

SYNTACTIC AMBIGUITY IN HIBERNO-ENGLISH

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Hiberno-English shows deviations from all areas of Standard English of which syntax is only one. Within this area we have many constructions which have no formal equivalents in Standard English. If we then look at the remaining ones in the field of syntax we find a small number which do have equivalents in Standard English, that is the precise syntactic constructions which do have equivalents in Standard English but with different meanings. The development has been in my view not so much the expansion of certain Standard English syntagmas to become polysemic in Hiberno-English but rather the adoption of many constructions from Irish into English among which were some that already existed in Standard English with a given and different meaning. Because of this belief I offer below Irish equivalents of the Hiberno-English constructions but will leave it up to the reader to decide whether he regards transfer as a plausible explanation of their emergence.

Although the constructions presented here have their origins in the 17th. and 18th. centuries¹ they continue to exist in Hiberno-English up to the present. All of them are part of the passive knowledge of the speakers of Hiberno-English and most of them of the active knowledge also. As with phonetic features of this variety of English we find increasing acceptability of non-standard forms with an increase in colloquial register. With syntactic features the speaker's awareness of their use is lower than with phonetic or lexical features. For this reason we find them represented by speakers who would not indulge in the more salient phonetic characteristics of Hiberno-English or use many of those lexical items which are exclusive to it.

¹ For accounts of the origin of the constructions treated here and many others from the area of syntax in particular, see O'Sullivan (1978: 93-141); Bliss (1979: 284-311). For a more general account see Hogan (1927: 52-61); Joyce (1979: 1-9) and Bliss (1972).

The constructions to be treated here can be divided into the morphosyntactical categories they affect. This then gives us the following division:

- (i) prepositions
- (ii) conjunctions
- (iii) determiners
- (iv) verbs.

Category (i) contains two prepositions *on* and *after* which are involved in polysemic constructions in Hiberno-English. Let us start with the former and look at the following sentence:

- (1) *The soup boiled over on me.*

The Standard English interpretation of the sentence is normally:

- (1a) *The soup boiled over on a part of my body.* (e.g. *hand*)

its second interpretation in Hiberno-English is one which derives from the function of *on* a preposition used to express pertinence, relevance, being affected by or involved in an action. The Irish equivalent to (1) is:

- (2) *Chuaigh an t-anraidh thar fuchadh orm.*

(went the soup over boiling on-me)

Here we have the compound prepositional pronoun *orm* which expresses the same notion of being affected by an action which is interpreted as being conveyed by 'on me' in (1) in a Hiberno-English reading. Note that this constructional type is also found elsewhere. Compare the German translation of (2):

- (3) *Mir kochte die Suppe über.*

which contains an instance of the 'Pertinenzdativ'² used to express the relevance of an action to a given person.

Not all constructions of this type are semantically ambiguous. If we change the lexical items of the construction we may attain one which cannot be meaningfully interpreted on a literal level and so remains with the specifically Hiberno-English interpretation:

- (4) *The fire went out on her.*
 (4a) *Chuaigh an tine in éag uirthi.*

(went the fire in death on-her)

(4a) shows the Irish translation which as (4) only allows of a non-literal interpretation.

² The syntax of this type of dative is treated in Polenz (1969).

The preposition *after* is used in Hiberno-English to convey a perfective sense³ which does not exist in Standard English. Constructions with this preposition are often given as examples of Hiberno-English and precisely because of its ambiguity it has received notice. A construction of this kind would be:

- (5) *He is after his dinner.*

The two interpretations which it has are:

- (5a) *He wants his dinner.* (Standard English)
 (5b) *He has finished eating his dinner.* (Hiberno-English)

It is in fact questionable to what extent (5) is ambiguous in Hiberno-English at all as (5a) is not a ready interpretation of it. If used in a context where (5a) is likely then it is ambiguous as we would then have the tension between a context suggesting the less common interpretation and the more normal one (5b) coming to mind also. As before we have an exact Irish equivalent to (5):

- (6) *Tá sé tar éis a dhinnéar.*

(is he after his dinner)

which has only the meaning of (5b); that of (5a) would have to be rendered as something like:

- (6a) *Tá sé ag lorg a dhinnéar.*

(is he searching his dinner)

Incidentally (5) shows a participle deletion which is optional. If this deletion is not carried out then the resulting form is an unambiguous sentence, but as with (4) unacceptable in terms of Standard English:

- (5c) *He is after eating his dinner.*

The compensation in Hiberno-English for the perfective of Irish exists across all tenses, as the following example with the future perfect shows (and which in Hiberno-English is a perfectly acceptable sentence):

- (5d) *He will be after eating his dinner by the time you're ready.*
 (5e) *Beidh sé tar éis a dhinnéar a ith nuair a bheidh tú réidh.*

(be-FUT he after his dinner eat-NON FINITE when be-FUT you ready)

This Irish sentence is not in fact the most obvious rendering of (5d). The constructional type represented here is normally restricted to the past. A more acceptable translation would be:

³ See Hogan (1934 : 143) as well for mention of this.

(5f) *Beidh a dhinnéar ite aige nuair a bheidh tú réidh.*

(be-FUT his dinner eaten at-him when be-FUT you ready)

The Hiberno-English sentence could well be interpreted as a case of interference extension, i.e. an original interference form spreads throughout a paradigm (here: the tense paradigm) to areas where it does not (readily) occur in the donor language.

Category (ii) contains conjunctions and here we are concerned with the use of the conjunction *and* which occurs in ambiguous constructions in Hiberno-English. They illustrate, however, the reverse phenomenon to that which we had with the two prepositional constructions observed above. Here we have the case of deletion of a distinction which is made in Standard English, namely between clause conjunction and subjunction. Let us take the following sentence:

(7) *I met Michael this morning and I going to town.*

This sentence shows the exchange of a temporal subjunctor (*while, when*) for the conjunctor *and*. I postulate that this construction is a result of transfer from Irish which does not necessarily make use of a (syntactic) temporal subjunctor but relies on the context to convey the notion of temporal subjunction when it is unambiguous:

(7a) *Bhuail mé le Michéal maidin inniu agus mé ag dul chun an bhaile.*

(hit I with M. morning today and I going to the town)

However, if we substitute the following sentence for (7) we obtain an ambiguous construction in English:

(8) *He went for a walk and it raining.*

The conjunctor *and* in (8) need not necessarily be interpreted as a temporal subjunctor. In Hiberno-English the *and* could stand for a qualifying subjunctor as the possible paraphrase of (8) shows:

(8a) *He went for a walk although it was raining.*

From the form of (8) there is no way of deciding whether this is the case or not.⁴ Here the context is unconsciously relied upon to suggest the correct interpretation of the conjunctor. The same applies to the Irish equivalent of (8) which is:

(8b) *Chuaigh sé ag siúl agus é ag cur báistí.*

(went he walking and it putting rain-GENITIVE)

⁴ The lack of a finite verb form in the second part of (8) is irrelevant to the interpretation of the conjunctor *and*.

Category (iii) which is a source of ambiguous constructions is that of determiners, the one in question here being the definite article. Here we must look at the situation in Irish first. It has only one article, the definite one, and this is used before nouns used in a generalizing and an abstract sense. Again we may compare the situation with that of German where the definite article behaves similarly:

(9) *An fhealsúnacht. Die Philosophie. But: philosophy.*

(the philosophy)

This leads in Hiberno-English to an over-representation of the definite article as in:

(10) *He likes the life abroad.*

(10a) *Taitníonn an saol thar sáile leis.*

(pleases the life abroad with-him)

In certain cases the syntagm in which this over-representation occurs becomes thereby ambiguous. Consider:

(11) *We went to Dublin in the car.*

(11a) *Chuamar go dtí Baile Átha Cliath sa ghluaiseán.*

(went-we to Dublin in-the car)

This sentence allows of two interpretations:

(11b) *We went to Dublin in a specific car.*

(11c) *We went to Dublin by car.*

Again one must have recourse to the context to disambiguate the sentence.

The last category I wish to deal with is that of verbs. It contains a few areas where ambiguity may arise. To begin with I would like to treat the use of the conditional in Hiberno-English in two particular areas: (i) that of questions and (ii) that of commands. Again we may point out the parallel to usage in Irish where the conditional has an equally wide if not greater range of application. An example for its use in interrogative constructions is:

(12) *Would you have a match on you?*

(12a) *An mbeadh cipín agat?*

(INTERROG. be-COND match at-you)

If we now move to imperative constructions we find a conditional in an interrogative syntagma. Thus a conditional sentence can often be ambiguous in Hiberno-English (with regard to sentence type and mood intended) though this is not normally the case in Standard English. Hence the following

sentence is open to two interpretations in Hiberno-English which depend on context (and to a certain extent on the prosody which it carries):

(13) *Would you do your work now?*

In an appropriate context this sentence can be equivalent to:

(13a) *Get on with your work.*

Although it is also possible that (13) should receive the interpretation in (13a) in Standard English, this is not usually the case whereas in Hiberno-English the likelihood that (13) be interpreted as (13a) is much higher. Once more this increase in probability can be traced back to the use of the conditional in Irish as an imperative:

(13b) *An ndéanfá d'obair anois?*

(INTERROG. do-COND your work now)

The second case of ambiguity within the verbal area concerns the use of an infinitive instead of a past participle. The ambiguity arises because in both Standard English and Hiberno-English the verb *have to* when followed by a bare infinitive has the meaning of 'must', 'be compelled to' and because the auxiliary *have* can be followed by an infinitive with *to* instead of a past participle in some instances. Consider:

(14) *If I had to be there it wouldn't have happened.* (Hiberno-English)

(14a) *If I had been there it wouldn't have happened.* (Standard English)

Its use is almost solely confined to conditional clauses and cannot be traced back to Irish nor to any other apparent source.

Perhaps one could nonetheless link up this use of the infinitive to another in a not very dissimilar type of construction which one can, however, trace to Irish, or at least point out the structural similarity with it. This use can be seen in

(15) *It's a pity you to be going so soon.* (Hiberno-English)

(15a) *It's a pity that you're going so soon.* (Standard English)

Here the finite verb form has been exchanged for a non-finite one, this also being the form required in the equivalent Irish construction:

(15b) *Is mór an trua é tú bheith ag imeacht chomh luath sin.*

(is great the pity it you be going as early that)

In this as in the other examples above it is hard to ignore the parallelism between the syntax of Irish and Hiberno-English at certain points. Needless to say one cannot establish with certainty that interference has taken place

and my presentation which favours an interference hypothesis obviously sheds in many respects a too favourable light on the possibility of transfer. Furthermore Irish speaking districts have shrunk to such an insignificant size that we cannot observe transfer taking place on any appreciable scale today, something which might confirm our suspicion that it also did so in the past in the areas discussed here. But we can take cognizance of the above structures and recognize them as an integral part of the syntax of Hiberno-English even if their origin is a matter of dispute.

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