

STANDARD ENGLISH, DEVIATION AND INTERFERENCE:
A REPLY TO ROGER LASS

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In the 17th volume of *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* Roger Lass published a paper entitled "‘Irish Influence’: Reflection on ‘Standard’ English and its Opposites, and the Identification of Calques" in which he took issue with me on a number of points made in two articles of mine in *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* (1983), s. Hickey (1983a+b). The editor of *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* has kindly allowed me to make a reply to Lass as his paper is specifically directed at my work. The following remarks are thus intended as such a reply; please note that the present paper presupposes acquaintance with Lass’s article.

To begin with let me make some points of a general nature before treating matters of detail. Lass starts out by criticizing the ‘common and misleading use of ‘SE’ [=Standard English, RH] to mean “southern British English”’. The main thrust of his argument is that Standard English in the sense of southern British English is too restrictive and one must allow for more tolerance in labelling structures as ‘non standard’. Lass would seem to want to abandon the idea of a single codified standard with reference to English. While I am subjectively in sympathy with this desire I feel I must reject it as it deprives one of a yardstick for measuring a particular variety of English against (in my case, of Hiberno-English). Indeed Lass has caught himself in his own net as he himself (later on in the article) appeals to the notion of ‘standard’ speakers and talks of speakers being less ‘standard’ in casual registers than in more formal ones. True, he puts the adjective ‘standard’ in quotation marks; this however does not excuse his inconsistency in railing against the notion of a standard and using the notion in his remarks at the same time. His quotation marks merely indicate his uncomfortable feeling in using the term; they neither contribute to the explication of the term nor constitute a conceptual alternative to it.

The next point which it is necessary to touch on here concerns a remark of Lass's in which he warns of the danger of regarding features which are found in a given diatopic variety of English, and which do not occur in southern British English, as being characteristic of this variety. As Lass mentions this in connection with his criticisms of my articles he seems to be suggesting that I hold this view (his wording is not quite explicit either way). But I have never maintained this; the two papers which form the point of departure for Lass's considerations happen to be about Hiberno-English; it cannot be held against them that they do not treat parallel structures in other varieties of English. Inasmuch as this is the case Lass's criticism of my work is otiose. He would rather seem to have used my work as a peg to hang his own thoughts concerning certain structures in his idiolect of English on.

The remaining general point to be made concerns the value of certain structures in Hiberno-English as evidence for a transfer hypothesis. At the end of his article Lass concludes that my case for 'Irish origin for [my] HE [=Hiberno-English, RH] parallels is at least not proven'. It is obvious that this statement is intended as a criticism by Lass. However, I do not contend it in the least. In fact in the conclusion to Hickey (1983a, see 44f.) (referring to the syntactic structures listed) I point out that "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 ... 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" (Hickey 1983a: 45). The point here is that there can never be any definite proof of an interference and it is unfair of Lass to suggest that I think I had 'proved' the interference origin of the structures commented on in Hickey (1983a). What I did was to offer Irish equivalents to certain Hiberno-English structures and to leave it up to the reader to decide as to the *likelihood* that the latter have their origin as transfer phenomena. In fact this is all one can do no matter how decisive the data looks. Even if one were to have two structures in two languages in contact with each other which were nowhere else to be found one would still not have proven that one of the structures constituted an interference in one language from the other. The demand that one prove transfer to have taken place is of its nature misguided. The best one can do is to show that it probably took place.

Given these general points, I would now like to make a few comments on details of Lass's paper. With reference to the sentences containing a pertinence dative (with the preposition *on* in Hiberno-English) Lass notes that the scope of *on*-prepositional phrases is much wider than I suggest and cites examples to support this (see his sample sentences under (6)). I grant the

validity of these as acceptable sentences outside Hiberno-English and acknowledge the relevance of his observation that such constructions always imply a 'negative affect' as he terms it. The likelihood of the pertinence dative in Hiberno-English being the result of transfer is increased when one looks at the situation with other prepositional phrases. Several other construction types occur which do not seem to be simultaneously characteristic of varieties of English outside of Ireland. Consider the following examples.

- (1) a *'Twas bad weather that was in it.*
 b *Droch aimsir a bhí ann.*
 c (bad weather COMP was in-it)
 d 'It was bad weather'.
- (2) a *He took the book off me.*
 b *Bhain sé an leabhair uaim.*
 c (took he the book off me)
- (3) a *Come here till I tell you a story.*
 b *Tar anseo go n-inseoidh mé scéal dhuit.*
 c (come here till tell-COND I story to-you)
- (4) a *You could be caught with them.*
 b *Bhéadfá do rugadh léi.*
 c (could-NON FINITE your catch with them)
 d 'You could be caught because of them'.

In view of the strong parallels between Irish and Hiberno-English across the board in the prepositional area it seems justified to view the pertinence dative with *on* as deriving from Irish as well.

The second syntactic peculiarity which Lass discusses is the use of the definite article with nouns in a generic sense. In his commentary he gives one to understand that sentences such as *He likes the life abroad* and *I'm going in the car* are acceptable to him. No doubt they are, but not in the Hiberno-English sense. The Hiberno-English reading of these sentences would seem to be different from that which Lass gives them (this being what I would term a standard interpretation). For example of the sentence *I'm going in the car* he says that the particular car he has is not known. However, this is not the point here. The Hiberno-English reading is that a car is being used as a mode of transport (as in *by train, by plane, etc.*) and does not imply that the speaker either possesses a car or has a car at his disposal.

The third aspect of Hiberno-English syntax which Lass discusses is the overgeneralization of the use of *would* which I suggested might be connected with a similar use in Irish. On reconsideration, however, I would prefer to play down possible Irish influence here not because I now believe this not to have existed but because of the difficulty of showing that Irish influence has

been present in this area of Hiberno-English. As Lass rightly remarks, the use of *would* as a softened imperative is so common in English as to render its use in Hiberno-English of only slight interest for a transfer view.

The majority of issues taken up by Lass are from Hickey (1983a). The second paper (1983b) is only touched upon in two respects, the first being the use of *us* as a subject pronoun (as in *Us wives have a hard time of it*). He considers this acceptable in his idiolect. But here, as with the discussion of the pertinence dative forms, the fact that one form (or a few) among many is acceptable does not invalidate my view that their use may well have its source in Irish: it is the high representation of several object-form pronouns in subject position (Hickey 1983b: 50f.) (just like the many prepositions in idiosyncratic constructions, see Hickey 1983a: 40ff. and (1)–(4) above) which suggests Irish influence. The second respect in which Lass refers to Hickey (1983b) concerns the use of the definite article for the possessive pronouns in sentences like *The mother was on to me the other day about it*. The fact that Lass finds *the wife* and *the boss* as subjects in such a sentence acceptable is irrelevant. These are lexicalised cases. What is interesting in Hiberno-English is the independence of the article-for-possessive pronoun substitution of particular lexemes.

The remainder of Lass's paper is taken up with discussing a phenomenon in Afrikaans, verb-second order, which has two possible sources: English (i.e. the other official language in the Republic of South Africa) and the general trend (convergence) to have verb-second order in West Germanic languages as well, notably German and Frisian. Lass's arguments concerning German are marred by the grammatical incorrectness of one of the two sentences he quotes. His sample sentence (19a) is not grammatically possible: the equivalent to the sentence *Er sagte, er wäre krank* with subordinate clause complementizer is not **Er sagte, daß er krank wäre* but *Er sagte, daß er krank sei*.

REFERENCES

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