Overhearing Ireland: Mediatized personae in Irish accent culture

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Abstract

Metapragmatic representations of ‘accent’ in Irish English over a 400-year period are examined, identifying the phonological shibboleths that have remained in place as emblems of ‘Irishness’ over the whole period. A textual structure based on direct quotation is shown to have supported a brisk trade in commodified text-artifacts (joke-books, pamphlets, a web site) that present amusing anecdotes of Irish English speech. These narrational miniatures vivify a wide range of recognizable personae, inviting readers to align (or dis-align) themselves with the Irish ‘characters’ represented. The figure of the overhearer as reporter has been central to the genre ever since a shift to realist reportage around 1800.

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1. Introduction

This paper emerges from a larger project investigating ‘the politics of accent’ in contemporary Ireland. Drawing material from Web sites, newspapers, and literature, the larger project explores how figurations of personhood in contemporary Ireland emerge as shibboleths of commoditized personae, circulating in textual forms that are remarkably stable and perduring, even as they are today being used to render figurations of an ever-expanding range of social types.

My initial concern is with the emblematic value of certain highly salient phonological segments, i.e., those that co-occur in speech as what people call ‘accents’. In every linguistic community, variations in the way a language is pronounced can be seized upon as reliable indicators of a speaker’s provenance, and/or membership in ethnic, class, or other social groupings. Once enregistered, or widely recognized, such diacritics gain the status of shibboleths, or emblematic signs, of a given speaker’s identity—which of course opens the door to citation, parody, and other ‘parasitic’ usages.

And indeed, preliminary research indicates that many speakers of English in Ireland are routinely able to recognize, and to perform, more than one accent. Speech practices involving the imitation of (other people’s) accents inform the texture of face-to-face interaction and popular media in Ireland today (see, e.g., Brereton, 2008; Coleman, 2004). Meanwhile, some speakers attempt consciously to intervene in their own habits of speech, reshaping their pronunciation, vocabulary, voice quality, etc., in the direction of a positively-valued norm or target, or at least away from a stigmatized one (see Moore, 2011 for an extended treatment of accent avoidance).

The most obvious such interventions into accent are of course those of elocution—a field essentially invented in the 18th century by one Irish writer (Thomas Sheridan), and given a kind of literary immortality by another (G.B. Shaw). And yet many people who have never been subjected to systematic training in elocution have nonetheless sought to alter their accents (perhaps at key junctures of the life-cycle, like leaving home to attend university). Is this really a process of replacing one accent with another, or is it a process of adding to an already internally differentiated repertoire? How many different accents can one person be said to ‘have’? Are some of them ‘their own’, and others, Others’? How does awareness of such phonological norms become widely available in the community?
In the discussion below I show that contemporary mediatized texts recycle and transform elements of a much older ‘accent culture’ that has grown up in and around Ireland over the past 400 years. I also show that the mediatized texts that transmit ‘accent culture’ across this long history present a remarkable constancy of form, even as the social relations mediated by these texts have undergone equally remarkable changes from colonial to postcolonial times.

2. Contemporary accent culture

Alongside an unusual diversity of regional, class, and urban–lects in Ireland, imitations of others’ accents are ubiquitous today in broadcast media, in face-to-face interaction, and in print. Such accent imitations—in whatever medium—are almost always deployed for comical effect. In oral performance, the use of direct quotation provides a way for speakers to disparage an absent party all the while shielding themselves as Animators in the immediate speech–event from the damaging indexicality of the quoted speech and the figures of personhood recycled through it (for ‘Animator’ see Goffman, 1981). The more ‘accurate’ the accent imitator, the more effective the disparagement—provided there is a minimum of ‘leakage’ across the boundary between the reported (imitated) voice and the voice of the reporter (cf. Bakhtin, 1981 [1934–35]).

But of course there always is leakage. Given the complete absence in Ireland of an endogenous Standard register of English—and of any imagined form of ‘neutral’ un–accented spoken English—all such imitations are inevitably given ‘in’ the accent of the imitator, whenever they are realized in the spoken oral/aural channel. This apparently trivial (and perhaps universal) fact takes on special significance in Ireland, where written and printed English has been standardized completely on British norms, but spoken English has never been standardized, and certainly could never be standardized to British (RP) norms of pronunciation, for obvious political reasons (see, e.g., Kallen, 1988; Hickey, 2007, p. 22; cf. Croghan, 1985; see Agha, 2003 for a discussion of RP, and cf. Mugglestone, 2003).

Irish ‘accent culture’ has been defined for centuries in part by a brisk trade in commodities that memorialize the charming—funny, yet abhorrent—mis-speakingfulness of Irish Others: in the first instance, of characters on stage or in a joke-book; more recently, of complete strangers, who turn out to be our relatives, our friends and neighbors, ourselves. But these text-artifacts not only memorialize these moments of telling dysfluency, they also enable the continual re-circulation and re-animation of these cringe- or hoot-producing verbal performances.

One can begin to make inferences about circulation by attending to the physical characteristics of these text-artifacts, whether online or on paper. These are texts designed for use, for sharing, and for particular kinds of reading practices. The Overheard in Dublin books (there are now three)—of which more below—are in a small trim size (roughly 4” × 6.5”), and fit easily into a purse, or the back pocket of a pair of trousers, or the glove box in a motorcar (Kelly and Kelly, 2007a,b, 2008).

And the trade in such textual commodities is quite old. The Irish joke-book tradition goes back well into the 17th century, when the books and pamphlets were produced for an English readership and only indirectly (one might say, mediately)—through the use of deviant spellings to appropriate an Irish ‘voice’—by the Irish. Then as now, they appear in cheap, popular editions, their contents generously larded with plagiarized and otherwise suspect material. The point is that, at least since the period of Edgeworth’s Essay on Irish Bulls (Edgeworth, 2006 [1802])—around the time of the Act of Union (1800)—anecdotes of Irish English speech have been presented in a realist frame, asking to be taken as real-life utterances overheard on-the-fly and written down (or remembered) by the original overhearer, who is now, dear reader, your trustworthy reporter on Irish speech and character(s), and who supplies detailed paratextual apparatus fixing the time and place of the original overheard utterance.

This role-doubling across participation frameworks—wherein the peripheral participant ( overhearer) in one speech event becomes a focal participant ( narrator) in a second speech event that reports on the first—connects the popular literary material discussed here to narrational strategies found in much Irish literature of the 19th century (Eagleton, 1994; cf. Leersen, 1998; Murphy, 1998). I address these broader issues briefly in the conclusion below.

3. Overheard in Dublin

In the summer of 2007, first place on the Irish paperback nonfiction bestseller list was held by a small, cheaply produced paperback called Overheard in Dublin (Kelly and Kelly, 2007a; see Fig. 1). The paperback version of Overheard in Dublin emerged from the very successful collaborative blog of the same name (www.overheardindublin.com). The Web site, established in 2005, asks its users: ‘Overhear anything funny, interesting, unusual in Dublin?? Tell us what you’ve heard!’

Anecdotes pour into overheardindublin.com at a rate of at least five per day. All are in a fixed format: each bears a ‘title’ supplied either by the editors or by the contributor (more likely the former); the text of the anecdote almost always reports the setting, context, and participants of an overheard utterance or exchange, and then presents the directly quoted material. Often the overhearer-cum-reporter reappears after the quoted material with a kind of ‘coda’ addressed to the reader that

Users who submit a story must agree to the terms and conditions, which include granting to the webmasters the ‘royalty-free, non-exclusive right and license to use, reproduce, modify, adapt, publish, translate and distribute the content (in whole or in part) worldwide and/or to incorporate it in other works in any form, media or technology now known or hereafter developed’—rights, in other words, over all future re-circulation of the anecdotes.
sums up or otherwise encapsulates the import of the anecdote, usually with an implied conspiratorial wink. Beneath this in fine print is detailed information about the provenance of the anecdote: Overheard by [name], followed by even more specific information about the location of the original utterance, and the date it was submitted online.

Until a recent re-design of the site, anecdotes on the Overheard in Dublin web site were organized into six categories: four that reference the location (a sociologist of language would say, ‘speech domain’) where the utterance(s) were overheard—‘Transport, Workplace, Pub, On the Street’—and two that refer to highly salient Irish social types who happen to be located at the bottom, and at the top, respectively, of the Irish class hierarchy: ‘Skangers’ and ‘D4 Heads’.

Each entry on OHiD has an ‘email this to a friend’ button; since the re-design two other buttons have been added that enable users to assign a numerical rating to the anecdote, and to add their own comments.

The ‘email this to a friend’ button defines the minimal textual unit that can circulate as a freestanding anecdote. Each is like a playlet unto itself, a narrational miniature of urban reportage, capturing the vocal texture of encounters in public, in an environment of mutuality—and mutual surveillance—among strangers (Warner, 2002). It does so in a form that can easily be archived, collected, shared, re-animated, and otherwise recirculated.

Below in (1) is a representative sample, depicting a young girl on the Dublin tram line called the Luas (pictured in Fig. 1 above), switching between two enregistered accents as she speaks on the phone—the first a working-class Dublin accent, the second the posh accent known locally as ‘D4’ (see Moore, 2011 for an extended treatment of this accent). Here and in all the following examples below, I have taken the liberty of rearranging the text to throw into sharp relief the distinction between the framing speech of the overhearer-cum-reporter, and the directly quoted speech of the various ‘characters’: framing speech is presented flush left; directly quoted speech is indented. All details of spelling and punctuation are as they appear in the original. Along the right-hand side of each textual example I provide labels (in small caps) for the regularly recurring textual segments that compose each narrational miniature.
Two accents?

Some schoolgirl on her mobile on the Luas.

‘Outside the school? Yeah, I’m on the Luas. I’ll be two minutes like. Yeah I’ll be there. I’m fookin comin alrigh? Will ya hold on . . . Yeah, outside the school. Will ya fookin hold on! I’m comin! Jaysus! Fookin givin’ me hassle.’

She gets off the phone to whoever it was and makes another call (in a blatant southside accent):

‘Hello, yes, yes, I’m on the way, OK, excellent. Alroysh, heh, see you then’.

Overheard by Rob Gallagher, on the Luas between Charlemont and Windy Arbor stops
Posted on Friday, 10 June 2005.

The second example below illustrates how the format of Overheard in Dublin allows the narrator of an overheard speech event to use the material in the coda to establish with the reader a voicing alignment of collusive mutual amusement at the picturesque speech just displayed:

Priceless

My friend was on the old 123 from James’s into town.

A scanger was talking to some unlucky passenger saying:

‘For years I thought my kids name was Darren, me mot told me its bleedin Aaron!’

This is the god’s honest truth.

Overheard by DEKO, 123
Posted on Friday, 01st April 2005.

To ‘get’ the joke one needs to know that the old 123 is a Dublin bus line, that scanger is a derogatory term for lower-class Dubliners (stereotypically young males dressed in hooded sweatshirts), and that James’s refers to James’s Street, an area of lower-class social housing estates in the south inner city. The density of ‘local’ reference and allusion—so dense that this material is often literally not funny except in Dublin—is of course very much to the point.

In the third example below we see both the leakage of ‘accented’ speech across the boundary between reported speech and framing speech (as the narrator identifies the female character as Jacintehhhh), and the use in the coda of the same technique of style indirect ct libre:

Awful sore it is!

On the 78A to college the other morning a skanger youngwan gets on at James’s with a crutch and bandaged knee. She sits beside me at the back and her mate sits up the front, turns around and says

‘jayziz jacintehhhh dat looks terrible sore!’

Jacintehhhh goes

‘yer i’ is . . . Like bleedin artrootis or sumtin’.

Awful affliction that artrootis . . .

Overheard by Anonymous, 78A to ballyer
Posted on Monday, 26th November 2007.
The next example shows how *Overheard in Dublin* takes account of the pervasive presence in Dublin of the ‘New Irish’—immigrants from within and beyond the EU, whose numbers increased dramatically during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ period (roughly, 1997–2007); in this example the register is lexical as well as phonological (*gaffer* for ‘boss’, *blower* for ‘telephone’, *chinwag* for ‘conversation’, *jackanory* for ‘story’ via rhyming slang and an allusion to a popular British children’s television show):

\[(4)\]

Gotta know the lingo around here!

Security guard, foreign national probably Nigerian, gesturing with his walkie-talkie to dealer bloke to tidy up pallets and boxes near shopping center doorway. Dealer:

‘Der’s no problem, mate. Get yer gaffer on the blower and I’ll have a chinwag wih ‘im, he knows the jackanory’.

Retreats one very confused security guard!

Overheard by Anonymous, Ilac entrance, Moore Street
Posted on Tuesday, 24 January 2006.

The tone of reportage in *Overheard in Dublin* is one of mild aggression, tempered with a stance of inhabited joviality: the Irish elderly are casually patronized, the un-Irish speech and other behaviors of immigrants are derided nonchalantly (one anecdote in the book bears the title *Irish racism*), the pretensions of the newly rich (‘D4 Heads’) are casually lampooned.

But above all, *Overheard in Dublin* is fulsomely attentive to the ‘punctuality of its own circulation’ (*Warner, 2002, p. 68*): the reporter’s framing speech and the ‘paratextual’ apparatus pin down the location of each overheard utterance-token in time and space, using dates, times of day, exact locations, Dublin bus lines, and so on, employing ‘formulations of place’ (*Schegloff, 1968*) that appeal to readers’ inside knowledge, and provide the information that helps readers to perform the equivalent of what conversation analysts call ‘membership analysis’ on the characters represented.

Readers and web site visitors will recognize themselves and salient types of ‘others’ across a shared urban landscape refugured now as the backdrop for a potentially unlimited set of encounters between social types whose ethnic, class, gender and other characteristics are exquisitely revealed in their variously ‘accented’ English speech.

But if the number of encounters is potentially limitless—and the number of types of ‘Others’ difficult to constrain—the voicing structure and the method of entextualization is remarkably stable: framing speech in the voice of an overhearer (now, narrator), who invites the reader to collude in ironic appreciation of a bit of sociolinguistic ‘found art’: a snippet of directly quoted speech saturated with identity-revealing (phonological and lexical) shibboleths, indexed through deviant spellings. Each anecdote is like a picaresque novel in miniature.

Even the newspaper of record, the *Irish Times*, does not hesitate to employ deviant spellings to capture revelatory features of ‘accent’. Reporting from the press gallery about a typically theatrical encounter on the floor of the Dáil (the Irish Parliament) between South Kerry TD John (‘The Bull’) O’Donoghue and his bitter rival Jackie Healy-Rae (FF-Indep), the political reporter Miriam Lord provides example (5) below.

\[(5)\]  

[*Irish Times*, 15 June 2007 (Lord, 2007)]

The Bull’s constituency colleague, Jackie Healy-Rae, rushed to congratulate him [on his election victory], …

‘I wish him many long and happy years in the seat in which he is now sitting’,

puffed Jackie from his seat up in the gods beside fellow Independent jackpot winner, Finian McGrath. …

‘Standing here this evening, I guarantee the Ceann Comhairle that if there is a bad pothole around Waterville, on Dursey Island in Wesht Cork or anywhere in Cahirciveen, I will do my vurry besht to sort them out and I’ll keep ooo well informed all the time’,

declared Jackie, as his slick of hair glinted under the lights.

Having bagged ’milluns and milluns’ of euro for south Kerry, Jackie was entitled to be in good spirits.
Healy-Rae, a Co Kerry publican, artist, and politico, was once described with typical unkindness by Kevin Myers in the *Irish Times* (13 May 2002) as ‘a stage-Irish buffoon who is a mere shillelagh away from comic perfection’.

The important thing to observe in these materials is the way that the metapragmatic framing and textual organization of the anecdote lays out a voicing structure with its own invited alignments, at two levels: between the characters as represented speakers and addressees and an overhearer in the event being reported, and between the overhearer—who is now our reporter—and us as readers, in the event of reporting. To read these materials productively, then, we must attend to two orders of sociolinguistic reality: the represented interactional texts—really, playlets in which stereotypic figurations of recognizable social personae are depicted in encounters of various sorts—and the interactional textuality of reading and re-circulation (‘email this to a friend’), in which readers formulate a variety of positive and negative alignments with such figures.

4. Stage Irishry

The whole history of Irish English as a linguistic variety—the oldest of all the ‘extraterritorial Englishes’—is inextricably bound up with a textual history of metapragmatic representation in a satirical key: first, of course, from an English origo. The stereotyped features of Jackie Healy-Rae’s speech, for example—especially the phonological shibboleth of *sh* for *s*—themselves have a very long history.

The first specimen of the ‘brogue’, according to Jeremiah Hogan, comes from Skelton’s play *Speke, Parrot* [ca. 1525], in which a parrot ‘who imitates various languages and dialects, including that of the Irish water-carriers’ says:

(6) [John Skelton, *Speke, Parrot* (1525); source: Hogan, 1927, p. 56, fn 1]

‘Moryshe myne owne shelf’,
the costermonger sayth;
‘Fate, fate, fate, ye Irysh waterlag’

An important early example of Stage Irishry, in which Irish characters speak heavily ‘accented’ English, occasionally interspersing words and phrases of Irish, is the anonymous *Captain Thomas Stukeley* of 1596/1605 (O’Neill, 2007, pp. 118–142). For purposes of illustration, here is part of the sample provided by Bliss (1979, pp. 77–78):

(7) [Captain Thomas Stukeley (1596/1605); source: Bliss, 1979, pp. 77–78]

ONEALE Fate is the token? fate siegne that *Brian Mack Phelem*
said he would hang oot?³
O’HANLON I feate I know not ask the Shecretary.
ONEALE *Neale Mackener.*
MACK. Hest, *Oneale* hest, pease too art at the vater seed.⁴
ONEALE Fate is the token *bodeaugh breene*? That I sall see
ovare the valles of this Toone of Dundalke.

Here, along with a number of familiar shibboleths is an Irish phrase, <boudeaugh breene>, for Ir. *bodach brean* ‘stinking lout’ (O’Neill, 2007, p. 138).

Of course, the most famous utterance in all of Stage Irishry belongs to the character Captain Macmorris in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*:


FLUELLEN Captain Macmorris, I think, look you, under your correction,
there is not many of your nation—
MACM Of my nation! What ish my nation? Ish a villain, and a bastard, and a knave, and a rascal? What ish my nation?
Who talks of my nation?

² A fuller treatment would explore the broader cultural implications of the fact that the earliest sample of Irish English in the printed record comes in the form of utterances by a multilingual parrot in a macaronic and densely allegorical poetic satire, a work classed by one early commentator among those poems that, ‘though familiar to the students of English, are yet nearly devoid of meaning’ (Berdan, 1915, p. 140); but see Shell (2004) for some promising possibilities.
³ Translation (approximate): What is the token? What sign that …
⁴ *Please to halt at the water side.*
Leerssen’s (1996) discussion charts the ‘twofold accommodation of the Irish presence (as a character taking part in a fictional contrivance, and as an Irish character in front of an English audience)’ in the 17th and 18th centuries. He identifies three phases in its development: (a) in the 17th century, the Irish characters often later turn out to be Englishmen in masquerade; what’s represented is not “an Irishman” but rather an English character’s idea of what an Irishman is like (Leersen, 1996, p. 7); (b) by the end of the 18th century, ‘Irishmen of unmitigated loathesomeness are represented, whilst at the same time a claim to realism is raised’ (Leersen, 1996, p. 7). Then, in the mid-18th century comes (c) a dramatic shift to ‘a more appreciative treatment’ (Leersen, 1996, p. 79): ‘no longer a craven, heartless, dissembling enemy, he becomes a noble, sentimental, forthright hero, whose loyalty to England is only rendered more striking by his Irish accent and other markers of non-Englishness’—a development ‘influenced to no small degree by Irish rather than English playwrights’ (Leersen, 1996, p. 80).

In Charles Shadwell’s The Humours of the Army (1713), which features a Scottish colonel and a Welsh major, ‘the Irish angle is, interestingly, represented by two men. One of the is Major Outside, who is mainly characterized by a broad brogue; the other Irish Major, called Young Fox, and described in the dramatis personae as “a gay airy young fellow”, speaks standard English’ (Leersen, 1996, p. 113).

‘Shadwell’, Leerssen tells us, ‘goes to some lengths to emphasize the harmony between the two Irish officers, e.g., in a scene where Outside claims to have the same nationality and the same local background as Young Fox’:

(9) [Charles Shadwell, The Humours of the Army (1713); source: Leersen, 1996, p. 113]

OUTSIDE: By St Patrick, he only speaks his yords one way, and I do speak them an oder vay, but we do mean de same ting.

YOUNG FOX: Exactly my dear country-man.

What this passage really tells us is that Irish English speech as a site for a kind of sociolinguistic schismogenesis—a split between a hyper-English-speaking Irishman (in masquerade) and a dialect-speaking Irishman (being forthright)—already ‘worked’ onstage as generator of laughs by 1713. Oscar Wilde, another man in a mask, would later develop these dramatic possibilities further in his own life and work.

Charles Macklin’s The True-Born Irishman—produced to great success in Dublin in 1761, but a complete failure when it was staged in London in 1767—was ‘produced explicitly as an attempt to correct the popular view of Irish characters as traditionally represented on the stage’, according to Leersen (1996, p. 113). The contrast between ‘instinctive, native honesty’ and ‘the acquired fripperies of fashion’ (120) is embodied here in the contrast between two Irish characters, this time a husband and wife, Mr. and Mrs. O’Dogherty (Leersen, 1996, pp. 112–121; Morash, 2002, pp. 52–53).

As Hogan points out, this was a play ‘written to amuse a Dublin audience with the follies of those of their compatriots who aped English manners and speech’ (Hogan, 1927, p. 60). After they move to London, Mrs. O’Dogherty changes her name to Diggerty. Her husband complains that she is ‘in such a phrenzy of admiration for every thing in London’ that she has ‘brought over a new language for her’ (Leersen, 1996, p. 121). As Hogan observes,

She constantly repeats a few expressions that must have seemed highly ridiculous to the audience: imminsely, veestly. She uses a great many French words: vardee, jenny-see-quee, and once, having spoken of the ‘orage’ which assailed her ‘picket’ on the way from Holyhead, she has to explain that ‘an orage is a storum’ (Hogan, 1927, p. 61).

The presence of epenthesis to reduce heavy syllable codas composed of two resonants (so, filum for film, towen for town, storum for storm) is a dead giveaway (see Hickey, 2007, pp. 307–308). The mask always slips. In a climactic scene, her husband addresses her:

(10) [Charles Macklin, The True-Born Irishman (1761); source: Leerssen, 1996, p. 121]

MR O’D: I hope I shall never have any more of your London English; none of your this here’s, your that there’s, your winegars, your weals, your vindors, your toastesses, and your stone postesses; but let me have our good, plain, old Irish English, which I insist is better than all the English English that ever coquets and coxcombs brought into this land.
5. Bulls and blunders

The full title of the most famous joke-book of the late 1680s (and the self-description of its putative author) provides a rich example of 'Stage-Irish' English phonology captured in deviant spellings, and of the dialogic relations between accent-mediated voices:

(11) *Bogg-Witticisms; or, Dear Joy's Commonplaces. Being a Compleat Collection of the most Profound Punns, Learned Bulls, Elaborate Quibbles and Wise Sayings of some of the Natives of Teague-Land.*


A textual genre known as ‘bulls’ was a mainstay of joke-books from the 18th century onward. Bulls, according to the definitive historical monograph on this textual genre, ‘were, over a period of more than two centuries, one of the chief verbal signals by which the Irish were identified by speakers of standard English’ (Earls, 1988, p. 3; never mind that ‘standard English’ did not exist over most of this period). Earls offers a brief three-point definition of the Irish bull:

(1) It is a brief spoken utterance rarely extending beyond a sentence in length; (2) it involves a comic contradiction between two of its component parts of which the speaker is unaware but which is perceived by the person who has recorded the anecdote and by his readers; (3) since the late seventeenth century it has been consistently associated with Irish people speaking in English and most prominently with social groups included within the category ‘the lower Irish’ (Earls, 1988, p. 1).

Without any doubt the most important single contribution to the genre was Maria Edgeworth’s *Essay on Irish Bulls* (Edgeworth, 2006 [1802]), a dizzying work written during and after the 1798 revolution that manages both to be a critical debunking of the idea that the Irish are given to making ‘bulls’ and other verbal blunders, and a collection of ‘excellent’ examples of same, gleaned by its author over several years of collecting activity. Self-contradictory in—and probably, by—its very design, Edgeworth’s *Essay* itself exemplifies the form of a bull.

‘While other comic genres in the Irish tradition ... are deliberately shaped by the performer’, writes Earls, ‘the bull is the creation of the hearer’. It represents ‘a kind of anti-folklore which is the creation of the collector rather than of the performer’ (Earls, 1988, pp. 18–19). Central to the very construction of this genre is the double role-alignment of the overhearer, who then becomes our (reliable) reporter.

Here is one of Edgeworth’s introductory examples, taken from her vast store of verbal *collectanea*:

(12) [Paddy Blake’s bull; source: Edgeworth, 2006 [1802], p. 6]

When Paddy heard an Englishman speaking of the fine echo at the lake of Killarney, which repeats the sound forty times, he very promptly observed

‘Faith that’s nothing at all to the echo in my father’s garden, in the county of Galway: if you say to it “How do you do, Paddy Blake?” it will answer, “Pretty well, I thank you, Sir”

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5 Teague is an ethnic slur, based on an Irish (male) proper name often today spelled Tadhg; the term is still in use today as a vulgar and insulting term for ‘Catholic’ in Northern Ireland (where it is usually now spelled taig, pronounced [teyg]). Another popular joke-book, Teagueland Jests, went through seven editions between 1686 and 1750. Its ‘successor in terms of popularity’, according to Earls, was *The Comical Sayings of Paddy from Cork with his Coat Buttoned Behind. Being an Elegant Conference between English Tom and Irish Teague*, which went through nine editions between 1780 and 1850 (Earls, 1988, p. 12). While joke-books were clearly popular throughout the whole period, Earls shows that bulls—Irish or other—only became prominent in them in the late eighteenth century, hence his characterization of the 19th and early 20th century as ‘the golden age of the printed bull’ (Earls, 1988, p. 13).
Another, framed more as an anecdote than a joke, features the textual format that lives on in Overheard in Dublin:

(13) [Source: Edgeworth, 2006 [1802], p. 22]

When a poor Irish haymaker, who had but just learned a few phrases of the English language by rote . . . began his speech in a court of justice with these words:

‘My lord, I am a poor widow’

it was sufficient to throw a grave judge and jury into convulsions of laughter

Discussing more modern developments in the Irish ‘bull configuration’, Earls observes that J.C. Percy’s Bulls Ancient and Modern (published in 1912) ‘had its origins in an article in The Automobile Club Journal which sold out and, when reissued in pamphlet form, “sold like hot cakes”’ (Earls, 1988, p. 15). One of its successors, More Bulls and Blunders (published in 1921) ‘was based on six hundred letters which the author had received from his readers’ (Earls, 1988, p. 15).

Irish bulls experienced a ‘remarkable revival’ of popularity during the 1970s, according to Earls, ‘and were a significant component in the flood of anti-Irish jokes which became so widespread in England’ during the Troubles (Earls, 1988, pp. 15–16). He provides several examples, including the following from 1985, which uses pseudo-dialect spelling to elicit a performance of ‘defective’ Hiberno-English from the (presumptively English) reader:

(14) How to speak Irish in one easy lesson (Source: Earls, 1988, p. 80)

Say very quickly:

WHALE

OIL

BEEF

HOOKED

My own experience suggests that as a genre label, the term bull is known today only to older people, who have sometimes evidenced discomfort with the word, due no doubt to its probable origins in anti-Catholicism. Overheard in Dublin, however, abounds in examples—the vast majority of them attributed to elderly Irish people:

(15) Overheard two elderly ladies on the no. 2 bus discussing the drug problem in Dublin:

Mary: ‘Jaysus, Josie, aren’t them drugs terrible?’

Josie: ‘Mary, if it wasn’t for the Valium. I’d be on drugs meself’

(Kelly and Kelly, 2007a, p. 22).

(16) Two aul dears queuing for the no. 27 bus. Just caught the end of the conversation:

Old dear #1: ‘Sure whoaya tellin. De kids dees days is terrible bold’.

Old dear #2: ‘And ye know it’s not de parents I blame, it’s de mudders an fadders’.

(Kelly and Kelly, 2007a, p. 109)

Seeming to exemplify the propositional function of language turned back upon itself, the Irish ‘bull’ is a (socio-) linguistic chimera that deserves a special place among the ideological weaponry of colonialism. Turned to new purposes in Overheard in Dublin, the form remains vital.

6. English as we speak it in Ireland

The title—or rather, the pronoun in the title—says it all. Reviewing the history of studies of Irish English, the linguist Raymond Hickey characterized Patrick Weston Joyce’s English As We Speak It In Ireland (Joyce, 1910) as a work that ‘despite all its shortcomings, still represents the beginning of modern scholarship on this variety’ (Hickey, 2005, p. 18).

And yet, despite masquerading as a grammatical treatise, Joyce’s book also belongs to the popular genre centered on anecdote collections of Irish English speech. Joyce presents a series of putative ‘example sentences’—again, token utterances attributed to specific, often named individuals—in a range of quotational modes. As an editor—or, perhaps better, a curator,
since reading the book is like being talked, page by page, through someone’s scrapbook—Joyce alternates between a number of narrational voices. Sometimes he is the detached, forensic scientist of speech (a mask adopted earlier by Edgeworth in her Essay), sometimes the purveyor of homely (and often patronizing) sketches of Irish life and character, and sometimes a stern moral judge of his fellow Irishmen. The dichotomy between the ‘inclusive’ and ‘exclusive’ readings of the pronoun we in his title becomes ‘destabilised’ in the process.

The emphasis on the materiality of the textual material, and on the provenance of each item in the collection, seen already in Edgeworth, is developed further here. In his preface, Joyce tells the reader that he has ‘been collecting materials for this book for more than 20 years; not indeed by way of constant work, but off and on’ (Joyce, 1910, v). Among his sources for the material is his own memory, ‘a storehouse both of idiom and vocabulary; for the good reason that from childhood to early manhood I spoke—like those among whom I lived—the rich dialect of Limerick and Cork’ (Joyce, 1910, v–vi), supplemented by ‘the works of Irish writers of novels, stories, and essays depicting Irish peasant life in which the people are made to speak in dialect’ (Joyce, 1910, vi). But this is not how he acquired the bulk of his material:

Eighteen years ago (1892) I wrote a short letter which was inserted in nearly all of the Irish newspapers and in very many of those published outside Ireland, announcing my intention to write a book on Anglo-Irish Dialect, and asking for collections of dialectical words and phrases. In response to this I received a very large number of communications from all parts of Ireland as well as from … America, Australia, and New Zealand (Joyce, 1910, vi).

Here, Joyce directs the reader’s attention to the alphabetical list of 163 contributors printed at end of volume (with their full names and addresses). Like the earlier collections of so-called Irish Bulls, and the ‘Overheard in Dublin’ website, Joyce’s text is a stringing-together of anecdotes, a perfect example of what’s known today as ‘user-generated content’. To these verbal-interactional *collectanea*, Joyce has added his own observations:

For 20 years or more I have kept a large note-book lying just at my hand; and whenever any peculiar Anglo-Irish expression, or anything bearing on the subject, came before me—from memory, or from reading, or from hearing it in conversation—down it went in the manuscript. In this way an immense mass of materials was accumulated almost imperceptibly (viii–ix).

Here is the theme of the collection as a series of utterance-tokens ‘taken down’ immediately after being heard or overheard by the collector (who is also our narrator), a well-developed trope already in Edgeworth’s *Essay* 100 years before. In some of the examples, the voice of the collector/narrator/author is kept absolutely separate from the voice of the Irish English speaker whose utterance-token is presented as an example of this or that ‘Anglo-Irish’ feature, as in (17) below, designed to exemplify the use of _ould_:

(17) [Source: Joyce, 1910, p. 99; italics as in original]

Old Tom Howlett, a Dublin job gardener, speaking to me of the management of fruit trees, recommended the use of butchers’ waste.

‘Ah, sir’

—said he, with a luscious roll in his voice as if he had been licking his lips—

‘Ah sir, there’s nothing for the roots of an apple tree like a big tub of fine rotten _ould_ guts’.

Another example—ostensibly to illustrate that ‘d before long _u_ is generally sounded like _j_’—is given in ‘free indirect’ quotation (style *indirect libre*):

(18) [Source: Joyce, 1910, pp. 95-96; italics as in original]

Many years ago I knew a fine old gentleman from Galway. He wished to make people believe that in the old fighting times, when he was a young man, _he_ was a desperate _gladiaathor_; but he really was a gentle creature who never in all his born days hurt man or mortal. Talking one day to some workmen in Kildare, and recounting his exploits, he told them that _he_ was now _harrassed_ every night by the ghosts of all the _min_ he killed in _juels_.

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The Joycean polyphony in this example shows the interanimation of the reportorial/authorial voice with the voice of the ‘fine old gentleman from Galway’, blurring the boundary between framing speech and framed speech, and never once utilizing direct quotation.

A different appropriation of voice is found in the following example, which depicts one schoolboy imitating the Tipperary accent of another and being punished for it, with Joyce the reporter himself appropriating the same shibboleth of ‘accent’ to round out his anecdote in a characteristic coda:

(19) [Source: Joyce, 1910, p. 102; italics as in original]

In Tipperary the vowel \(i\) [\(\text{ay}\)] is generally sounded \(oi\).

Mick Hogan a Tipperary boy—he was a man indeed—was a pupil in Mr. Condon’s school in Mitchelstown, with the full rich typical accent. One morning as he walked in, a fellow pupil, Tom Burke,—a big fellow too—with face down on desk over a book, said, without lifting his head—to make fun of him—

‘foine day, Mick’.

‘Yes’,

said Mick as he walked past, at the same time laying his hand on Tom’s poll and punching his nose down hard against the desk.

Tom let Mick alone after that ‘foine day’

Noting the Irish pronunciation of words like \(\text{tea}\) and \(\text{meat}\), so that they rhyme with \(\text{say}, \text{great}, \text{fate},\) etc.—as had Swift, Thomas Sheridan, and others—Joyce brings the (then-) contemporary politics of accent into the very face of his readers in example (20) below; note that he is the overhearer here:

(20) [Source: Joyce, 1910, pp. 91–92; italics as in original]

Many years ago I was traveling on the long car from Macroom to Killarney. On the other side—at my back—sat a young gentleman—‘a superior person’, as anyone could gather from his \(d\text{andified}\) speech. The car stopped where he was to get off: a tall fine-looking old gentleman was waiting for him, and nothing could exceed the dignity and kindness with which he received him. Pointing to his car he said

‘Come now and they’ll get you a nice refreshing cup of \(\text{tay}\)’.

‘Yes’,

says the dandy,

‘I shall be very glad to have a cup of \(\text{tee}\)’

—laying a particular stress on \(\text{tee}\).

I confess I felt a shrinking of shame for our humanity.

Now which of these two was the vulgarian?

Note how Joyce makes use of the coda here to ask a direct question to the reader.

Joyce’s book as a whole hovers in a discursive space between obvious categories: it is partly a report from an impartial and detached observer of Irish speech habits, partly a celebration of demotic Irish English by an erstwhile ‘native speaker’, and partly a commonplace-book of anecdote and local color—and partly also an advertisement for itself, and for other books written by the author, his brother Robert, and others. This last is important, insofar as it provides clues about the audiences for Joyce’s text and others like it in Irish reading publics of the time.
In the back matter one finds an acknowledgment of the people ‘who sent me Collections of Dialectical Words and Phrases in response to my letter of February, 1892’, presented in alphabetical order with names and addresses ‘given exactly as I received them’—163 in all, with an asterisk (*) marking the names of those whose ‘collections … were very important’ (Joyce, 1910, p. 353).

This is followed by several pages of advertisements for ‘Works by P.W. Joyce, M.A., LL.D., T.C.D.; M.R.I.A.’ (pp. 357ff). There are 18 of these, including the present volume—‘Now ready (March 1910)—and the already-mentioned Ballads of Irish Chivalry by Robert Dwyer Joyce, M.D. Titles include A Smaller Social History of Ancient Ireland, The Story of Ancient Irish Civilization, A Short History of Ireland from the Earliest Times to 1608, A Child's History of Ireland, The Origin and History of Irish Names of Places, Old Celtic Romances, and many, many more, including A Concise History of Ireland from Earliest Times to 1908, Irish Local Names Explained, and of course A Hand-Book of School Management.

The several pages of advertisements in the back matter of Joyce's book open a window onto a whole world of popular literary production in Ireland that is exactly contemporaneous with—if somewhat culturally disjoint from—the high literary culture of the Gaelic Revival. The advertisements appear to be directed to a literate, Anglophone (Protestant?) readership for whom Irish English had already become an object of interest and sentimental attachment, but perhaps not a medium of everyday literacy and leisure reading.

Like Overheard in Dublin, Joyce's volume is highly attentive both to details having to do with the circulation history and provenance of the material presented in it, and to the details of its own current and future circulation; like Overheard in Dublin, much of its content is ‘user-generated’. In its preoccupation with the concrete materiality of the anecdote collection (‘a large note-book lying just at my hand’), and with the paratextual apparatus supplying details about the time, place, and participants of each recorded encounter, Joyce’s 1910 book is the link that connects Edgeworth's Essay on Irish Bulls of 1802 with the Overheard in Dublin Web site and paperbacks, bestsellers in Ireland since 2007.

7. Conclusion

At one point in the Essay on Irish Bulls, Maria Edgeworth despairs of ever successfully applying the principles of Enlightenment forensic science to the ‘specimen utterances’ she has carefully collected from Irish newspapers, classical literature, and her tenants and servants. There is perhaps even a glimmer here of the fact that the Essay itself, by ‘collecting’ samples of Irish English and ‘repeating them to all eternity’, is contributing to the very conditions that make its own earlier-stated goals impossible to achieve:

Those who see things in a philosophical light must have observed more frequently than others, that there is in this world, a continual recurrence or rotation of ideas, events, and blunders. With his utmost ingenuity, or his utmost stupidity, a man, in modern days, cannot continue to produce a system for which there is no prototype in antiquity, or to commit a blunder for which there is no precedent (Edgeworth, 2006 [1802], p. 41).

The present paper, insofar as it adds yet another layer of framing to already-framed ‘collections’ of quoted utterances, is part of the problem.

One constant over the 400+ years of Irish ‘accent culture’ surveyed here is the power of non-referential indexicals of ‘accent’—of sh for s, d- and t- for th- word-initially, tay for tea, and so forth—all of which recur across the whole period. When encountered in oral/aural speech, these phonological shibboleths have the power performatively to entail the localization, or localizability, of every speaker in a number of differentially shared topos of Irish social and geographical space.

More important, the textual organization of these anecdotes—likewise, as we have seen, highly stable at least since about 1800—summons us to various kinds of alignments with the characters and situations described in these dramatic miniatures of encounter, summoning forth a range of instantly recognizable social types.

The transduction of these social indexicals of accent from the spoken channel into a slightly grotesque version of written English introduces an important additional layer of artifactualization that both supports the constant recycling of the anecdotes, and helps to insulate the reader (or reader and re-enactor) from the potentially damaging indexicalities of the original in any event of recontextualization (Moore, 2011). Indeed, the ‘migration’ of accent representations from the oral/aural channel into the written channel, and eventually into the online environment, is only one moment in an open-ended process of mediatized recontextualization of accent culture.

Irish English speech has been represented in a satirical key on stage and in joke-books for several centuries; some early snippets are presented above. A fundamental shift, however, can be observed. Starting with the Essay on Irish Bulls by Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849)—like her father and frequent co-author Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744–1817) an Enlightenment figure to her fingertips—samples of comical Irish English speech became text-artifacts that could be collected, collated, compiled, and recirculated. This was not some magical concomitant of ‘literacy’ (Irish English had been ‘in print’ for 250 years)—rather, it was the result of a shift in politics, and in participant alignments and orientations to the artifactualization of text, most of which are rooted in the Enlightenment as an epistemic regime. Edgeworth was, her modern editors tell us, ‘encouraged by her father to make accurate and precise notes about speech she had overheard’ (Edgeworth, 2006 [1802], p. ix). *The*
Edgeworths’ habit of collecting speech-specimens’, another modern commentator tells us, ‘was careful, fairly systematic, and carried out for the purposes of science, not of literature’ (Butler, 1972, p. 363).

This ‘materialization’ of Irish English utterances as speech-specimens and collectable anecdotes went together in Edgeworth with the double role-alignment of the narrator, who overhears an utterance in one speech-event, and then reports it (to us) in a subsequent one. Here is the inherently unstable positionality—at once ‘insider’ (able to overhear) and ‘outsider’ (able to report what s/he has overheard)—that characterizes the narrating voice of much Irish literature of the 19th century (Murphy, 1998). And, despite a dramatically different sociopolitical context, it organizes virtually all of the material in Over-heard in Dublin.

This fundamental shift in role-alignments and participation frameworks corresponds as well to a shift into a rigorously realist form of reportage: the paratextual apparatus giving information about the provenance of the anecdote, and the time, place, setting, and participants of the original overheard utterance, serves as a warrant for the authenticity of report, and the reliability of the reporter.

Why all the fuss about contextual details? If, as some have argued, the pure realism achieved by Jane Austen, Dickens, and others depended upon the existence in English society of a relatively stable social order with relatively fixed behavioral expectations attaching to the inhabitants of different classes and social groups, then no such stable social order obtained in Ireland—certainly not at the time of the 1798 Rebellion and the Act of Union (1800) when the Edgeworths were writing (Eagleton, 1994). Arguably, not since.

Irish novels of the 19th century fed a hunger in England for information—really, ‘intelligence’—about this new part of the Empire, at once nearby and unreachably distant; hence the ‘double agency’ of the overhearer-cum-reporter. In this context, literary works were overburdened by the need to explain, to justify, to apologize (e.g., for Catholicism), to translate (e.g., from Irish into English). Rather than the novel of manners, Irish authors writing for English readers perfected the narrative techniques of what Leersen (1998) calls ‘auto-exoticism’.

Edgeworth’s Essay on Irish Bulls seems to fall apart while you read it. In the first instance this is because the experience of reading is constantly being interrupted by digressions, footnotes, register shifts, incorporated genres, and didactic excurses; but perhaps it is also because the social universe being described by the narrator was itself unstable and constantly being interrupted—by rebellion, famine, and upheaval.

The didactic texts that Maria Edgeworth co-authored with her father are replete with barely-veiled bits of advice to other members of the Anglo-Irish (Protestant) landlord class, most of which boil down to this: be careful what you say in front of the servants—you will be overheard. And so Maria Edgeworth, like other Protestant landowning women who were in close contact with their tenants, became an overhearer. In the unstable Ireland of today, we are all overhearers.

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