

IRISH BULLS OR BULLS¹

Pedro Guardia

Universidad de Barcelona

The adjective Irish has been, is, and probably will be, very productive in language. To mention just a few of the related entries found in dictionaries we have *Irish green* ("Connemara marble") and *Irish confetti* (slang for "stones when used as weapons"); there are *Irish apricots* or *Irish lemons* or *Irish grapes* ("potatoes"), *Irish bridge*, ("a surface of reinforced concrete laid on the bed of a river") *Irish spoons* ("spades") *Irish setters*, *Irish jokes* and, so much the worse for those who have never tried an *Irish coffee*. And, of course, there are *Irish bulls*².

A brief analysis of the entries *Irish bull* and *bull* will be helpful to shape their corresponding definitions and see how a bull eventually became an Irish bull³. Several examples will also illustrate the somewhat foggy

1.- This essay has been made possible thanks to a grant from the "Comité Conjunto Hispanoamericano para la Cooperación Cultural Educativa" during the academic year 1988-1989.

2.- A basic bibliography on the subject in question might be the following:

Aman, Reinhold, ed. *The Best of Maledicta*. Philadelphia: Running Press, 1987.

Bombaugh, Charles C. *Facts and Fancies for the Curious for the Harvest Field of Literature*. Philadelphia & London: Lippincot, 1905.

Bombaugh, Charles C. *Oddities and Curiosities of Words and Literature*. New York: Dover Publications, 1961.

Bombaugh, Charles C. *The Book of Blunders: Comprising Hibernicisms, Bulls That Are Not Irish and Typographic Errors*. Philadelphia: Evans, 1871.

Borgmann, Dimitri A. "Irish Bulls". *Wordways* 20.1 (1987): 40-43.

Edgeworth, Richard & Maria. *Essay on Irish Bulls*. London, 1802.

Esar, Evan. *Humorous English*. New York: Horizon Press, 1961.

Farmer, John S. *Slang and Its Analogues Past and Present*. Vols 1-7. London, 1890-1904.

Grambs, David. *Words about Words*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1984.

Partridge, Eric. *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*. 1961. New York: McMillan. Eight ed., 1984.

Shibley, Joseph I. *Playing with Words*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1960.

3.- The following dictionaries have been consulted while writing this essay:

Berrey, Lester and Melney Van den Bark. *The American Thesaurus of Slang*. New York: New York: Thomas Crowell, 1947.

Grose, Francis. *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*. London, 1785.

Guralvik, David B. *Webster New World Dictionary of the American Language*. 2nd College Edition. Cleveland: William Collins, 1980.

Johnson, Samuel. *A Dictionary of the English Language*. London, 1755.

Klein, Ernest. *Klein's Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*. Amsterdam and London: Elsevier, 1971.

Kurath, Hans, (ed). *Middle English Dictionary*. Ann Arbor: U. Michigan Press. Part B, 1958-.

definitions which dictionaries provide and, at the same time show that bulls are used profusely.

At first dictionaries only contained the entry for *bull*; later on the term *Irish bull*, became a subheading of the general entry. The word *bull* with the meaning of "fraud, deceit, trickery" had long been in use before it came to be associated with the adjective Irish. The *OED* (1933, I:1007) under the fourth subheading of the word mentions several examples of *bull* with these meanings:

"1690 *B.E.Dict.Cant.Crew.,Bull*:

'...false Hair worn (formerly much) by Women."

"A.A. Wood in *Oxoniana* II.23:

'Every one in order was to make a jest or bull, or speake some eloquent nonsense."

In fact the term *bull* already meant "to befoul" or "to mock" in Middle English, which proves the ancestry of the word⁴. Samuel Johnson (1755) defines it as "a blunder, a contradiction", and adds: "I confess it is what the English call a *bull* in the expression, though the senses be manifest enough." In *A Dictionary of Slang* it is defined "as a ludicrous inconsistency unnoticed by its perpetrator and often producing an unintentional pun," and it is added that "Irish was not added until ca 1850." (Partridge 149). The statement is not altogether correct for already in 1802, *An Essay on Irish Bulls* was published by Charles and Maria Edgeworth, thus testifying to the concern on this subject.

Bulls have been related to blunders and witticisms. In fact bulls are a mixture of blunder and wit, the portion of these two ingredients varying. It appears that a bull is always a blunder, but not all blunders are bulls. Blundering -linguistic blundering- is, just like language, almost connatural to the human race. Examples of blundering are abundant in all aspects of life. "Stand back and let the parson cough" instead of "let the coffin pass" (Brown 20) is a blunder of transposition, just as "dogs will be shot without a muzzle."

Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford: OUP. 1st ed. 1933. 2nd ed., 1989.

Palmer, Smythe A. *Folk-Etymology, a Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions Or Words Perverted in Form Or Meaning, by False Derivation Or Mistaken Analogy*. London: George Bell & Sons, 1882.

Partridge, Eric. *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*. New York: McMillan, 1984.

Random House Dictionary of the English Language. New York: Random House, 1987.

Webster Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield: Merriam Webster, 1983.

Webster Third New International Dictionary of the English Language. Springfield: Merriam, 1961.

4.- In (Kurath, 1901) we read: "boule (also bul(e). (OF boul), deceit, falsehood, trickery."

(Brown 22). Pronouncing the word *cheers* as *chairs* changes the meaning of "Three cheers for the Protestant ladies" (Brown 35). Changing the spelling brings about merriment and blundering: "He informed the masses of Philadelphia that Mr--- would address them asses (the masses) at National Hall" (Brown 39). "Sin on more", instead of "sin no more" (*Belfast Bible* 1746), or "the parable of the vinegar" instead of "the parable of the vineyard" (*Oxford Bible* 1717), are notorious examples of spelling blunders.

Although there is always some sort of witticism in bulls, witticisms are not generally blunders. "A witticism discovers real relations that are not apparent, bulls admit apparent relations that are not real" (Bombaugh 9). When a reporter wrote: "He said that he would erect a monument in the *dining room of the hotel*" (instead of "He said in the dining room...") he was making a linguistic blunder. The statement: "Betting is immoral; but how can the man who bets be worse than he who is no better?" is a clear example of witticism and wordplay. Here is an example of a witty bull or just a bull: "a doctor is a man who kills you today to save you from dying tomorrow."

It might be argued that if a bull is a conscious one then it ceases to be a bull and becomes a witty blunder. An Irish bull or bulls will always belong to the realm of spontaneity and freshness as the following samples attest.

While two Irishmen were walking about a quarry one of them fell into a deep hole. The other called out: "Arrah, Pat, are ye killed intirely? if ye're dead, speak." Pat reassured him from the bottom saying: "No, Tim, I'm not dead, but I'm speechless." And this recipe: "Potatoes should always be boiled in cold water". "Indade, miss, I should be glad to give you a sate, but the empty ones are all full," uttered an Irish usher.

Perhaps the best samples of hibernicisms are to be found in the following letter which an Irish member of Parliament sent to a friend in London in 1798. This document, which is to be found in several nineteenth-century anthologies, is reproduced from Bombaugh's *Book of Blunders*.

My Dear Sir: Having now a little peace and quietness, I sit down to inform you of the dreadful bustle and confusion we are in from these bloodthirsty rebels, most of whom are (thank God!) killed and dispersed. We are in a pretty mess; can get nothing to eat, nor wine to drink, except whisky; and when we sit down to dinner we are obliged to keep both hands armed. Whilst I write this I hold a pistol in each hand and a sword in the other. I concluded in the beginning that this would be the end of it; and I see I was right, for it is not half over yet. At present there are such goings on that everything is at a stand-still. I should have answered your letter a fortnight ago, but I did not receive it till this morning. Indeed, hardly a mail arrives safe without being robbed. No longer ago than yesterday the coach with the mails from Dublin was robbed near this town; the bags had been judiciously left behind for fear

of accident, and by good luck there was nobody in it but two outside passengers, who had nothing for thieves to take. Last Thursday notice was given that a gang of rebels were advancing under the French Standard; but they had no colors, nor any drums, except bagpipes. Immediately every man in the place, including women and children, ran out to meet them. We soon found our force much too little, and we were far too near to think of retreating. Death was in every face; but to it we went, and by the time half our little party were killed we began to be all alive again. Fortunately, the rebels had no guns, except pistols, cutlasses and pikes; and as we had plenty of guns and ammunition, we put them all to the sword. Not a soul of them escaped, except some that were drowned in an adjacent bog; and in a very short time nothing was to be heard but silence. Their uniforms were all different colors, mostly green. After the action we went to rummage a sort of camp which they had left behind them. All we found was a few pikes without heads, a parcel of empty bottles full of water, and a bundle of French commissions filled up with Irish names. Troops are now stationed all around the country, which exactly squares my ideas. I have only time to add that I am in great haste.

Yours truly,-----

PS.-If you do not receive this, of course it must have miscarried: therefore I beg you will write and let me know. (58)

The definition of "bull" including a reference to "Irish" begins to creep into dictionaries at the end of the eighteenth century, shortly after the publication of Johnson's *Dictionary*. Grose (1785) attempts an etymological explanation together with the definition in his *Dictionary*:

A blunder, from one Obadiah Bull, a blundering lawyer of London, who lived in the reign of Henry VII. By a bull, is now always meant a blunder made by an Irishman.

In Palmer's *Folk-Etymology* bulls are defined as "self-contradictory statements made with the most unconscious *naivete*, supposed incorrectly to be indigenous in Ireland (*Bos Hibernicus*)." He relates its origin to lat. *bull*, a bubble. "Life is as a *bull* rising on the water. When the German students flung a Papal bull into the river saying, *Bulla est!* (It's a *bull* or bubble,) Let's see if it can swim!...they meant it was empty verbiage." (43)

The Third Webster gives somewhat blurred definitions of bulls and Irish bulls. A bull is "a grotesque blunder in language (as in 'his brother and sister are much alike, esp. his sister')." An Irish bull is "a serious error: a bad or sometimes ludicrous blunder" (293). Here the meaning of "serious" or "bad" lends itself to ambiguous interpretations. After all "a serious error" is, by definition, opposed to "a ludicrous blunder."

The Random House Dictionary provides the following entry: "A paradoxical statement that appears at first to make sense. He is the kind of

guy who looks you right in the eye as he stabs you in the back" (1007). Some of the examples provided in other dictionaries are the following. "To have no family was hereditary in some families," or, Richard Steel's invitation: "If, sir, you ever come within a mile of my house, I hope will stop there all night." (Brown 6)

In the Collins *Cobuild* (1987) we read: "If you say something is a *bull*, you mean that it is completely nonsense: used especially in A.E.: What a load of bull!" (182). (No "Irish" bulls there).

The last word on the subject appears in the latest dictionary quoted: the *OED*, second edition, 1989:

"*bull*. Of unknown origin. No foundation appears for the guess that the word originated in a contemptuous allusion to papal edicts, nor for the Assertion of the *British Apollo* (No. 22 1708) that 'it became a Proverb from the repeated blunders of one Obadiah Bull, a Lawyer of London, who liv'd in the Reign of K. Henry the Seventh.'

.....

"a self contradictory proposition. Now often with epithet Irish; but the word had been long in use before it came to be associated with Irishmen... 1702. *Let fr. Soldier to Ho. Commons 17* These Gentlemen seem to me to have copied the Bull of their Countryman, who said His Mother was barren.

.....

"a bad blunder (US).

.....

"Trivial, insincere (USA slang), popularly associated with Bullshit" (II: 638-39).

Here bulls or Irish bulls are considered as self contradictory propositions. The other two meanings -by the way, are there "good" blunders?- widen the semantic field of the word.

It is obvious that bulls are not restricted to their supposed Irish ancestry⁵. The story of human life is but a record of funny linguistic blunders from beginning to end. Statements of the type: "con nuestro partido en el Gobierno la vida polftica nacional ha experimentado un giro de 360 grados"

5.- The reasons for placing the adjective Irish next to the term bull have been discussed at length in some early nineteenth century books. The two main reasons are: first, the Irishmen, whose native language is Celtic, are prone to perform blunders when using English; second, England looked down on Ireland. I consider the first reason absolutely ridiculous. And, as far the second is concerned, it remains to be seen if political bigotry is the origin of the term.

or "Arconada no estuvo ni bien ni mal sino todo lo contrario" occur quite often in our everyday life and constitute an endless source of merriment. To detect them we only need to be aware and to sharpen our linguistic intuition.

Here is a typical example drawn from a local American newspaper -the very day this essay was being written the University of Illinois basketball team had just reached the Final Four:

"To a longtime, 25-year Illini fan, this is all what it's been for, right here in the Final Four," exclaimed John Lambert, 39, of Urbana. If I die tonight, I'll be happy for the rest of my life." (*The News-Gazette*, March 27, 1989,1).

And another from a 19th century French newspaper quoted by *The New York Picayune*, 30 April 1859 : "Ici on n'enterre que les morts qui vive dans la commune." (Only the dead who live in the parish are buried here. In describing a teetotal meeting a reporter wrote that "they had a most harmonious and profitable session, and retired full of the best spirits" (Brown 4). During a funeral sermon a clergyman said: "Here brethren, we have before us a *living witness* and a *standing monument* of the frailty of human hopes. And from an Irish editorial: "He leaves a brilliant future behind him" (Brown 44). "He walked up and down the garden, with his hands on his back, eagerly perusing a newspaper" (Brown 88).

The utterances of Yoghi Bear are also full of Irish Bulls, to say nothing of those *bon mots* that have filtered into the language as "Goldwynisms", used by the famous mogul movie-maker, Sam Goldwyn⁶. "Well, she is colossal in a small way. Yes, my wife's hands are very beautiful. I'm going to have a bust made of them." One of his greatest dramatic triumphs was never referred to otherwise than as 'Withering Heights'; he moaned that actors like Joel McCrea were giving him more trouble than Mussolini was having in Utopia; and he remarked to understandably puzzled friends that "Hello Dolly" was a "dirty picture", referring to it as "The Valley of the Hello Dollies." Irish bulls belong to the realm of the world.

If we consider the information from dictionaries as the norm of usage -a debatable question- we could sum up the state of affairs thus: the term *bull* with the meaning "comical blunder" is of uncertain origin. The adjective Irish begins to be linked to the term bull during the second part of the eighteenth century. This probably shows that it was widely used some time before. During the nineteenth century, dictionaries continue reflecting this usage. Twentieth-century dictionaries tend to include *Irish bull*, as a

6.- See A. Scott Berg. *Goldwyn*. New York: Knopf, 1989.

general rule, in the entry *bulls*. An Irish bull is always a humorous linguistic blunder.

Life is as incongruous as an Irish bull and humor is always based on this incongruity, an Irish bull being its candid reflection. The difference between life and a bull is that the former is short and always comes to an end. Irish bulls -whatever their progeny- never die: their immortality is insured because they belong to the realm of humor. There is an epitaph -a bull!-in an Ulster churchyard which runs thus: "Erected to the memory of John Phillips, accidentally shot as a mark of affection by his brother" (Brown 10). I would like to see another, running: "Erected to the memory of the adjective Irish, intentionally shot from the entry *Irish Bulls* as a mark of affection." Long live simply *bulls*!