

# The pragmatics of Irish English

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The use of English in Ireland shows specific features which contribute to its unique profile.

## **Introduction**

The utterance 'It's raining' (of great relevance to the Irish!) can have a variety of different meanings according to who says it, to whom one is talking, and where it is said, amongst other things. The fact that language in use (whether in spoken or written mode) is obviously much more than the sum of its constituent parts – the individual sounds that make up words, the combinations of words that create sentences or utterances, the meaning that can be derived from different words and combinations thereof – has been what has driven pragmatics as a discipline, from its origins in the philosophy of language. Initially, what drove the research agenda was the potential of words to perform acts, or speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), and later, the complexities of the relationship between what is said and what is meant, the study of conversational implicatures (Grice, 1975) or 'how people can understand one another beyond the literal words that are spoken' (Eelen, 2001: 2).

Pragmatics is now an inherently inter-disciplinary approach which has as its central orientation this study of, essentially, how speaker meaning is interpreted in context. Critical to interpretation is the concept of context itself, a complex and multi-layered notion involving cultural setting, speech situation and shared background assumptions (Goodwin and Duranti, 1992). Linguistic choices made by conversational participants can simultaneously encode

situational indices of position and time, and interpersonal and cultural indices such as power, status, gender and age. Pragmatic research comprises a diverse range of research strands including how linguistic choices encode politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Watts, 2003), reference and deixis (Levinson, 2004) and the relationship between domain specific discourse, such as workplace or media discourse, and specialised pragmatic characteristics (O’Keeffe, Clancy and Adolphs, 2011). Thus, pragmatics provides, as Christie (2000: 29) maintains, ‘a theoretical framework that can account for the relationship between the cultural setting, the language user, the linguistic choices the user makes, and the factors that underlie those choices’.

Pragmatics is a young discipline, having relatively recently cemented its position in the topography of linguistics, and the study of pragmatics in relation to Irish English is younger still. As this issue no doubt illustrates, much of the ground breaking work on the description of Irish English has concerned its phonological, grammatical and lexical features. Many of these features have been attributed either to transfer from An Ghaeilge, the Irish language, or to the continuation of features from earlier forms of English taken to Ireland in previous centuries. This resulted in Irish English being portrayed as a hybrid variety rather than as a variety valued in its own right, a fact perhaps compounded by the somewhat political overtones in the recognition of Irish English itself (Hickey, 2002: 2).

Researchers working within the field of pragmatics and Irish English have recently begun to address a general paucity of pragmatic research. In their introduction to *The Pragmatics of Irish English*, Barron and Schneider suggest that the pragmatic perspective on Irish English, in comparison with the impressive sweep of research on Irish English on other levels, has hitherto represented a ‘desideratum’ in the literature (Barron and Schneider, 2005: 3). Their book marked an additional direction in the study of Irish English, examining language use in

the private, official and public spheres of Irish life and contrasting this with language use conventions in other English-speaking cultures.

In the following section, we review studies which examine Irish English, in specific contexts, and frequently in relation to other varieties of English, from a primarily pragmatic perspective. This enables us to highlight what the literature has to say with regard to the pragmatic characteristics and profile of Irish English. What also becomes manifest is the general orientation of research in the area of pragmatics itself. Phenomena such as politeness, relational strategies, speech acts and analyses of the pragmatic salience of specific linguistic forms are addressed in the studies presented below. Where appropriate, the phenomena are grouped together to provide a framework within which to tease out what we now know about the pragmatic profile of Irish English.

### **What pragmatic phenomena have been studied in relation to Irish English?**

Speech acts, or the potential of an utterance to carry communicative force such as ‘request’, ‘promise’, ‘warning’ and so on, have been a focus of research within the variational pragmatic framework (see the contributions in Barron and Schneider (eds) 2005; Barron, 2009; Schneider and Barron, 2008). In a study that focuses on responding to thanks, Schneider (2005) compares realisation strategies for responses that follow an act of thanking, which he glosses ‘thanks minimisers’ (TMs), in Irish English, English English and American English. The data used are derived from discourse completion tasks (DCTs) designed to elicit TMs: Thank you very much for the lift, and Thanks for the coffee. A critical aspect of the study is that it is the first of its kind in terms of sketching the use of TMs in Irish English, and Schneider aims to determine ‘the Irishness of the use of this speech act in the Republic of Ireland’. Many claims previously made in the literature concerning English English and

American English are corroborated or modified, and a number of characteristics of this particular speech act in Irish English are provided. Among other things, he notes that while TMs can occur alone in head moves (e.g. that's all right), they may also occur with what he calls supportive moves (e.g. You'd do the same for me); more than half of the supportive moves are found in the Irish data. The realisations of TMs are more varied in the Irish data, and more likely to be characterised by internal modification, for example through the use of intensifiers, such as the adverb very (you're very welcome). No bother, a variant on the TM no problem, is also used exclusively in the Irish English data. What emerges is the intrinsic value of pragmatic research that contrasts varieties of English.

Barron (2005) focuses on offers in Irish English and English English using a free discourse completion task (FDCT) which required respondents to imagine themselves in a number of given situations, and to write both sides of a dialogue for each one. What she finds is that while there are many similarities between Irish English and English English – for example, ritual reoffering and indirectness, often associated with the pragmatic system of Irish English, were in fact a feature of both the Irish English and English English data – there are certain features that occur with much greater frequency in the Irish data. For example, grounders, such as I'm not too bad with calculus.

I can give you a hand if you like, in Barron's data a feature of positive politeness employed with offers to mitigate their imposition, while occurring in both the Irish English and English English data, were a quantitatively more significant feature overall of the Irish data (Barron, 2005: 164). On the whole, the evidence of the data pointed towards a tendency for the Irish English speakers to invest more effort in decreasing the face threat of the offers (p. 166). In a later study on requests in Irish English and English English, Barron (2008) notes a similar marked tendency towards indirectness manifest in these speech acts in Irish English.

Research into discrete expressions that encode politeness in Irish English appears to support this hypothesis of indirectness as a characteristic of its pragmatic profile. There have been a number of studies of hedging, communicative strategies realised by lexico-syntactical elements used to modify propositional content for a variety of purposes including politeness, vagueness etc., in Irish English. In contrast to speech act research, which currently relies on elicited data using, for example, DCTs, these studies use spoken language corpora which contain naturally occurring, authentic discourse in a variety of settings. The use of corpora, and corpus linguistic methodology, has added a quantitative dimension to the characterisation of Irish English. In one of the earliest studies to blend pragmatics and corpus linguistics in relation to Irish English, Farr and O’Keeffe (2002) examine the occurrences of the hedges I would say and I’d say in three one-million-word spoken corpora: the Limerick Corpus of Irish English (LCIE), and samples from the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English (CANCODE) and a corpus of American spoken data from the Cambridge International Corpus (CIC). Their initial quantitative findings indicate that these hedges are used twice as frequently by Irish speakers as by their American counterparts in the data. In order to further investigate this finding in relation to Irish English, they present a more nuanced, qualitative analysis of two specific contexts, radio phone-in and post-observation teacher training interaction, in which these hedges occur. They argue that Irish speakers use these hedges to soften face threatening acts such as disagreement or giving advice. Moreover, there was a pronounced tendency by Irish speakers to down tone, even where the propositional content is undisputed. They relate their findings to the Irish socio-cultural context and propose that the broad pragmatic functions of these hedges are linked to a tendency by Irish English speakers to avoid directness as ‘in Irish society...“forwardness”, which ranges from being direct to being self-promoting, is not valued’ (p. 41). They suggest

that Irish English speakers may feel an obligation to hedge in situations where British or American speakers do not.

In terms of the impact of context on the phenomenon of hedging, Farr, Murphy and O’Keeffe (2004) analysed the occurrence of hedging across various contexts in spoken Irish English: family discourse, radio phone-in, teacher training feedback, service encounters and female friends chatting, using the Limerick Corpus of Irish English (LCIE). The results of this analysis of intravarietal variation at the level of context indicated that the more institutionalised the discourse, the higher the frequency of hedging items. They also provide a list of hedges that are most frequently used in the LCIE as single-word and two-word clusters. What is interesting for the study of the pragmatic system of Irish English is the emergence from the single and two-word cluster frequency lists of the hedges like and you know. Clancy (2005) further examines the occurrences of frequent hedges derived from Farr, Murphy and O’Keeffe (2004) in relation to Irish family discourse. He also finds that like is the most frequent hedging item. This is despite the fact that discourse in the Irish families he examined is characterised by a low frequency of hedging in general. Further research on like in Irish English is being undertaken by Schweinberger (forthcoming) who also compares the use of like across different varieties of English. Other items that have been flagged as having a nascent pragmatic function in Irish English include now (Clancy and Vaughan, forthcoming) and so (Binchy, 2005). See also Kallen (2005b) for a consideration of I say, I’d say, I mean and you know.

Another interesting research vein points towards a socio-pragmatic feature of Irish English: the overt demonstration of power in spoken discourse is avoided. It is a recurring feature of work that considers power relationships in specific contexts in Ireland. For example, O’Keeffe’s (2005, 2006) studies of radio phone-in in the Irish context has described radio phone-in as pseudo-intimate, in that a range of strategies which reduce or redress the physical

distance and power differential between the caller and the presenter, such as first name vocatives, latching (a feature of collaborative interaction where one speaker's turn is completed by another) or reflexive pronouns (And what are you doing with yourself nowadays?) are employed. In addition, Farr's (2005) study of relational strategies in post-observation meetings between teacher trainers and trainees demonstrates the employment of similar strategies to redress the inherently asymmetrical nature of the speaker relationship. Interestingly, she notes how shared socio-cultural references such as codeswitching – the use of *muinteóir*, the Gaelic word for teacher, for example – can mitigate the context and down tone the power differential as well as act as a sort of professional shorthand. Hickey (2005: 27) notes that it is 'part of the competence of all speakers of Irish English that they know what features [of the vernacular mode] can be donned to impart a popular touch to their speech' and Kallen (2005a) specifically mentions the peppering of speech with Irish words, for example, I've no *grá* [love] for her, anyway (p. 141), as in-group identity markers. See also Atkinson and Kelly-Holmes (2011), which investigates the relationship between codeswitching, identity and attitudes to language ownership (in relation to the Irish language) in the Republic of Ireland.

Taboo language, loosely defined as 'words or expressions that are totally or partly prohibited in society' (Murphy, 2009: 86), has been a very recent entrant to the field of pragmatic research in relation to Irish English. Murphy considers the use of the item F<sup>U</sup>CK (a lemma which contains *fucking*, *fuck*, *fucked*, *fucker(s)*) from a gender and age viewpoint, using a corpus of the discourse of male and female Irish English speakers in various different age groups (see also Murphy, 2010). Murphy (2009), perhaps unsurprisingly, finds that F<sup>U</sup>CK is most frequently used by adult speakers in their 20s, and mostly by male speakers. What is really valuable is that while this might be intuited to be the case, it is empirically demonstrated to be so. (Of course, Irish English speakers also have at their disposal the

alternative FECK which is more acceptable socially.) On the less incendiary end of the taboo language scale, Farr and Murphy (2009) consider religious references in language, previously designated as taboo, such as God, Christ, Jesus and so on. They compare different varieties of English and find that in informal contexts, this feature of language is most common in the Irish English data, with Jesus and Christ the most frequently used taboo items, the former often as [dʒe:səs], reflecting an earlier general pronunciation, now confined to the vernacular mode. In general though, they find that these items are an acceptable part of Irish English, and have had their previous pragmatic force diluted.

Response tokens have been a focus of recent pragmatic research using a variational pragmatic framework and corpus linguistic methods. Response tokens can be broadly defined as items in discourse such as yeah, mm, a head nod etc., which demonstrate engaged listenership without changing the speaker turn. O’Keeffe and Adolphs (2008), using two one-million-word corpus samples, investigate the form and pragmatic function of response tokens in Irish and British English. The results of their analysis show that in the British English data response tokens are far more frequent. A subsequent analysis of the response tokens was conducted using smaller sample subcorpora, which was further differentiated in terms of macro-social variables such as gender, age and socio-economic status. They again found that the response tokens were more frequent in British English, although there was no real variation at the level of the response tokens’ pragmatic functions. These findings pose a number of interesting cross-cultural pragmatic conundrums, for example, are British people better listeners? Do Irish people talk more and respond less? Do Irish people yield turns less and interrupt more? (p. 92).



## **Conclusion: Looking to the future**

As can be seen from this review of pragmatic studies, recent research has been, whether implicitly or explicitly, dominated by a variational approach, unsurprisingly given the notable influence of Barron and Schneider's work (see references). The variational pragmatic framework has made the study of the pragmatic system of Irish English a serious and structured research agenda. The variational studies have highlighted the fact that Irish English has a distinct pragmatic system from, say, American English or English English.

In addition, the corpus-based nature of many of these studies has introduced an empirical, quantitative aspect to the research. The recent release of the Irish component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-Ireland) (Kallen and Kirk, 2008a) has been welcomed by all researchers of Irish English. Nevertheless, corpus-based research is not without its drawbacks. There are many pragmatic features of spoken language which may or may not be contained in a corpus: if the extralinguistic feature of laughter, for example, is not included in a transcription, then the corpus software will not be able to locate this potential indicator of humour. A broader point is that pragmatic research is currently only partially possible using corpus tools – a significant amount of manual sifting is required, although the situation has been somewhat addressed by the release of SPICE-Ireland (Kallen and Kirk, 2008b), which provides pragmatic and discourse annotation to the spoken component of the ICE-Ireland Corpus and a prosodic transcription for 100 of the 300 texts. The significant advantage of using corpora, of course, rests in the authenticity of the language they contain. While the research to date is characterised by an impressive breadth, there is much that can be done through follow-up research that should add strength and colour to the findings that have been generated thus far. Areas for follow-up research include:

- Pragmatic markers, such as like, you know, now, so, amongst others;

- Response tokens;
- Speech acts in context (using SPICE-Ireland, for example);
- Taboo language;
- Politeness in Irish English, using both Brown and Levinson's (1987) classic research framework, but also more contemporary approaches, such as the work of Watts (2003) and Locher (2004). Equally, there is a need for a consideration of impoliteness (see Culpeper, 1996 and Bousfield, 2008) in Irish English.

In terms of original research, an interesting paper by Hughes (2001) on violation of Gricean maxims as the basis of humour in an Irish and American television comedy (Father Ted and The Simpsons respectively) points to another useful direction in the future of pragmatic research on Irish English. Humour is a powerful, polyvalent pragmatic resource, and requires more focused research in the realm of pragmatics. A critical aspect of any pragmatic system is deixis. To date, it remains 'one of the most empirically understudied core areas of pragmatics' (Levinson, 2004: 97). Researchers in Irish English could spearhead a movement to redress this issue; it would be both timely and illuminating in terms of the pragmatics of Irish English and pragmatics in general.

Spoken Irish English has dominated the pragmatic research agenda thus far; however, a useful direction for future studies of written language is suggested by Amador-Moreno (2005). Her study relates to the 'literary rendering' of Irish English and deals with discourse markers in the novels of Patrick MacGill, namely and, sure, surely, troth and arrah, in terms of the light they cast on Irish English as a variety at the turn of the twentieth century. MacGill's novels are shown to be particularly valuable as repositories of late nineteenth-century Donegal English as he consciously aims to give credibility to his characters by giving

them dialogue that mirrored as closely as possible a genuine use of language. Amador-Moreno remarks that *sure* and *arra* (noted by Hickey (2007: 375) as having similar pragmatic functions) are still common in Irish English, particularly in the west of Ireland, to this day, and further research on DMs in different written genres of Irish English will be illuminating (Amador-Moreno, 2005: 93).

Finally, pragmatics has, potentially, an added value to researchers of the use of English in both Southern and Northern Ireland, especially when viewed in the light of the troubled recent history of the island. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006: 101) maintain that ‘some of the major areas of social dissonance and conflict among different social and ethnic groups in American society are directly tied to people’s failure to understand that different groups have different language-use conventions’. Therefore, in the future, pragmatics may contribute in some way towards addressing any linguistic misconceptions that may exist between people of different social, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

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