

Intra-lingual Translation: Irish English—Standard English

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Abstract

The focus of this article is problems inherent in intra-lingual translation between two varieties of English, Irish English and Standard English. The genesis and relationship between the two principal forms of English in Ireland, Hiberno-English and Ulster English, are explored along with the various ways in which both differ from Standard English. Evidence is provided of the fact that the geographic proximity of Ireland to Britain leads some critics and editors to underestimate the extent and implications of the differences between Irish English and Standard English. For example, the substitution of the Standard English word *fostering* for the highly pejorative Hiberno and Ulster-English *foostering* (< Irish, *fústar*) in James Joyce's *Ulysses* has been a source of confusion for editors and critics from its publication in 1922 to the present. The most obvious and serious problem facing anyone attempting to decode the language of Irish literature in English is the absence of a comprehensive dictionary of the English of Ireland. The article explores the complex socio-political reasons for this absence and concludes with an evaluation of eleven specialised glossaries and dictionaries which have been published since 1986, with particular emphasis on *A Concise Ulster Dictionary*.

In *After Babel*, George Steiner observes: "On the inter-lingual level, translation will pose concentrated, visibly intractable problems; but these same problems abound, at a more covert or conventionally neglected level, intra-lingually" (1975, 47). My focus is problems inherent in intra-lingual translation between two varieties of English, Irish English and Standard English, with particular emphasis on glossaries and dictionaries.

Irish English, like Standard English, is not monolithic. It consists of two major forms: Hiberno-English in the south and Ulster-English in the northern region roughly corresponding to the nine-county Province of Ulster. Hiberno-English is contact vernacular, which has its genesis in the interaction of two languages and cultures, Irish and English, over a very long period. It is heavily influenced in vocabulary and syntax by the Irish language, and it retains many rare or obsolete Standard and dialect English words and phrases, along with rare or obsolete meanings of words that remain current in English. Independently of these two major sources, and like other varieties of English, Hiberno-English has evolved a vocabulary of its

own that reflects the experience of life in Ireland. Ulster-English has its genesis in the relatively recent, seventeenth-century Plantation of Ulster. It is less heavily influenced by Irish than Hiberno-English, but differs principally from Hiberno-English in the fact that it is heavily influenced by the Scots of Lowland Scotland, from which the majority of the planters came. Neither form, in turn, is monolithic: they vary greatly, both geographically and socially, and interpenetrate considerably.

The most obvious and serious problem facing anyone attempting to decode the language of Irish literature in English is the absence of a comprehensive dictionary of the English of Ireland. This absence, combined with the geographic proximity of Ireland to Britain, leads some critics and editors to underestimate the extent and implications of the differences between Irish English and Standard English, and in so doing completely misinterpret texts. One example from each activity will suffice.

The stock Hiberno-English phrase “wet and dry” appears twice in James Joyce’s works. In his verse attack on Ireland, “Gas from a Burner,” he states: “’Twas Irish humour, wet and dry,/Flung quicklime into Parnell’s eye” (1959, 243). This bitter comment is echoed in a cryptic sentence fragment in his novel *Ulysses*: “Humour wet and dry” (1961, 199). An article on allusions in *Ulysses*, which shows no inkling of the meaning of the phrase, provides a completely misleading explanation based on the ancient theory of humours (McCarthy 1975, 54-55). This explanation is the result of a mnemonic irrelevance. The words wet and dry reminded the critic of the other two other terms, hot and cold, which, in the theory, are related to characteristics of the four elements: earth, air, fire and water. However, the phrase simply means constant, and has its origin in work not interrupted by the notoriously fickle Irish weather. A wet and dry job is a constant job, and Irish humour is, in Joyce’s view, constantly malevolent. Joyce is not the only writer to use the phrase. Its meaning is clearer, and its origin suggested, in John B. Keane’s more recent use of the term in his novel *Durango*: “If a man was prepared to work from dawn till dark, wet and dry and survive on leftovers, his job with the Gobberleys was assured” (1992, 231).

An obvious error in the first edition of *Ulysses* has been a source of confusion since its publication in 1922. An unintelligible sentence resulted from substituting the Standard English word *fostering* for the very common, pejorative, Hiberno and Ulster-English word *foostering*. In an interior monologue, a highly irritated Leopold Bloom asks: “What is he fostering over that change for?” (71). This question makes no sense whatever; whereas, “What is he foostering over that change for?”, makes perfect sense. Foostering (< Ir. *fústar*) means fussing in a clumsy manner. The error was repeated in the 1934 Random House edition (73), and in the revised and reset edition of 1961 (74). A Gaelic glossary for Joyce’s works published in 1967 compounded the problem by glossing the misprint as Irish: “*fostughadh*, being employed, being engaged” (Ó Hehir 1967, 338). The failure of this

gloss to produce an intelligible sentence was either not noticed or ignored by its author. Finally, in 1984, the controversial 'Corrected Text' of *Ulysses* undid the error (1986, 60).¹ Thus we have an Irish English word of Irish origin being Anglicised by assimilation to a completely unrelated English word, and this English word in turn being Hibernicised by assimilation to a completely unrelated Irish word. I suspect that Joyce, who deliberately employed a number of misprints in the work, would have been highly amused by all this, perhaps seeing it as an epiphany of the convoluted relationship between the two countries and their varieties of English. The publication of the 'Corrected Text' of *Ulysses* did not end the matter. The Everyman Library edition, published in 1994, is still fostering the confusion (102).

The reasons for the absence of a dictionary of the English of Ireland are largely socio-political. Under British rule, the language of administration and education in Ireland was Standard British English. The two principal forms of English in Ireland, Hiberno-English and Ulster-English, were ignored, while the use of Irish was actively discouraged, especially in the so-called National School System, established in 1831. With the passing of the Government of Ireland Act in December 1920, which established subordinate parliaments in Belfast and Dublin, Standard English remained the official language of the Northern Irish State, and the *de facto* official language of the Irish Free State. No official recognition was given to Ulster-English in the North or to Hiberno-English in the South, both of which were regarded as sub-standard, especially by the administrative and educational establishments, notwithstanding their long and extensive use in literature.

The language situation in the South became more complex, or comic, depending on one's perspective, under the 1937 Constitution, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*. Article 8 states: "1. The Irish language as the national language is the first official language" (6). The next item gives somewhat grudging recognition to English as a subordinate official language: "2. The English language is recognised as a second official language" (6). This statement begs an obvious question: what exactly is the English language? The Irish text seems to give the answer because it appears, at first glance, to be more specific than the English text: "*Glactar leis an Sacs-Bhearla mar theanga oifigiúil eile*" (7). The usual term for the English language is *Bearla*, but here we have a compound, *Sacs-Bhearla*. It appears earlier in Article 4, which names the state: "*Éire is ainm don Stát nó, sa Sacs-Bhéarla, Ireland*" (5); "The name of the State is Éire, or in the English Language, *Ireland*" (4). According to Niall Ó Dónaill's authoritative dictionary, *Sacs-* as a prefix in compounds means "Saxon" or "English" (1019). One might therefore conclude that English means British English. However, in this context, Ó Dónaill's dictionary, published in 1977, is misleading. Patrick Dinneen's dictionary, published in 1927, gives the same definition of *Sacs-*, and, in addition, defines *Sacs-Bhéarla* as "the English language" (928). Ultimately,

the Irish text fails to clarify the ambiguity of what exactly is meant by “the English language”.

Since there is no reference in the Constitution to Anglo-Irish, the usual term for Hiberno-English then, and the document itself is written in British Standard English, the state now had two official languages, Irish, *de jure*, and British Standard English, *de facto*. Neither was the native language of the vast majority of citizens, who used Hiberno-English, or Ulster-English in the three counties of the Province of Ulster that formed part of the state.

An obsessive focus on the revival of Irish led to some bizarre educational situations. Like many of my generation, I can recall attending school in Dublin and being taught such subjects as Algebra, Latin grammar, and even multiplication tables, forwards and backwards, through the medium of Irish, by teachers whose native language, like mine, was Hiberno-English. In all fairness, I must add that English was the language of instruction in English classes!

Given this convoluted socio-political background, it is hardly surprising that there is, as yet, no comprehensive dictionary of the English of Ireland. However, in the past decade or so, there has been a rather remarkable upsurge of interest in the subject, which has resulted in the appearance of a number of specialised glossaries and dictionaries. Collectively, but to a limited extent, they provide a cumbersome alternative to a comprehensive dictionary.

In most instances, the titles or sub-titles of these glossaries and dictionaries reveal their individual limitations. In 1986, I published *An Anglo-Irish Dialect Glossary for Joyce's Works*. In 1990, Loreto Todd published *Words Apart: A Dictionary of Northern Ireland English*. In 1995, Terence Dolan and Diarmuid Ó Muirthe published *The Dialect of Forth and Bargy*, two baronies in Co. Wexford where a dialect of English introduced during the Anglo-Norman invasion in the late twelfth century survived until the middle of the nineteenth century. Also in 1995, I published *A Dictionary and Glossary for the Irish Literary Revival*. 1996 was a banner year. Lis Christensen in Denmark published *A First Glossary of Hiberno-English*, designed for newcomers to the spoken and written English of Ireland. *A Concise Ulster Dictionary*, edited by C. I. Macafee, appeared and superseded Loreto Todd's dictionary. Diarmaid Ó Muirthe published *A Dictionary of Anglo-Irish: Words and Phrases from the Gaelic in the English of Ireland*, and he published *The Words We Use*, the first in a series of compilations of his regular Saturday language column of the same title in *The Irish Times*. The utility of this informative and witty work is limited by the fact that words are not discussed in alphabetical order and it has no index. The fifth work to appear in 1996 was *The Language of Kilkenny* by Séamas Moylan. In 1997, Bernard Share published *Slanguage: A Dictionary of Slang and Colloquial English in Ireland*, and, in 1998, Terence Dolan published *A Dictionary of Hiberno-English*.

None of these eleven works illustrates the continuing socio-political implications of language in Ireland, and the limitations of existing dictionaries from the perspective of Irish literature, more obviously than the *Concise Ulster Dictionary*. It is the result of the Ulster Dictionary Project, initiated in 1989, and funded by the British Government via the Education Department of the Northern Ireland Office. Along with funding came the requirement that the dictionary be "suitable for classroom use" (Jeffrey 1996, 11). In keeping with this requirement, the introduction states: "Obscenities have been omitted, where it was thought they might cause offence. Farmyard terminology has, however, been retained, as it was felt that its removal would be detrimental to the coverage of folklife that the dictionary offers" (xix). This exception underscores the strong rural bias of the dictionary, which led a reviewer to state: "This dictionary is in effect the Ulster Folk Museum in print" (Jeffrey 1996, 11).

It is difficult to reconcile the editor's statement of intention to avoid causing offence with the design of the cover of the dictionary. Against a black background, it shows a silhouette in red of that part of Ireland roughly north of a line drawn from Sligo to Drogheda. A three dimensional effect is created by showing parts of the coastline in blue, and the title, sub-title and publisher's name are in white. Visually, the cover is rather attractive, but the combination of red, white and blue is either an overt Unionist statement that Ulster is British, or a manifestation of monumental ignorance of the political and religious symbolism of colours in Ireland. In the hyper-charged political atmosphere of Ireland, even the black background is questionable. It is a colour associated with the Orange Order and Protestantism, as the entry for the colour in the dictionary clearly indicates. The minuscule use of green in underlining the words Ulster and Oxford does little to dilute, and perhaps even intensifies, the overall political impact of the cover. I cannot imagine the cover not causing offence in classrooms in Nationalist communities, and I could not imagine it not causing offence in classrooms in Unionist communities if its dominant colour scheme were the green, white and orange combination of Nationalists.

Along with obscenities, much of the language of the current conflict in Northern Ireland has been omitted from the dictionary. Some of this language appears in literature. Brian Moore's novel *Lies of Silence* (1990), provides three examples. The first is *Rah*, a term for the Irish Republican Army: "[T]his boy is very headstrong and his mother thinks he just *might* be mixed up with the Rah" (Moore 1991, 205). It also appears in Dermot Healy's novel *A Goat's Song* (1994): "The Brits shoot his brother and he joins the RA" (Healy 1997, 311). The second example is *lift*, as a verb, meaning to arrest: "They came to lift her son" (Moore 1991, 295). The third example is the traditional term for a member of the I.R.A., volunteer: "Volunteer, you go with him" (Moore 1991, 42). This term also appears in Daniel Magee's play *Horseman Pass By* (1984), which is set in Belfast in the

early 1970s: “Bren, I’m a volunteer, not a fucking padre...” (1984, 134). Brits, a pejorative Nationalist nickname for the British Army in the Healy quotation is missing. Also missing is the pejorative Unionist nickname for a Nationalist, Shinner (< Ir. *Sinn Féin*, We Ourselves or Ourselves Alone, a Nationalist slogan and the name of a political party). The potentially fatal consequences of the use or misuse of such terms is suggested by one of Magee’s characters: “[W]hen I am out and about here amongst your friends, I have to remember to say *Brits* . . . If I forgot myself and said *British soldier* I’d likely end up shot as a traitor...” (1984, 131). It is little wonder that the editor excluded such emotive terms from the dictionary.

It is equally revealing to examine the dictionary from the perspective of the work of a nineteenth-century Ulster novelist, and one whose background and focus are rural rather than urban, William Carleton. The dictionary contains most of the Ulster idioms used by Carleton, but there are significant omissions, as illustrations from both ends of the alphabet indicate. *Absentee* is a Standard English word, but it has a particular historical significance and emotive force in Ireland and is prominent in Irish literature. An absentee is an Anglo-Irish landlord of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who lived away from his estate, usually in London, and left its management to an agent. In one of his stories, Carleton complains:

a vast proportion of our landlords are absentees who squander upon their own pleasures or vices, in the theatres, saloons, or gaming-houses of France, or in the softer profligacies of Italy, that which ought to return in some shape to stand in the place of duties so shamefully neglected. (n. d., 143)

Absentees are the focus of Carleton’s novel *Valentine M’Clutchy, The Irish Agent*, published in 1848. It attacks the indifference of absentees to the sufferings of their tenants and the ruthlessness of their agents. Another Standard English word with a particular meaning in Ulster-English and used by Carleton is also omitted: bog (< Ir. *bog*, soft). As a verb it means to defeat someone in an intellectual contest: “[Y]oung Brady . . . went nigh to *bog* the priest himself in Greek” (Carleton n. d., 244).

As a native speaker of Irish, Carleton frequently uses Irish words that formed part of the vocabulary of the English of the people in his stories. One such word is *airgead*, money: “[I]nstead of the *airighad* jist lave us your blessin....” (n. d., 40) This word does not appear in the *Concise Ulster Dictionary*. If, perchance, it had been considered for inclusion, it probably would have been excluded. By means of what the editor admits is “a rough rule of thumb”, words deemed to be “unassimilated loans from Irish” are excluded (xviii). Also missing are many of the exclamations and interjections from Irish, such as, *awouh*, alas (< Ir. *abhó*), that pepper the speech of

Carleton's people: "Faith . . . I could tell where the cow grazes that was milked for that! Awouh!" (1848, 347)

In one of his stories, Carleton uses a different spelling for the exclamation "awough" (1848, 42). Like most Irish writers, Carleton is notoriously inconsistent in his spelling of such idioms. This inconsistency, coupled with the unfettered nature of Irish English, means that compilers of glossaries and dictionaries, and readers, are faced with the problem of coping with an enormous number of variants and subtle differences in their meanings. Carleton's use of the Hiberno-English word *vanithee*, a housewife (< Ir. *bean an tigh*, woman of the house), highlights this problem: "[T]he good woman, or *vanithee*, had got the pot of water warmed, in which Jemmy was made to put his feet" (n. d., 26). Spellings of the word usually begin with the letter b. The *Concise Ulster Dictionary* records "banati" and "beanati" as a term for "a landlady" (14), but that is not the usual meaning of the term, nor is it the sense in which it is used by Carleton. More importantly, the variant he uses does not appear in the dictionary. Diarmaid Ó Muirithe's dictionary is the only reference work to record the variant.

I have devoted more attention to the *Concise Ulster Dictionary* than to all the other reference works combined because it differs from all of them in a number of important respects: it is more ambitious, it is more substantial, it is a product of a collaborative effort involving a considerable number of people and it received generous state funding. It is a valuable reference work; however, as I have indicated, it is, like all the others I have mentioned, a limited aid to the study of Irish literature.

NOTES

¹ The 'Corrected Text' of *Ulysses* was first published in 1984 by Garland Publishing, New York. The reading text to which I refer was published by Bodley head in 1986. This text and the Penguin Student Edition, the most widely available texts, are identical in episode and line numbers to the Garland text, and identical to each other in pagination.

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