four occasions: what he says totals 204 words in all:

Macmorris. By Chrish Law tish ill done: the Worke ish giue ouer, the Trompet sound the Retreat. By my Hand I sweare, and my fathers Soule, the Worke ish ill done: it ish giue ouer: I would haue blowed vp the Towne, so Chrish saue me law, in an houre. O tish ill done, tish ill done: by my Hand tish ill done.

Macmorris. It is no time to discourse, so Chrish saue me: the day is hot, and the Weather, and the Warres, and the King, and the Dukes: it is no time to discourse, the Town is beseech’d: and the Trumpet call vs to the breech, and we talke, and be Chrish do nothing, tis shame for vs all: so God sa’me tis shame to stand still, it is shame by my hand: and there is Throats to be cut, and Workes to be done, and there ish nothing done, so Christ sa’me law.


Macmorris. I doe not know you so good a man as my selfe: so Chrish saue me, I will cut off your Head.

Table 1: Linguistic features of the Four Nations scene (Henry V)

1) Replacement of /s/ by /ʃ/, e.g. tish ‘it’s’, ish ‘is’, Chrish ‘Christ’.
2) Possibly [θ] for /v/, e.g. giue ‘give’, saue ‘save’, haue ‘have’. This interpretation would seem justified given that elsewhere in Henry V Shakespeare writes give, have, etc.
3) Devoicing of /dʒ/, e.g. beseech’d ‘besieged’.
4) Singular verb form despite plural subject with existential there, e.g. ...there is Throats to be cut...
Feature (1) is a consistent feature of Irish English in all literary representations and remained typical into the twentieth century. However, by the modern period the shift of /s/ to /ʃ/ was confined to a pre-consonantal environment in syllable codas, e.g. *west* [weʃt], *best* [beʃt].

Feature (2) is also a genuine feature of Irish English through its entire history (on its occurrence in Irish English in the fourteenth century, see Hickey 1993 and 2007, section 2.3). It rests on the fact that speakers of Irish frequently use bilabials realisations of /θ/ [θ] and /v/ [β], these then being transferred to their pronunciation of English. In present-day Irish these realisations are typical of western and northern pronunciations and they probably had a greater geographical scope in previous centuries. The variation in the realisation of Irish /θ/ and /v/ can be seen in the anglicisations of Irish names, e.g. Ó *Faoλain* which has been rendered as both *Pheelan* and *Wheelan* with /w/. In the reverse direction one has Irish /θ/ as the equivalent to English /w/ in loanwords like *faoitιn* from *whiting*. Given the bilabial and voiceless nature of Irish /θ/ one finds <f> written for <wh> in many early modern texts, e.g. *fat* for *what*.

Feature (3) is attested in many early modern texts though it is not typical of modern Irish English. However, in contact Irish English it is found given that Irish has no voiced sibilant (/ʃ/ and /ʒ/ do not occur in the language). Hence voiced fricatives which contain /ʒ/ were devoiced. This applied to loanwords from Anglo-Norman/English into Irish (which also show metathesis), e.g. *page* [-dʒ-] > *páiste* [pa:ʃtə] ‘child’, *college* [-dʒ-] > *coláiste* [ku:ltə] ‘college’.

Feature (4) is also documented throughout the entire history of Irish English and is found in all vernacular varieties of Irish English today. Generally, this phenomenon is known as the Northern Subject Rule (Ithalainen 1994), though it has been shown to occur in various parts of Britain. The original English input to Ireland was of a western or south-western nature so that the appearance of singular verb concord with plural subjects supports the view that this is by no means an exclusively northern feature in England.

There are other features of Irish English which are not shown by Shakespeare but indicated by his near contemporary Ben Jonson (see below) such as unshifted Middle English /i:/ and /u:/ which in London at around 1600 would have already been diphthongised to /æi/ and /v/ if not /æi/ and /ʌ/ respectively.

The anonymous play *Captain Thomas Stukeley* is available in a single edition from the year 1605 and probably dates from 1596. It contains one scene in Irish English, the seventh scene, which by some curious twist is present in two consecutive versions in the extant edition. The first version is in blank verse, like the remainder of the play, and the second is in prose. Bliss (1979: 32f.) supports the view that the Irish English scene is not by the author of the rest of the play and attributes a good knowledge of Irish affairs to its original composer. There are discussions of this play in older literature, notably Eckhardt (1910-1), Duggan (1937: 51-57) and Bartley (1954: 14-16). Some of this literature contains linguistic discussion, for instance when Eckhardt (1910-1: 38-41) deals with phonetic peculiarities of Irish English.

Table 2: Linguistic features of *Captain Thomas Stukeley*
1) (i) Replacement of /s/ by /ʃ/, e.g. Cresh blesh vs ‘Christ bless us’, ish ‘is’, tish ‘it is’, Shecretary ‘secretary’, (ii) replacement of /ʃ/ by /s/, e.g. sall ‘shall’.

2) (i) Use of [f] for wh-[w], e.g. feete ‘white’, fate ‘what’, fan ‘when’; (ii) Use of [v] for /w/, valles ‘walls’, vater ‘water’, (iii) Possibly [β] for /v/, e.g. giue ‘give’, euen ‘even’.

3) Stopping of interdental fricatives, too, ‘thou’, turd ‘third’.

4) Unshifted Middle English /u:/, e.g. toone ‘town’, prood ‘proud’, aboote ‘about’.

5) Unshifted Middle English /i:/, e.g. feete ‘white’, dree ‘dry’, lee ‘lie’.

6) Lowering of /e/ to /a/, e.g. ovare ‘over’.

Feature (1) shows replacement in both directions in this document. /ʃ/ by /s/ is not found in the Four Nations scene but it is attested in the early fourteenth-century Kildare Poems (Hickey 1993).

Feature (2) shows additional complexities with /w/ being substituted by [v], probably due to the merging of [v] and [w] under [β]. The variation among labial fricatives both in early Irish English (again in the Kildare Poems) and in Anglo-Norman/English loanwords into Irish is considerable. In the latter one finds the substitution of /b/ for /w/, e.g. balla ‘wall’, probably because the form [wal] was regarded by the Irish as showing lenition (a change of stop to fricative) and was ‘reversed’ on borrowing, yielding initial /b-/ in Irish.

Feature (3) is again known from the late medieval period and is characteristic of vernacular forms of Irish English to this day. The spelling used to indicate this stopping is generally t for voiceless th /θ/ and d for voiced th /ð/. This feature is among the most salient in Irish English and has been repeatedly indicated in stage-Irish portrayals in early modern and late modern literature.

Features (4) and (5) show that the English long vowel shift (the ‘Great Vowel Shift’, Pyles and Algeo 1993 [1964]: 170-3) was not found in varieties of Irish English. Because of this the vowels written as <a, i, u> were pronounced as /a:/, /i:/, /u:/.

Evidence of this can also be found in English loanwords in Irish, e.g. bácús /baːk조사 ‘bakehouse’ and slísín /slisʲn/ ‘little slice, rasher’ which show unshifted /a:/, /i:/, /u:/.

In general this vowel shift was slow to be implemented in Ireland: /aː/, /iː/ and /uː/ were recorded in the FACE, PRICE and MOUTH lexical sets respectively (Wells 1982) until the early eighteenth century. Unraised long E is also part of the English long vowel shift: it stems from Middle English /eː/ (the vowel in meat /meːt/ and by extension the vowel in meet /meːt/ with which it later merged). Long E (either from /eː/ or /eː/) was not raised to /iː/ in Ireland and nineteenth-century, supraregional Irish English (Hickey forthcoming) adopted an /iː/ pronunciation in line with mainstream British English.

Feature (6) shows a lowering of /e/ to /a/ before /r/. This is the same feature as found in barn, dark, parson, and county names like Derbyshire, Berkshire, Hertfordshire, etc. in British English. It had a much wider range in Irish English, either due to its quantitative representation in input varieties or to an extension of the /eːr/ > /ar/ shift within Ireland. The feature is very widespread in texts representing Irish English up to the late nineteenth century after which it disappears. It is not found in present-day spoken Irish English anymore. In writing the shift is indicated by <ar>, e.g. sarve ‘serve’ sarch
‘search’. Because the form *sarve* is so frequent in the textual record, the shift is termed SERVE-lowering in the present chapter.

3 The seventeenth century

The early seventeenth century marked the appearance of *The Irish Masque at Court* (1616) by Ben Jonson (1572-1637) which illustrates the satirical portrayal of Irish characters by an English author. This is a drama piece, some six pages long, in which four Irish characters – Dennish, Donnell, Dermock and Patrick – are made fun of by Jonson.

Table 3: Linguistic features of *The Irish Masque at Court*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1)</td>
<td>Replacement of /s/ by /ʃ/, e.g. <em>chreesh</em> ‘Christ’, <em>blesh</em> ‘bless’, <em>tish</em> ‘it is’, <em>shweet</em> ‘sweet’, <em>shpeake</em> ‘speak’, <em>faish</em> ‘face’, <em>shay</em> ‘say’, <em>besht</em> ‘best’, <em>pleash</em> ‘please’, <em>vash</em> ‘was’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2)</td>
<td>(i) Use of <em>ph</em>- [f] for <em>wh</em>- [ʍ], e.g. <em>phair</em> ‘where’, <em>phich</em> ‘which’; (ii) <em>ph</em>- [f] for <em>w</em>- [w], e.g. <em>phit</em> ‘with’; (iii) Use of [v] for /w/, <em>vilt</em> ‘wilt’, <em>vay</em> ‘way’, <em>vorsht</em> ‘worst’, (iv) Possibly [θ] for /v/, e.g. <em>sherviuce</em> ‘service’, <em>fiue</em> ‘five’, <em>giue</em> ‘give’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3)</td>
<td>Stopping of interdental fricatives, <em>tou</em>, ‘thou’, <em>tat</em> ‘that’, <em>te</em> ‘the’, <em>ten</em> ‘then’, <em>fayt</em> ‘faith’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4)</td>
<td>Unshifted Middle English /iː/, e.g. <em>creesh</em> ‘Christ’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5)</td>
<td>Unshifted Middle English /eː/, e.g. <em>hee</em> ‘he’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6)</td>
<td>Low vowel retraction and raising, e.g. <em>daunsh</em> ‘dance’.</td>
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<td>7)</td>
<td>Lowering of /er/ to /ar/, e.g. <em>var</em> ‘where’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8)</td>
<td>(i) Final devoicing, e.g. <em>got</em> ‘god’, <em>gotsh</em> ‘god’s’, <em>ant</em> ‘and’, <em>heet</em> ‘heed’, (ii) Sibilant devoicing, e.g. <em>doshen</em> ‘dozen’.</td>
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Feature (1) shows the unconditioned realisation of /s/ as /ʃ/. It occurs word-finally, prepausally and before a stop, and also initially before a vowel and before a stop.

Feature (2) shows a similar degree of variation to that in *Captain Thomas Stukeley*. Jonson writes *ph*-, presumably to indicate a sound different from English /f/. This would suggest the bilabial voiceless fricative [φ].

Features (4) and (5) suggest that the English long vowel shift had not taken place, e.g. *chreesh* ‘Christ’ points to Middle English /iː/ and the spelling *hee* for ‘he’ would seem to imply /he:/ with Middle English /eː/. However, the dangers of putting too much store by English representations of Irish English are evident here: Jonson implies in spellings such as *mout* ‘mouth’, *now* ‘now’, *tou* ‘thou’ that Middle English /uː/ had shifted, or at least he leaves the matter undecided as he does not avail of the spelling <oo> in such words (as did the author of *Captain Thomas Stukeley*).

Feature (6) is only attested in one word in Jonson, but it is found in later texts. It implies that /aː/ was raised to /aː/, perhaps first before nasals and later unconditionally. This feature is censured by Thomas Sheridan (1781: 144f.) in the late eighteenth century. He mentions *psalm* with [ɔː] which shows a raising of /ɔː/, itself a retraction of /aː/. The
raising of low vowels along a back trajectory was later reversed (Hickey 2002a) and lowering became typical and remained so into the twentieth century only being reversed to a raising tendency in contemporary emergent varieties of supraregional Irish English (Hickey 2003).

Feature (7) is the same type of lowering of /er/ > /ar/ which was found occasionally in Captain Thomas Stukeley. It is worth commenting on the fact that none of the plays looked at so far have many tokens of this feature (this contrasts starkly with later cases). This might imply that the feature was not very widespread in Irish English at the time. It may well be that the later high incidence of /er/ > /ar/ was due to renewed English input in the mid-seventeenth century as a consequence of the Cromwellian settlements which provided land to English soldiers who had rendered military service to Cromwell and whom he had to recompense. If this is the case then the varieties of English brought to the south of Ireland in the mid seventeenth century were responsible for the later widespread appearance of /er/ > /ar/ in Irish English.

Feature (8) has two variants. The first is final devoicing which is attested in later texts. It is also found in present-day vernacular rural varieties of Irish English but only in post-sonorant position, e.g. *beyond* [bɪˈjænt], *killed* [kɪlt]. The second variant is the devoicing of all sibilants of English whether /z/ or /ʒ/, whether on their own or in clusters or affricates. This is a clear transfer feature from Irish which has no voiced sibilants.

Reviewing the above features and considering their putative genuineness the question can be asked how a writer like Ben Jonson attained his knowledge of Irish English. He is not known to have been in Ireland (though he did visit Scotland). Perhaps he acquired some acquaintance of Irish English from inmates during his many spells in prison in London and/or through contact with Irish vagrants of which there were many in England in the early seventeenth century (Edwards 1973: 139). The latter may also have been true for Shakespeare.

4 The eighteenth century

4.1 Drama in the eighteenth century

Not all Irish or Irish-related drama in the early modern period is centred around the stage Irishman. Dramatists were active at the beginning of the eighteenth century who worked in the Restoration tradition of the comedy of manners. William Congreve (1670-1729) and George Farquhar (1678-1707) are probably the two best examples. Congreve was born in Leeds but his father was posted on military service to Ireland which led to his son being educated there, first at Kilkenny School and later at Trinity College, Dublin, where he was a fellow student of Swift. He is the author of a number of dramas, the best known of which is probably *The Way of the World* (1700). The language of his plays does not, however, betray any non-standard features and cannot be taken as particularly Irish in character.

George Farquhar, was born in Derry and later started studying in Trinity College, Dublin and then worked as an actor in the Smock Alley theatre, playing major Shakespearian roles. He left for London in 1697 where he began as a playwright. His best known comedy, *The Beaux Stratagem* (1707), was written just before he died. Farquhar is one of the last Restoration dramatists and his many plays, such as *The Twin Rivals* (1702)
and *The Stage Coach* (1704), had a strong influence on subsequent writers in the eighteenth century, including novelists like Fielding, Smollett and Defoe. His plays sometimes contain Irish characters and Farquhar attempted to represent the Irish speech of his time.

The later eighteenth century (Morash 2002: 67-93) saw the novelist and dramatist Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774) produce his popular comedy *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) as well as the Dublin playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816) begin his dramatic production in 1775 with *The Rivals* which was a success at Covent Garden. Soon afterwards, Sheridan produced his own major work, *The School for Scandal* (1778), which was quickly followed by another comedy of considerable merit, *The Critic* (1779). Neither Goldsmith nor Sheridan were particularly concerned with representing Irish speech in their plays. Indeed it was Sheridan’s father, the elocutionist Thomas Sheridan (1719-1788), who in his one play, *Captain O’Blunder or The Brave Irishman* (1740/1754), did portray Irish speech by manipulating English spellings using conventions which are reminiscent of Ben Jonson, e.g. ph- for [ϕ]. The following two extracts show stretches of Irish English from pieces by Farquhar and Thomas Sheridan. In the first extract the figure Teague speaks. The name used here – deriving from the Irish first name Tadhg – is a typical name used for Irish characters in early modern drama. In the second extract the eponymous hero of the play – *Captain O’Blunder* – is speaking and, given his telling name, it is hardly necessary to say that he is a figure of satire.

(1) George Farquhar: *The Twin Rivals* (1702/1703)

Teague. *Fet* [what], dear Joy, ‘tis the bravest *Plaase* [place] I have *sheen* [seen] in my Peregrinations, *exsheping* [excepting] my nown brave *Shitty* [city] of Carick-Vergus. – *uf, uf, dere ish* [there is] a very fragrant *Shmell* [smell] hereabouts. – *Maishter* [master], shall I run to that *Paishtry* [pastry]-Cooks for *shix* [six] penywroths of boil’d Beef?


Teague. *Be me Shoul* [By my soul], my *fole* [whole] Generation *ish* [is] so. – I have *noting* [nothing] but *thish* [this] poor Portmantel, and *dat* [that] it *shelf ish* [self is] not my own.

Teague. [Aside.] I will tell a *Lee* [lie] now; but it shall be a true one. – Macfadin, dear Joy, was his *Naam* [name]. He *vent* [went] over *vith* [with] King Jamish into France. – He was my Master once. – *Dere ish de* [there is] the true *Lee, noo* [lie, now].

Table 4: Linguistic features of *The Twin Rivals*

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<tr>
<td>1)</td>
<td>Replacement of /s/ by /ʃ/, e.g. <em>sheen</em> ‘seen’, <em>ish</em> ‘is’, <em>shix</em> ‘six’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2)</td>
<td>Use of [ϕ] for /ʍ/, e.g. <em>fet</em> ‘what’, <em>fole</em> ‘whole’; shift of /w/ to /v/, e.g. <em>vent</em> ‘went’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4)</td>
<td>Low vowel retraction and raising, e.g. <em>tauke</em> ‘take’</td>
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<td>5)</td>
<td>Unshifted Middle English /iː/, e.g. <em>lee</em> ‘lie’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6)</td>
<td>Unshifted Middle English /aː/, e.g. <em>naam</em> ‘name’</td>
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7) Unshifted Middle English /u:/, e.g. noo ‘now’

(2) Thomas Sheridan: Captain O’Blunder or The Brave Irishman (1740/1754)

Captain. Yesh [yes], you shons [sons] of whores, don’t you see by my dress that I am a shentleman [gentleman]? And if I have not better cloaths [clothes] on now, phat [what] magnifies that? Sure I can have them on to-morrow.

Captain. Arra then! ... and they know my faash [face] ever since – Shir [Sir].

Captain. O, ... you mean my chister’s [sister’s] husband...

Table 5: Linguistic features of Captain O’Blunder

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<tr>
<td>1)</td>
<td>Replacement of /s/ by /ʃ/, e.g. yesh ‘yes’, shons ‘sons’, shix ‘six’, shivil ‘civil’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2)</td>
<td>Shift of /ʃ/ to /tʃ/, e.g. chister ‘sister’, Chergeant ‘sergeant’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3)</td>
<td>Use of ph [f] for /ʍ/, e.g. phat ‘what’, phipt ‘whipped’, phat ‘what’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4)</td>
<td>Unshifted Middle English /æ:/, e.g. faash ‘face’, plaash ‘place’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5)</td>
<td>Raising of /e/ to /i/ before nasals: phin ‘when’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6)</td>
<td>Verbal -s as marker of narrative present, e.g. And so you tells me ... ; if I catches any of these...</td>
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Feature (2) is common in Irish English of the late modern period and occasionally rendered orthographically as here. It was commented on in the early twentieth century by P. W. Joyce (1979 [1910]: 98): ‘there is a curious tendency among us to reverse the sounds of certain letters, as for instance sh and ch ‘When you’re coming to-morrow bring the spade and chovel, and a pound of butter frech from the shurn’.

Feature (5) is not represented before Sheridan and he himself has only one token. As this is easily represented in English spelling it may well be that it simply was not widely present in Irish English in the early eighteenth century. But by the nineteenth century the unconditioned raising of /e/ to /i/ became a salient feature of Irish English and one which is repeatedly indicated in dramas with Irish characters. In present-day rural Irish English of the south-west and mid-west the conditioned raising before nasals is still found but the unconditioned raising does not occur anymore.

This is the first attestation of feature (6) in Irish drama and points to the existence of this feature in Irish English already in the early eighteenth century. It is still widespread in vernacular varieties, both rural and urban.

Sheridan’s piece is noticeable for not having some features which were definitely present in vernacular Irish English of his day. For instance, he does not use t/d for th to indicate stopping of the voiceless and voiced fricatives.

The term ‘brogue’

Sheridan would appear to be the first dramatist to use the word ‘brogue’ (Murphy 1943) in a play when referring to an Irish accent of English (Sconce to Captain O’Blunder: ...you have not the least bit of the brogue about you.). This term was afterwards used repeatedly to characterise the speech of Irish characters in satirical and/or sentimental
drama, e.g. by Dion Boucicault in his play The Colleen Bawn (1860):

Eily, with her awkward manners, her Kerry brogue, her ignorance of the usages of society.
... but I’m gettin’ clane of the brogue, and learnin’ to do nothing - I’m to be changed entirely.
When I am angry the brogue comes out
May the brogue of ould Ireland niver forsake your tongue

In another play, The Shaughraun (1875), Captain Molineux, a young English Officer, remarks favourably on the Irish English accent (after hearing Claire Ffolliott, a Sligo lady, say you mane [me:n] ‘you mean’): Delicious brogue - quite delicious! By this stage (the second half of the nineteenth century) there was a certain reverse pride in the use of an Irish accent in English as can be seen from a later comment by Claire Ffolliott in the same play: That speech only wanted a taste of the brogue to be worthy of an Irishman.

The eighteenth century also saw some minor dramatists of sentimental comedies who are now more or less forgotten. Of these one could mention John O’Keefe (1747-1833) who was quite successful and devised a distinctly Irish mode for plays produced in Ireland, often in the reputable Smock Alley Theatre (Morash 2002: 71-74).

The documents for English in eighteenth-century Ireland are fairly abundant, at least compared to those for the centuries before this. The dramas by English authors give an indication of what features of Irish English were generally known to an English audience. Seen from this point of view, a play like A Wife Well Managed (1715) by Susannah Centlivre (1667-1723) is of interest. In general, there is more linguistic detail in the plays written by Irish authors themselves, e.g. by John Michelbourne (1646-1721) whose tragi-comedy Ireland Preserved, or the Siege of Londonderry (1705) contains a lot of information on language. This short piece is noticeable for a number of reasons, e.g. it contains the first recorded instance of the habitual do of later Irish English and has several instances of the after perfective (Hickey 2000).

Table 6: Linguistic features of Ireland Preserved

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) (i) replacement of /s/ by /ʃ/, e.g. plaash ‘place’, graash ‘grace’, (ii) replacement of /ʃ/ by /s/, e.g. seep ‘sheep’, sall ‘shall’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Possibly /f/ for /w/, e.g. fee ‘we’, fill ‘will’, faarne ‘warm’, fell ‘well’; /f/ for /ʍ/, e.g. fen ‘when’, fy ‘why’; /f/ for /v/ before /ɑ/, e.g. waacancy ‘vacancy’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Low vowel retraction and raising, e.g. laubour [lɔ:ˈbʊr] ‘labour’, mauke ‘make’ [mɔ:k].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Shift of /ʃ/ to /ʃ/, e.g. shamber ‘chamber’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Unshifted Middle English /eɪ/, e.g. fee ‘we’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Unshifted Middle English /ɑ/, e.g. graash ‘grace’, haast ‘haste’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Unshifted Middle English /ɔ/, e.g. cloaths [-ɔː-] ‘clothes’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9) Possible final stress in cases like bacoan [ba'kə:n], trooparr [tru:'par], labour [lə:'bər] ‘labour’, shouldar [ʃəul'dər] ‘shoulder’.

10) Habitual do: and fen de Trooparr do get up, he does go and bring home de Seep and de Muck ... and no body do taake any ting from me ‘...and when the trooper do get up, he do go and bring home the sheep and the pig ... and nobody do take anything from me’.

11) After perfective; he has been after wearing dem himself ‘he has been wearing them himself’, l'll bee after telling dee de Raison ‘I will have told you the reason’, ...and I fill be after doing fell for my shelf ‘...I will have done well for myself’.

12) Finite be: We be dose de Rebels call Rapparees, we be de Kings good Voluntiers. ‘We are those the rebels call rapparees, we are the King’s good volunteers.’

Features (1) to (3) are those found in other texts, see comments above. Feature (4) is the reverse of the shift of /ʃ/ to /tʃ/ as was found in Sheridan’s play (cf. chister ‘sister’, see remarks above). Features (5), (6) and (7) show the lack of the Great Vowel Shift as one would expect in an Irish English text from about 1700. Feature (8), the stopping of interdental fricatives is unremarkable in the Irish English context.

Feature (9), assuming the interpretation of the spelling is correct, is an archaic feature of Irish English, namely final stress in words ending in a sonorant (here /n/ or /r/). This stress pattern is known from Anglo-Norman and words borrowed from it into Irish (in southern Irish, Hickey 1997) and from the archaic dialect of Forth and Bargy in the south-east corner of Ireland (Hickey 2007: section 2.4).

The remaining three features – (10), (11) and (12) – are syntactic and show that by 1700 two of the central features of Irish English grammar, the after perfective and habitual do, were already clearly established. The instances of uninflected be in this text show that this prominent feature of vernacular Irish English was also present, probably an archaic feature (see Hickey 2007: section 4.4.1 ‘The verbal area’).

4.2 Summary of features up to 1800

By the end of the early modern period (c 1800) a number of features of Irish English were clearly established and represented with reasonable consistency in different dramas by various authors. The general regularity of the representations would imply that the authors not just copied from each other but that the features in question were indeed present in Irish English contemporary to the author in question. These features are summarised in the following table with the approximate date when they ceased to be attested in the textual record given in the right-most column.

Table 7: Historical features of early modern Irish English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Realisation</th>
<th>Representation</th>
<th>Attested until</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vowels</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Long U-retention</td>
<td>now [nu:]</td>
<td>&lt;oo&gt;, noo</td>
<td>mid 18c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Long I-retention</td>
<td>lie [li:]</td>
<td>&lt;ee&gt;, lee</td>
<td>mid 18c</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Long A-retention  
   face [fæs]  <aa>, faash  
   mid 18c

4. Long OA-retention  
   clothes [klɔz]  <oa>, cloaths  
   mid 18c

5. A-back raising  
   take [tɔk]  <au>, tauke  
   late 18c

6. SERVE lowering  
   serve [sarv]  <ar>, sarve  
   late 19c

7. A-raising  
   what [fet]  <e>, fet  
   early 20c

8. Short E-raising  
   yes [jɪs]  <ɪ>, yis  
   now only pre-nasally

9. Unraised long E  
   speak [spe:k]  <aCe>, spake  
   today, recessive

10. OL-diphthongisation  
    old [auld]  <ou>, ould  
    today, restricted

Consonants

11. F [θ] for WH  
    when [θen]  <f, ph> fen  
    19c

12. V [β] for W  
    went [βent]  <v> vent  
    19c

13. S-palatalisation  
    self [ʃɛlf]  <sh>, shelf  
    today, recessive

14. SH-CH exchange  
    sister [ʃɪstə]  <ch>, chister  
    early 20c

15. TH-fortition  
    nothing [nʌtɪŋ]  <ɪ>, noting  
    today

Notes

1-4 The English long vowel shift which began during the late Middle English period in England, was slow to be implemented in Ireland. /u/ and /i/ were recorded in the MOUTH and PRICE lexical sets respectively until the mid eighteenth century. Unraised long E is also connected to the English long vowel shift: the vowel stems from Middle English /e:/ (and by extension from words with /e:/ in Middle English) which was not raised to /i:/ in Ireland. In the nineteenth century, non-local Irish English speakers adopted an /i:/ pronunciation in line with mainstream British English. /æ/ in the FACE lexical set and /ə/ in the GOAT set are further evidence that the long vowel shift had not taken place in Ireland by the mid eighteenth century.

5 This feature was censured by Thomas Sheridan in the late eighteenth century, see Sheridan (1781: 141). Its origin is uncertain.

6 Lowering before /r/ had a much wider range in Irish English, probably due to its quantitative representation in input varieties.

7 This feature appears to have been continued with some speakers into the twentieth century (it was a prominent characteristic of conservative Received Pronunciation until the mid-twentieth century, Bauer 1994: 120f.).

8 Short E-raising is common today, but only in south-west and mid-west rural Irish English and only in pre-nasal position, e.g. when [ʍi:n], pen [pɪn]. Joyce (1979 [1910]: 100) states that ‘short e is always sounded before n and m, and sometimes in other positions, like short i: “How many arrived? Tin min and five women.””

9 Unraised long E has a special status as a stereotypically Irish feature which has been lexicalised in the expletive Jaysus! [dʒɛzəz] and in set expressions like lea’ [leː] me alone! It is found regularly in vernacular varieties throughout Ireland.

10 OL-diphthongisation is most common with old and bold today. Joyce (1979 [1910]: 99) mentions it with reference to these words and to hould where it is not found in supraregional speech today. However, in vernacular varieties, both north and south, there is a greater range of forms with OL-diphthongisation. Pre-1800 texts do not show this diphthongisation, but it
must have been present seeing as how it is an inherited feature of early varieties of English taken to Ireland. The feature was already noted in England by John Ray in 1674.

11-12 What appears to have happened here is that speakers used Irish non-palatal /f/ (phonetically [φ]) as an equivalent for [w] and Irish non-palatal /v/ (phonetically [β]) for [w] during language shift. In eye dialect the bilabial fricative [φ] is rendered as f or ph, and its voiced counterpart [β] as v or u. This development would appear to be independent of developments in Britain, although a case might be made for the transportation of [φ] and [β] to the Caribbean by indentured Irish in the seventeenth century (see Trudgill, Schreier, Long and Williams 2004 on approximants in this context but without a consideration of the Irish situation).

13-14 S-palatalisation (the shift of /s/ to /ʃ/) is a still feature of contact Irish English, e.g. best [bɛst] and is generally confined to syllable codas in pre-consonantal position.

15 TH-fortition takes on two forms (i) fortition to dental stops and (ii) fortition to alveolar stops. The former is part of supraregional Irish English, e.g. thin [tɪn], this [ðɪs], whereas the latter is stigmatised. In the textual record there is no means of telling whether the non-standard spellings indicate fortition to an alveolar or to a dental stop. This is a phonetic detail which is simply not recoverable via English orthography.

5 The nineteenth century

The history of Irish English can be divided into two periods, an early one which began in the late Middle Ages and continued until the sixteenth century and a second period which began around 1600. The features of the early period were by and large replaced from the seventeenth century onwards. Some phonetic traces of English from the first period (before 1600) were to be found during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries and can be seen in colloquial Dublin English today, e.g. unshifted [u] in the STRUT lexical set (Hickey 2005). Features of a phonological nature, e.g. vowel values which contrasted in the sound system of Irish English, were generally aligned to those of English in England by the eighteenth century. A few were retained by relegation to the vernacular level, i.e. by representing an alternative, non-standard pronunciation which is still used for local flavour in colloquial Irish English, e.g. ‘Unshifted long E’ as in leave, tea, eat, speak with [eː] or [eː] rather than [iː].

Nonetheless, there are features of early modern Irish English which are shown clearly in dramatic representations of Irish accents of English into the 18th century. For example, George Farquhar in his play The Beaux’ Stratagem (1707) has /a:/ in the FACE lexical set. Somewhat later, Jonathan Swift used end-rhymes which indicate that for him words like placed and last rhymed. At the end of the eighteenth century, Thomas Sheridan criticised the Irish use of /a:/ in matron, patron, etc.

But by the mid-nineteenth century there are no more references to /a:/ in the FACE
lexical set (or to the unshifted vowels in the MOUTH and PRICE sets for that matter). The playwright Dion Boucicault, who shows many non-standard pronunciations in his dramas, does not indicate unshifted Middle English /a:/ when writing some eighty years after Sheridan. The older pronunciation was replaced by the newer one in the generations between the late eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth century, i.e. within three generations.

This kind of development can be shown to have applied to a number of features. For instance, SERVE-lowering appears to have died out during the nineteenth century: By the beginning of the twentieth century the feature had all but disappeared.

Table 8: Development of Irish English features since 1800

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features which have disappeared entirely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vowels</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unshifted long U, I, A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-back raising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SERVE lowering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-raising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consonants</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S palatalisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SH depalatalisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SH-CH interchange</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features which have developed a more restricted occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Restriction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unraised long E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short E-raising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final devoicing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OL-diphthongisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[φ] for WH, [β] for W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confined to few words, e.g. old [aul], bold [baul]</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only in vernacular varieties, not for all words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only pre-nasally in south-west and mid-west</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only after sonorants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only in contact Irish English, if at all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persistent features in the history of Irish English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TH-fortition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitual do, after perfective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table might suggest that of all the phonetic features discussed in this chapter only TH-fortition has survived since the early modern period. However, the comments above refer to features which are clearly indicated in non-standard English spellings. There are many other features which cannot be represented via the orthography and hence are ‘invisible’ in the textual record. For instance, the lenition of /t/ in post-vocalic, intervocalic or pre-pausal position is not shown in writing but must have been an established feature of Irish English for some time, not least because it was transported abroad, e.g. to Newfoundland in the eighteenth century by Irish migrant labourers in the fishing industry and later by settlers (Hickey 2002b).

6 Conclusion

The development of specific features of Irish English can be traced in dramatic texts from about 1600 onwards. These texts are largely satirical in nature and general contrast Irish English speakers with those who language was more formal or standard. While it is true that only a selection of salient features are picked out by all authors, the re-occurrence of
these across texts of different types would point to their existing in spoken Irish English of the early modern period.

In many cases one is dealing with features which no longer exist in Irish English so that the ‘bad data’ of satirical drama is indeed the only source for the features in question. This means that the written word in this form is the only linguistic evidence for many aspects of Irish English at the onset of the modern period. In other cases the texts are useful as early attestations of features which persist to this day. Either way, the acceptance of these records as sources for linguistic analysis is justified. This assumes that cross-comparison and comparison with present-day varieties is done in each case to ensure the maximum degree of reliability for statements about early modern Irish English made on the basis of the textual record.

References


