Rural and urban Ireland: a question of language?

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Introduction

A cursory glance at a map of Ireland not only reveals a geographical division of the country into a northern and a southern part but also a clear delimitation of town and countryside. The cities in Ireland are all on the coast and are all some distance from each other. There are no conurbations in Ireland comparable to that of Liverpool-Manchester or Birmingham-Coventry in England or the cities of the Ruhr area of Germany. But both halves of the country are dominated by a single large city: Belfast for Northern Ireland and Dublin for the Republic of Ireland. These cities have extended into their respective hinterlands in the twentieth century, greatly enlarging their metropolitan areas in the process. All other cities are considerably smaller as can be seen from the following table of approximate sizes (rounded up to the nearest thousand). The figures for Belfast and Derry are based on the 2001 United Kingdom Census. Those for the remaining cities derive from the 2006 Republic of Ireland Census. Note that the tripartite division into (i) city area, (ii) urban area and (iii) metropolitan area only applies to the four largest cities.

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In both the north and the south of Ireland the metropolitan area of the respective capital occupies well over one third of the entire population. This situation is necessarily reflected in the culture of the two halves of the country. For the Republic of Ireland there are various levels on which a binary division into Dublin and the rest of the country is made.
The urban-rural split in literature

In the literature of the south one can see clearly that there is a metropolitan group of writers and a second group outside of this. Among the first group is James Joyce (1882-1941) as the novelist par excellence of early twentieth-century Dublin with Sean O’Casey (1880-1964) as the corresponding dramatist, even though the topics of their literary works are very different. The Dublin line of novelists continued through the twentieth century with authors like Flann O’Brien (pseudonym of Brian O’Nolan, 1911-1966), a linguistic manipulator in the tradition of Joyce (Huber 1988), and extends into the present with Roddy Doyle, the most prominent popular representative of Dublin literature today (Kirk 1997).

The representation of the countryside in literature is more intricate and in many respects more multi-faceted. The reason for this is that many of the writers who have displayed life in the countryside and along the seaboard were not in fact from these areas. In this context the most idiosyncratic (Kiberd 1979; Kelly 1988) is probably John Millington Synge (1871-1909) because the life he portrayed, and importantly, the language which he used to do this, was several removes from reality, despite his protestations to the contrary. Other writers who did indeed come from rural Ireland, such as John B. Keane, gave a portrayal of country life which at least in language is closer structurally to the rural forms of the English language which are known from linguistic investigations.

In the literary landscape of Ireland Dublin is not the only city which was home to major writers. In the twentieth century Cork was heavily represented, e.g. by Frank O’Connor (pseudonym of Michael O’Donovan, 1903-1966) and Seán Ó Faoláin (1900-1991), to mention two of the more prominent writers from this city.

The rural-urban divide has applied to writers in the north of Ireland as much as to the south. In the first half of the nineteenth century the novelist William Carleton (1794-1869) wrote in his early novels about country life in his native Co. Tyrone (McCafferty 2005, 2008). In the later twentieth century rural Ulster moved centre stage with the rural poetry of the Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney (1939- ).

A special subgroup of creative writers are those who came from the Irish-speaking areas. There are some who always wrote in Irish, such as the Connemara writers Pádraig Ó Conaire (1882-1928), the author of Deoraíocht ‘Exile’ and Martín Ó Cadhain (1906-1970, author of Cré na Cille ‘Clay of the graveyard’) and the group of Blasket writers (Co. Kerry) from the early twentieth century, notably Muiris Ó Suailleabháin (1904-1950, author of Fiche Blian ag Fás ‘Twenty years a-growing’) and Tomás Ó Criomhthain (1854-1937, author of An t-Oileánach ‘The Islander’).

Other writers used both languages (Zach 1988), notably Liam O’Flaherty (1896-1984), from the Aran Islands, who wrote novels such as Famine and The Informer in English but short story collections like Dúil ‘Desire’ in Irish. Still others came from the Gaeltacht (‘Irish-speaking district’) but wrote solely in English, e.g. Patrick McGill (1889-1963), who wrote novels like Children of the Dead End and The Rat Pit at the time of World War I (Amador Moreno 2006).

Even this short section on Irish writers of the twentieth century shows that there is a clear dichotomy between town and countryside. For the present chapter
the question is whether this is furthermore reflected in a difference in language. To answer this question one must first of all trace briefly the history of Irish accents of English, mostly in the perception of outsiders, usually English observers. Historically, the accent of Irish English was taken to be a country accent as it was regarded as typical of those individuals who lacked urban sophistication.

**A name for an accent: ‘brogue’**

A country accent of Irish English is termed *brogue* and this label was already in use in the seventeenth century and became clearly established in the eighteenth century (used by Swift, for instance, in his ‘On barbarous denominations in Ireland’). The first mention of the term *brogue* would appear to be by John Skelton (?1460-1529) in *Speke, Parrot* (?1521) in which a parrot imitates various languages and dialects, including that of Ireland. The term is also associated with that volatile and pugnacious character of many early modern dramas, the Stage Irishman (Duggan 1969 [1937]; Kiberd 1980), whose language illustrates the popular perception of the brogue, both within Ireland and outside, mainly in England.

‘Brogue’, meaning an Irish accent of English, may come from the Irish word for ‘shoe’ or it maybe from the word *barróg* meaning ‘knot in the tongue’ (Bergin 1943; Murphy 1943). The use of ‘brogue’ as a reference to a non-standard accent became common in later centuries among British commentators on the Irish use of English as the following remarks by Benjamin Smart in the early nineteenth century show:

*Hints for softening a Hibernian Brogue*

The first point our Western friend must attend to for this purpose is, to avoid hurling out his words with a superfluous quantity of breath. It is not ‘broadher’ and ‘louder’ that he must say, but the ‘d’ and every other consonant in the language must be neatly delivered by the tongue, with as little riot, cluttering, or breathing as possible. (Smart 1836: xli)

The contemporary use of the *brogue* implies a low-status accent of English in Ireland, typically a rural dialect, though there have in the past been attempts to improve the perception of it (Walsh 1926). The term is not used by the Irish to refer to their own forms of English because of its negative connotations.

**Avoiding your own accent: hypercorrection**

Hypercorrection is a phenomenon where speakers of one variety try to imitate another. Generally, the one they are imitating or aspiring to is the standard of the language in question, here English. In Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were many features which differed between the standard and local forms of English. Those speakers of the latter often overshot the mark
when trying to speak the standard. Take for instance, the widespread use of the vowel in *face* in words like *meat* and *beat* in Irish English. This led to those people who had this pronunciation producing words like *great* and *bear* pronounced as if they were written *greet* and *beer* respectively. Gradually, these pronunciations disappeared as speakers had more exposure to standard English because of education. Later, they acquired the standard pronunciation to begin with and hypercorrection waned away.

In the Ireland of the eighteenth, and probably the nineteenth centuries, when pronunciations like those just mentioned were not confined to specific styles, hypercorrection was common. Both Sheridan (1781) and Walker (1791) remark on the fact that the Irish frequently say *greet, beer, sweer*, unaware of the fact that these words had the vowel in *face* rather than that in *street*, the normal realisation of the vowel in words like *tea, sea, please*, in more standard varieties of English.

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*!’ (Edgeworth 1824: 356).

Getting it almost right: malapropisms

A prominent feature of the language acquired by the colonised – in this case the Irish – is that they do not always quite master the standard. Just as they may have difficulties with a difference in pronunciation – consider the hypercorrection just discussed – so they may have difficulties with words which they do not quite grasp and which they use with the right meaning but a sound form which is close but not quite the same one would expect in the standard.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the figure of Mrs Malaprop – from whom the term *malapropism* stems – comes from a play written by an Irishman, namely *The Rivals* (1770) by Richard Brinsley Sheridan:

But the point we would request of you is, that you will promise to forget this fellow – to *illiterate* [obliterate – RH] him, I say, quite from your memory. (Sheridan 2008 [1770]: 19)

– and I hope you will represent her to the captain as an object not altogether *illegible* [ineligible – RH]. (Sheridan 2008 [1770]: 21)

I am sure I have done everything in my power since I *exploded* [explored – RH] the affair. (Sheridan 2008 [1770]: 47)

Sure, if I *reprehend* [apprehend – RH] any thing in this world it is the use of my oracular tongue. (Sheridan 2008 [1770]: 48)

Out with the old: replacement of features
The development of Irish English in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries shows many cases of sound disappearing from use entirely. This replacement was gradual and generally spread over a century or more. An example would be so-called SERVE-lowering where words written with a word-internal -ER- have a pronunciation with -AR-, e.g. \textit{serve} pronounced like SARVE, \textit{search} pronounced like SARCH. This pronunciation gradually died out during the nineteenth century, and by the beginning of the twentieth century the feature had all but disappeared.

Such features were replaced by the corresponding mainland British pronunciations. An instance is provided by AA vowel (read as in \textit{last}) which was a prominent feature of Irish English up to the eighteenth century. George Farquhar (1678-1707) in his play \textit{The Beaux' Stratagem} (1707) has many of the stereotypes of Irish pronunciation, including this one: \textit{Fat sort of plaace (= PLAAS) is dat saam (= SAAM) Ireland? ‘What sort of place is that same Ireland?’} Somewhat later, Swift used end-rhymes which indicate that for him words like \textit{placed} and \textit{last} rhymed. At the end of the century, Thomas Sheridan (1719-1788) criticised the Irish use of AA vowel in \textit{matron, patron}, etc. But by the mid nineteenth century there are no more references to this. Dion Boucicault, who does not shy away from showing phonetic peculiarities in his dramas (see examples below), does not indicate the older AA vowel when writing some eighty years after Sheridan.

\textbf{The Rackrents of Longford}

The earliest conscious attempt in Ireland to represent the life and language of country inhabitants in fictional literature (Hayley 1988) must be by Maria Edgeworth, whose \textit{Castle Rackrent} (1801) is generally regarded as the first regional novel in the British Isles and was admired by Sir Walter Scott for that.

Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849) was born in England at Black Bourton near Reading, the third child of Richard Lovell Edgeworth by his first wife. She started her education there and finished it in London after which she moved together with her father to her family’s estate at Edgeworthstown, Co. Longford, in 1782. Her father married several times and Maria, who shared his liberal ideas on education, was involved in the teaching of his later children. She was encouraged to write by her father and his influence is obvious in works such as \textit{The Parent’s Assistant} (1796), children’s stories in a didactic vein. Her next work, \textit{Practical Education} (2 vols. 1798), was a collaborative publication with her father in which they recommended learning through recreation. Further books for children followed, notably \textit{Early Lessons} (1801), \textit{Moral Tales} (1801) and other collections of stories. This series continued for over two decades as can be seen by the later \textit{Harry and Lucy} (1825).

\textit{Castle Rackrent} is set in Ireland ‘before the year 1782’. The story is narrated by the old retainer Thady Quirk and relates the eccentric excesses of three generations of the Rackrent family, a group of Anglo-Irish landowners. The book falls into two parts, the first recounting the exploits of the early
generations of Rackrents, originally called O'Shaughlins. The tone is satirical throughout: Sir Patrick, noted for his lavish entertaining, drinks himself to death. Another, the miserly Sir Murtagh, dies in a fit of rage at his enemies. A third character, Sir Kit, is a gambler with a Jewish wife who he keeps in seclusion. He dies after a duel, being brought home in a wheelbarrow mortally wounded. The second part of the novel concerns Sir Condy, a figure with little education but political ambitions, who sees himself as heir to the disastrous temperament of Sir Patrick. He marries a wealthy woman at the toss of a coin, but she abandons him, leaving him destitute. The satire reaches new heights when Sir Condy simulates his own death in order to witness his own funeral wake, but does indeed die in a bout of drinking in which he attempts to match the stamina of Sir Patrick. Thady Quirk’s son Jason gains possession of the estate illustrating the decadent and destructive nature of the Rackrents. In its picture of the decline of an Anglo-Irish landowning family, Castle Rackrent is a typical ‘big house’ novel and established a tradition which continued well into the twentieth century as witnessed by many novels on similar themes, such as those by Molly Keane (1905-1996) with, for example, Good Behaviour (1981).

The local flavour of Castle Rackrent is realised in two ways. The first is the portrayal of specifically Irish traits in the characters, implicitly contrasted with the English. The second is the use of Irish English sayings and expressions. The features Edgeworth chose are genuine, indeed most of the features are still found today. Expressions like ‘I’m bothered to death this night’ (Edgeworth 1824: 115) or the use of ‘ye’ as in ‘Didn’t ye hear it, then?’ (Edgeworth 1824: 119) or the Irish way of using ‘and’ to link parts of a sentence, for instance, ‘I was coming home that same time from Biddy M’Guggin’s marriage, and a great crowd of people too upon the road coming from the fair’ (Edgeworth 1824: 119).

The love of the Victorians: Dion Boucicault

Dion Boucicault (1820-1890) is an innovative writer of the mid-nineteenth century inasmuch as he deals with Irish themes and does not try to ingratiate himself with an English audience. Admittedly much of his work is in a pathetic vein, which has given him the reputation of furthering the figure of the stage Irishman, but nonetheless his achievement in liberating Irish theatre from its dependence on an English, specifically London, audience should not be underestimated (Kosok 1990: 132; Nelson 1978). Boucicault is a solitary figure in the Irish literary tradition and the only one in the nineteenth century to have established a reputation for himself in the United States. Despite this, his popularity in England was clearly established in the mid-Victorian era and he was indeed a favourite playwright of Queen Victoria.

In his use of language, Boucicault shows many features of Irish English which are found in Castle Rackrent and also at the end of the nineteenth century with authors like Gregory and Synge and especially O’Casey. In terms of literary records, his plays can be viewed as a bridge between Edgeworth and the figures of the Irish Literary Revival and afterwards. Below a selection of features from three of his plays are listed which show the linguistic traits which Boucicault
used to give his characters a specific Irish flavour.

Table 1.  Irish English features in the plays of Dion Boucicault

1) The use of stops rather than fricatives for sounds written with th-: ‘wid’ (*Arragh na Pogue*). ‘den’ (*The Colleen Bawn*).
4) Reduced number of verb forms: ‘I *seen* it all’ (*The Shaughraun*).
5) Use of *them* as a demonstrative pronoun: ‘If Shaun heard *them* words’, ‘I’ll swear to *them* notes’ (*Arragh na Pogue*).
7) Use of independent reflexive pronouns: ‘*Himself*, yer honour, [...]’, ‘He’s gone to inform on *himself*’ (*Arragh na Pogue*).
8) Use of *in it* for existence: ‘It’s yourself that’s *in it*?’ (*Arragh na Pogue*).
9) Clause coordination with *and*: ‘She’s got a long round to go, *and* the wind rising’ (*The Colleen Bawn*).
10) Highlighting of sentence elements: ‘It’s the pig that’s got loose’, ‘It’s the bad luck that is over me entirely’, ‘It’s proud I am of the kiss’ (*Arragh na Pogue*).
11) Special verb forms expressing completed action: ‘But don’t ye be *after forgettin*’ your pretty girl’ (*The Colleen Bawn*). ‘And *after letting* me throw all the money away’ (*The Shaughraun*).
12) Special verb forms expressing habitual action with *do* + *be*: ‘I *do be* afraid to go near some girls’ (*Arragh na Pogue*). ‘He *does be* always telling me’ (*The Shaughraun*).
13) Narrative present with inflectional *-s*: ‘Well’, *says I*, ‘that’s not the place’ (*The Colleen Bawn*). ‘Very well’, *says I*, ‘Bally-mulligan is my parish.’ (*The Shaughraun*).

Boucicault and the Irish brogue

In the context of the present chapter Dion Boucicault is interesting because he used the term ‘brogue’ repeatedly and one can discern a subtle change in his own apparent attitude to rural accents of Irish English throughout his plays. The following extracts illustrate these varying attitudes to the Irish brogue:

1) External attitudes, frequently belittling

CAPTAIN MOLINEUX, a young English Officer
CLAIRE FFOLLIOTT, a Sligo Lady
MOLINEUX Is your mistress at home?

CLAIRE My mistress. Oh, ‘tis Miss O’Neal you mane!

MOLINEUX Delicious brogue – quite delicious! Will you take her my card?

CLAIRE I’m afeard the butter will spoil if I lave it now.

MOLINEUX What is your pretty name?

(\textit{The Shaughraun}, 1875 [Thomson ed., 1984: 173])

2) Brogue as a sign of backwardness

[HARDRESS CREGAN, Son of Mrs. Cregan, a lady with social pretensions. EILY O’CONNOR, the Colleen Bawn, a local girl full of natural charm]

HARDRESS What will my haughty, noble mother say, when she learns the truth! how can I ask her to receive Eily as a daughter? Eily, with her awkward manners, her Kerry brogue, her ignorance of the usages of society. (\textit{The Colleen Bawn}, 1860 [Krause (ed.) 1964: 57])

3) Attempts to remedy the situation

FATHER TOM Maybe. Afther all, ye’d have done better to have married Myles there, than be the wife of a man that's ashamed to own ye.

EILY He isn’t – he’s proud of me. It’s only when I spake like the poor people, and say or do anything wrong, that he’s hurt; but I’m getting’ clane of the brogue, and learnin’ to do nothing – I’m to be changed entirely. (\textit{The Colleen Bawn}, 1860 [Krause (ed.) 1964: 64])

4) Linguistic pride

FATHER TOM Put your lips to that jug; there’s only the strippens left. Drink! And while that threue Irish liquor warms your heart, take this wid it. May the brogue of ould Ireland niver forsake your tongue – may her music niver lave yer voice – and may a true Irishwoman’s virtue niver die in your heart! (\textit{The Colleen Bawn}, 1860 [Krause (ed.) 1964: 65])

5) Identity

ANNE Well, I can’t help it. When I am angry the brogue comes out, and my Irish heart will burst through manners, and graces, and twenty stay-laces. (\textit{The Colleen Bawn}, 1860 [Krause (ed.) 1964: 73])
Quotations like those above show a degree of ambivalence to country accents among the characters of Boucicault’s plays, that is, such accent were by no means just belittled. The last two attitudes (4 and 5) were to increase considerably towards the end of the nineteenth century, not perhaps among the people themselves but among those writers who turned to the life and culture of Irish people as an inspiration for their creative work (Croghan 1986). A specific register of language was part and parcel of this acceptance of Irish life in contrast to urban settings or indeed English settings for fiction (Bernstein 1994).

The Irish Literary Revival

For both English writers and Irish writers not primarily concerned with matters Irish, there existed a repertoire of stock features which were generally assumed to be representative of Irish English. For instance, in his *Soldiers Three* (1890) Rudyard Kipling avails of two orthographical devices to add Irish flavour to direct speech as in ‘Those are the Black Oirish’ and ‘tis they that bring dishgrace upon the name av Oirland’ where the spelling *dishgrace* implies the use of the SH sound for S. The second element is suggested by the spellings *Oirish* and *Oirland* and implies a more central starting point for the diphthong I in Irish English. This was well known in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and it was a pronunciation feature for which the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816) was ridiculed by Fanny Burney (1752-1840) at the beginning of the nineteenth century. George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) used such standard features occasionally in his plays, for example, in *John Bull’s Other Island*.

Recruiting the brogue for literature

A quite different stance towards Irish English was taken by those authors directly involved in the Irish Literary Revival from the 1880s onwards. This stance was also one which deliberately attempted to counteract Victorian views of the Irish as backward and unsophisticated (Curtis 1971). A good practitioner of a radically different representation of Irish speech was Lady Gregory who wrote dramas about the Irish peasants in her neighbourhood. The setting for these works was often Kiltartan, a district not far from Coole Park in south County Galway, the home of Lady Gregory who was among the first to produce a specific kind of Irish English for her dramas in local settings. This type of English came to be referred to disparagingly as ‘Kiltartanese’ by those who felt that it was artificial. However, it was to reach a different quality in the hands of other authors at the beginning of the twentieth century (Todd 1989).

The two main playwrights to emerge after the resurgence of literary activity in the second half of the nineteenth century are John Millington Synge and Sean O’Casey (1884-1964). These literary figures are in a way
complementary. Synge is to rural Ireland what O'Casey is to urban Ireland, above all Dublin. O'Casey was himself a native of Dublin, while Synge, although not a native of the west of Ireland, studied the life and language of its inhabitants and attempted to represent this faithfully, at least in his early plays. It is true of both authors that their later plays are stylistically more idiosyncratic and less typical of a general form of the rural or urban varieties of Irish English.

Mock peasants and fake speech? John Millington Synge

In terms of his language (Bliss 1972) John Millington Synge (1871-1909) is probably the most Irish of the major playwrights. The only other dramatist with whom he can be compared is Sean O'Casey, some nine years Synge’s junior and active some twenty years later in the period after the First World War. The language of O'Casey’s plays reflects that of the Dublin working classes at the beginning of the twentieth century. Synge’s language is putatively that of the rural inhabitants of the west of Ireland of roughly the same period. His portrayals have been controversial and not always seen positively by fellow writers, such as the nationally minded Daniel Corkery (see Corkery 1931).

Synge was active at a period – that of the Irish Literary Revival – which lasted from about 1890 to the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922 (Welch 1996: 311-14). This period is associated above all with the name of the poet William Butler Yeats. Synge was personally acquainted with Yeats. Indeed it was the latter who convinced Synge on meeting him in Paris in December 1896 that he should return to his own country and study the life of his countrymen, particularly on the Western seaboard, with a view to a literary treatment of their lives. In May 1898 Synge followed the advice of Yeats and travelled to the Aran Islands off the mid-west coast of Ireland to seek creative inspiration. He subsequently met Lady Gregory, an important supporter of the writers of the Irish Literary Revival and herself a writer of some renown. Between 1898 and 1902 Synge spent a total of four and a half months in various stays in the Aran Islands interspersed by periods in Paris where he was engaged as a reviewer and where he continued his studies of literature at the Sorbonne.

By late 1901 he had completed his largely autobiographical account of his encounters in the west of Ireland in The Aran Islands (not published until 1907). All his works up to then (poems in a fin-de-siècle vein and a play) can for all intents and purposes be neglected. Synge himself regarded The Aran Islands his first serious piece of work. He later supplemented his knowledge of local conditions on the Aran Islands by an acquaintance of other parts of the west when he went to Mayo and Kerry. In addition Synge had from his youth visited the Wicklow mountains south of Dublin, an area which became the locale for In the Shadow of the Glen.

These biographical references are of relevance when considering the language used by Synge in his plays. The west of Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century was still largely bilingual and the Aran Islands were, with the partial exception of the largest island, Inis Mór, Irish-speaking. Synge spent his time on the middle island, Inis Meáin, which is to this day one of the few
pockets in the country which still has Irish monoglots.

Synge’s first plays to be written in his mature Irish-influenced idiom were completed in 1902. These are the two one-act plays Riders to the Sea and In the Shadow of the Glen. At this time he also began his two-act comedy The Tinker’s Wedding. Due to felicitous external circumstances Synge found himself in a position where he had a natural outlet for his dramatic writings, namely in the Abbey Theatre, which was opened in 1904. Here the play The Well of the Saints was produced in February 1905. His best known play, The Playboy of the Western World, was given its premiere in January 1907, accompanied by tumultuous riots by more bigoted sections of the Irish population who saw in it an affront to their image of Catholic Irishness. Synge’s final dramatic work was Deirdre of the Sorrows, which he never completed to his own satisfaction and which was first performed posthumously in 1910.

Synge is not only a dramatist, and thus concerned with the representation of spoken language in literary form, but was the only major author who sought an authentic representation of the English used by the uneducated rural Irish. Indeed, he went so far as to say in the preface to his major dramatic work as follows:

In writing the Playboy of the Western World, as in my other plays, I have used one or two words only, that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers. A certain number of the phrases I employ I have heard also from herds and fishermen along the coast from Kerry to Mayo, or from beggar-women and ballad-singers nearer Dublin. (Smith (ed.) 1993: vii)

This is tantamount to maintaining that each structure he used was authenticated by native speakers of a form of English still very close to Irish.

For the present section three plays have been examined closely. These are the early pieces Riders to the Sea, In the Shadow of the Glen, and The Tinker’s Wedding, which were written during or immediately after the author’s sojourns in the West of Ireland and so can be assumed to be relatively genuine representations of the English he heard there as he himself assures us. Synge’s main work The Playboy of the Western World has also been given special consideration. Linguistically, the most difficult play is Deirdre of the Sorrows. Apart from the fact that it was not fully completed by Synge, the subject matter is less down-to-earth than in the other plays (the heroine Deirdre is a mythological figure) and so the linguistic question for the other plays, namely to what extent Synge faithfully represented the natural speech of rural inhabitants of Ireland, cannot be asked in the same manner.

The following table shows a variety of specifically Irish English features which are attested in Synge’s plays: (i) the use of on + personal pronoun to express relevance of an action, (ii) the use of and + continuous verb form as a type of subordinate clause and (iii) the use of is it? as a general tag at the end of a sentence.
Table 2.  Irish English features in the plays of J. M. Synge

(i)  He’s after dying on me, God forgive him, and there I am now.
     (In the Shadow of the Glen, 1903)
     Maybe she’d wake up on us, and come in before we’d done.
     (Riders to the Sea, 1904)

(ii)  there was a star up against the moon, and it rising in the night.
     Why wouldn’t you give him your blessing and he looking round in the door?
     And what time would a man take, and he floating?
     (Riders to the Sea, 1905)

(iii) Blights me, is it?  (The Tinker’s Wedding, 1909)
     Make me, is it?  (The Well of the Saints, 1905)
     You wouldn’t, is it?  (The Playboy of the Western World, 1907)

The speech of true Dubs: Sean O’Casey

Sean O’Casey (1884-1964) is the playwright who portrayed Dublin working class life at the beginning of the twentieth century in three major plays, The Shadow of a Gunman (1923), Juno and the Paycock (1924), The Plough and the Stars (1926), in which the adverse social conditions of Dublin tenements mixed with nationalist rebellion against the British were linked in vivid and bold dramas. O’Casey’s later plays are generally regarded as less successful and certainly none of them reached the popularity of the earlier plays, especially after The Silver Tassie (1928) was rejected by the Abbey Theatre and a rift between O’Casey and other literary figures of the time arose, chiefly with W. B. Yeats.

In his plays, O’Casey relies heavily on language to convey the nature of his characters. He alters English orthography to suggest the more salient features of vernacular Dublin English of the time. This is fairly successful as most of the characteristics can be indicated, or at least hinted at, by means of spelling alterations.

The language of O’Casey’s plays has been investigated by a number of scholars (Schrank 1978, 1985; Snowden 1972; Dolan 1985). Dolan looks at various syntactic devices which he takes as being specifically Irish, e.g. the use of sentence-initial highlighting and the habitual verb form expressed by forms of do + be. Many Irish English vocabulary items are also used by O’Casey, e.g. chancer, chiselur ‘child’, bowsey ‘disreputable person’. The following table lists prominent dialect features in O’Casey’s early plays: (i) the use of on + personal pronoun to express relevance of an action, (ii) non-standard agreement of verb and pronoun, (iii) the use of and + continuous verb form as a type of subordinate clause and (iv) the use of double negation for emphasis.
Table 3.  Irish English features in the plays of Sean O’Casey

(i)  D’ye want to waken her again on me, when she’s just gone asleep?
    (The Plough and the Stars, 1926)
    God, I’d be afraid he might come in on us alone.
    (The Silver Tassie, 1928)

(ii)  ...that they wasn’t a mile from where he was livin’
    (The Shadow of a Gunman, 1923)
    D’ye mean to tell me that the pair of yous wasn’t collogin’ together here
    (Juno and the Paycock, 1924)

(iii)  We’ve had enough for one night, and you for a serious operation tomorrow.
    (The Silver Tassie, 1928)

(iv)  You’ll not shut no door till you’ve heard what I’ve got to say.
    (The Shadow of a Gunman, 1923)
    ... an’ not be clusthered round the table, as if we never seen nothin’.
    (Juno and the Paycock, 1924)
    We don’t want no shoutin’ here.
    (The Plough and the Stars, 1926)

The linguistic effect of O’Casey’s dialogues is attained in part by a deliberately false use of language. This can be based on a kind of malapropism or on derivations which are non-standard in English. From The Shadow of a Gunman one could quote an example like ‘Oh, Mrs. Henderson, that’s a parrotox’ (Murray (ed.) 1998: 29). Of course this is contrived; at least the use of parrotox for paradox is not generally recorded in Irish English. But that kind of lexical near-hit is frequent in vernacular speech. Another instance from the same play is found in the following passage:

    Mrs. Henderson: Well, now, Mr. Gallicker, seein’ as I have given Mr. Davoren a fair account ov how you’re situated, an’ ov these tramps’ cleverality, I’ll ask you to read the letter, which I’ll say, not because you’re there, or that you’re a friend o’ mine, is as good a letter as was decomposed by a scholar. (Murray (ed.) 1998: 25)

Again the quality noun cleverality for cleverness is not widely attested, if at all, but misformations such as this do occur frequently. Equally decompose probably stands for compose and illustrates the pretentiousness of the uneducated character found in this passage.

Assessing the urban-rural split in language and literature

In present-day Ireland there is no doubt that the urban-rural split characterises many attitudes and positions in the population. With an increasing urban
population the number of rural speakers who use their local forms of speech is diminishing and those using the metropolitan forms of Irish English are increasing. But there is no question of a uniform variety being used across the entire Republic of Ireland.

For creative literature the use of specifically forms of Irish English is still a valid means for character portrayal. The older forms of language found in Dublin writers like O’Casey are reflected partially in the work of novelists like Roddy Doyle. On the other hand the clearly manipulated ‘rural’ language of Synge cannot be reapplied in today’s literature. It is confined to the work of a single author and any use of it would open an author to the charge of linguistic stereotyping.

Experience, gained from other sociolinguistic investigations, shows that even fairly uniform varieties like recent metropolitan Irish English (Hickey 2003, 2007) will in time diversify. But more importantly, despite any pressure to use standard forms of speech, local ones will always win out because the identity function they have cannot be fulfilled by any other form of language. This will in turn provide an impetus to future writers to continue using regional forms of language to portray characters strongly rooted in localities, be these urban or rural.

Works cited


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