PHONETIC FEATURES OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN IRELAND

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Abstract: The article investigates the phonetic features of the English language in Ireland. The process of the English influence on the Irish culture in all time of its development is also considered. The examples of the north and south phonetic features are presented in the article.

Keywords: Middle English, the phonetic features of English language in Ireland, Irish English, Hiberno-English, Mid Ulster English or Ullans, on the Irish culture, the phonetic features of northern and southern Ireland.

The present discussion will thus address the problem of specifying objective phonetic criteria for identifying Irish speakers of English. The two main dialects of English spoken natively in Ireland are Hiberno-English (mainly found in the provinces of Connacht, Leinster and Munster) and Mid Ulster English or Ullans (mainly found in Ulster). What is relevant is the fact that neither feature is characteristic of the supraregional, largely urban standard of the south or north.

The consideration of acoustic salience within the features of a dialect raises the next question of where speakers obtain their image of a dialect from. For the mainland English this can be due to experience of Irish speakers in England, for instance in the Merseyside area or parts of London such as Kilburn. They are usually from the South so that specifically southern features may play a role in the identification of Irish English. Additionally the media may be another source of dialect exposure, if only indirect, for the English. Here there is an equal distribution of southern and northern speakers; in fact the representation may be tilted in favor of the north, given the extent to which the troubles in Northern Ireland dominate current affairs in present-day England. For the Irish themselves the formation of phonetic stereotypes has certainly to do with conceptions of stage Irish English which has a long tradition and which originally derives from Irish characters in seventeenth and eighteenth century English drama, whether stemming from Irish or English writers.

To investigate the phonetic features of Irish English we should know about the division of Ireland. A basic distinction can be made between northern and southern Irish English which roughly correlates with the political division of the country. There are historical reasons for this division to be found in the plantation of Ulster by settlers from Lowland Scotland who started emigrating to northern Ireland in the latter half of the seventeenth century after the Cromwellian defeat of the Irish and the subsequent large-scale land confiscation and redistribution among willing British craftsmen, traders and farmers, indeed not infrequently as a reward for mercenary service. These origins of northern Irish English are to be seen most clearly in the variety known as Ulster Scots still spoken in rural parts of Antrim and to some extent in the centre of the province, especially in the county Tyrone. The south of the country was unaffected by Scottish immigration and the varieties of English which developed there stem from the first forms of English brought to the east coast of Ireland in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries and which showed features of south-western Middle English. A later wave of Anglicisation of the south set in the seventeenth with more settlers from England (though not from Scotland) as a result again of land confiscation and banishment of most of the native Irish to the poorer and less fertile west of the country. Given the linguistic division which separates the north and the south in Ireland, we will treat the features of these areas separately with an ensuing consideration of possible mixed accents.

A fricative realization of the initial sounds in *think* and *this* is very much an exception in the South of Ireland. Instead the sounds are manifested as dental stops, i.e. [t] and [d] respectively. This applies to all but a few varieties of the South which may go further, so to speak, and use alveolar stops at the beginning of such words as *think* and *this*. This alveolar realisation is quite stigmatised in the

South and rural speakers are frequently ridiculed by imitating their speech using alveolar rather than dental stops, e.g. [tink] and [dis] for [tink] and [dis] (Filppula, 1991). The ability of speakers to imitate this clearly shows that they make a distinction between a dental and an alveolar place of articulation.

The dental stop realization of /2/ and /3/ may well be a contact phenomenon going back to Irish (Bliss, 1972) where the two coronal plosives are realised dentally, i.e. /t/ and /d/ are manifested phonetically as [t] and [d] respectively as in *tá* 'is' [t<:] and *dún* 'castle' [du:n]. Recall in this connection that there was considerable Irish-English bilingualism up to the late nineteenth century before the radical decline in the numbers of Irish speakers (Bliss, 1977). Hence the suspicion that many features of Irish English derive from a contact phenomena would seem to be found.

The obvious plosivisation of English dental fricatives leads to the frequently found but erroneous statement that Irish English is characterized by dentalisation. This is an observation which shows typical underdifferentiation on the part of external observers. There is a clearly audible difference between [t] and [t] for speakers of Irish English, i.e. pairs like *thank* and *tank*, *thinker* and *tinker* are by no means homophones for the majority of the Irish.

If general segmental or suprasegmental characteristics are indecisive in speaker's identification, one could imagine having recourse to other areas of phonology, for instance, to that of pronunciation variants. An example of what we mean would be the preferred use of a stress pattern such as the initial stress in harass and harassment as opposed to [hq/ræs] and [hq/ræsmqnt].

This is a simple instance. There are, however, variants which can be attributed to a general preference in Irish English. Here are two concrete examples of this. Irish English prefers /s/ to /$/ in those words where this variation is tolerated. Thus one has appreciate, issue, Christian with /s/ as opposed to /$/. Where voiced and voiceless sibilants can vary there is a preference for voiceless variants. This results in pronunciations like version [vq:r$qn] and parse [pa:rs] although proper names tend to be lexicalised so that one has Asia [e:gq] rather than [e:$q] for [ei$q] (Barry, 1982).

Turning to a linguistic description of Northern Irish English one can begin by a general statement on accent. Whatever about the segmental features of Northern Irish English, it has a very distinctive prosody. This manifests itself most clearly in the fall in pitch on stressed syllables (Jarman, Cruttenden, 1976), the highlighting of which is realized in the South (and in most varieties of English for that matter) by lengthening of the stressed syllable. This is the fall which is probably responsible for the lowering of short high front vowels as in: He was hi[e]t by a bullet. This feature is so salient that it alone can suffice for the recognition of a Northern Irish speaker.

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