THE UNMENTIONABLE: VERBAL TABOO AND THE MORAL LIFE OF LANGUAGE

“If I Actually Talked Like That, I’d Pull a Gun on Myself”: Accent, Avoidance, and Moral Panic in Irish English

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Abstract
The robust “accent culture” of English-language speech in the Irish Republic provides an opportunity to explore the concept of verbal taboo in terms of non-referential indexical function (in this case, phonological variants). The paper documents an ongoing moral panic of language in Irish society, centering on a new and fashionable accent of Irish English. This new accent, termed “D4” (after the postal code of a mostly well-to-do part of south Dublin), has been explained by observers and commentators in the Irish media as a way for younger, newly affluent speakers to “hive off” from the masses, by avoiding pronunciations seen as emblematic either of working-class Dublin identity or of rural Irish provincialism. And now, “D4” itself has become an accent to avoid. Determined at the intersection of this double avoidance, D4, and voicings of D4, reveal the anxieties surrounding the compulsive mentionability of “accent” in contemporary Irish media texts. [Keywords: Accent, class, Irish English, phonology, mass media]
Introduction

Drawing upon some of the materials gathered in the course of a broader study of “the politics of accent” in contemporary Irish English, I bring attention here to an ongoing moral panic of language in Irish society, centering on a new and fashionable accent of Irish English. This new accent, usually termed “D4” (after the postal code of a mostly well-to-do part of south Dublin), has been explained by observers and commentators in the Irish media as a way for younger, newly affluent speakers to “hive off” from the masses, by avoiding pronunciations seen as emblematic either of working-class Dublin identity or of rural Irish provincialism.

As I will show, the “D4” phenomenon construed more broadly—the phonological emblems, the identities they summon forth, and the moral panic evidenced in plentiful media commentary—is in fact determined by two distinct levels of phonological avoidance. “D4” as “an accent” is a kind of negative creation, a set of pronunciations or emblematic sound segments that gesture away from (and dissociate the speaker from) certain other already emblematic sound segments, specifically those that identify and delineate two highly salient groups of Irish Others: lower-class Dubliners (Skangers or sometimes, Knackers), and rural, backward Irish people (Culchies). The pronunciations—really, shibboleths—that are identified with “D4” are pronunciations that are (negatively) oriented to specific other kinds of actually existing pronunciations; hence, “first-order” avoidance (itself an unavoidably “second-order” indexical phenomenon; Silverstein 2003).

And yet this avoidance-driven “accent” has itself become stigmatized—imbued with strong indexicality—and has become worthy of avoidance in its own right, as the quotation from an online comment thread in my title is meant to suggest; hence, a “second order” of avoidance. “D4” is an accent that no one in Ireland would claim as their own. As an ideological construct in an Irish sociolinguistic imaginary, then, “D4” is already explicitly denaturalized: it has no community of “native speakers,” only people who are pretending to be something they aren’t; not authentically linked to any particular place, it spreads across the countryside like an infectious disease; above all, it has no connection to a shared Irish past—it was only invented recently, during the economic boom years of the “Celtic Tiger” economy. The “D4 accent” is then itself an emblem, and a creature, of that recent and short-lived period of Irish affluence—but even before the economic collapse that began in 2008 and
now threatens the very future of the Irish state, it had already become stigmatized, an object of disparagement, and the people who spoke this way had become hate figures (O’Toole 2009). By the time of writing (late 2010), the “D4” accent itself may have become “endangered.”

Indeed, all of the material discussed here was collected during the last years of “boom,” and already the very sounds of “D4” were eliciting strong reactions, documented fulsomely below. I will try to use this material to expand the discussion of linguistic avoidance beyond “taboo” words and expressions to address what the editors call “discursive anxiety about, and avoidance of, diffuse and multiply realizable semiotic configurations,” in two ways.

First, by attending to the phenomenon of strong indexicality in a signaling realm beyond the limits of surface-segmentable denotational form—principally that of phonetics/phonology (and suprasegmentals of pitch, prosody, and intonation)—one can ask how such non-referential indexes as those of “accent” become the vehicles of strong indexicality, and what kinds of containment strategies are available to protect speakers from their corrosive effects. To answer this question requires attention to achievements of what Bakhtin (1981 [1934-1935]) termed “voicing,” most obviously in the widespread practice of imitating (other people’s) accents.

Second, by examining the implications of moving, or transducing, an indexically risky utterance of “accented” Irish English speech from the spoken or oral/aural channel into a written or, more precisely, a text-artifactual one, one can ask whether such movement from the spoken into the written channel—employing various graphical means (quotation marks, italics, deviant spellings, or all three) to demarcate the boundary between framing (reporting) speech and framed (reported) speech—helps to reduce the danger emanating from stigmatized pronunciations, and if so, how does it do this, and for whom? Is there something about writing as a medium—and/or about written text-artifacts as communicative forms—that helps to distance the reader from the “aural” stigma of these accents? Does writing perform an analogous function—at the level of communicative modality—to that which reported speech achieves at the level of the calibration of pragmatic indexes to their contexts of occurrence (cf. Jaffe and Walton 2000)?

Indeed, the material to be discussed here consists not of actual “D4” speech recorded under “naturalistic” conditions; rather, it consists of imita-
tions—usually, direct quotations—of “D4” speech, most of them rendered in print (or on screen). This paper, then, examines the D4 accent as a phenomenon of report—literally, in the case of newspaper and internet commentary. Like Standard American English as analyzed by Silverstein (1987), “D4” is undeniably “there” as an ideological construct, even if it is very hard to pin down with any degree of empirical certainty (as the next section will show). The present paper is thus both a reflection on and an example of the practices of reported speech that it discusses.

The moral panic surrounding “D4” would seem to present a case in which the unavoidable interdiscursivity of all reported speech—whether written or oral/aural—becomes a moral, political, and aesthetic threat to the integrity of the speaker qua reporter. The material on the “D4” accent discussed here—dating mostly from the 1990s through 2008—reveals that an Irish “identity crisis” in language, heavily informed by widening disparities of class, was well underway long before the economic crisis hit home (O’Toole 2009).

The contemporary moral panic surrounding the “D4” accent in Irish English, as I show in the conclusion, is rooted in a long history of (at best) ambivalence towards the English language itself in Ireland, both at the level of explicit folk ideology and on the part of State and non-State institutions (in this respect, the present paper invites comparison with the paper by Susan Frekko in this issue). A glance at the much fuller literature of English dialectology elsewhere in the archipelago (in England, Wales, and Scotland) reveals the presence elsewhere of similar double-binds of accent-focused anxiety; as a phenomenon of report and as the focus of moral panic, “D4” finds echoes in other parts of Europe, as a brief comparison with so-called “Rinkeby Swedish” (Stroud 2004) shows. And yet, as Oscar Wilde knew, there is something irreducibly Irish about the avoidance of Irishness. The “D4” phenomenon construed in its social and cultural context, then, is as much a “structure of feeling” (Williams 1977) as an example of sociolinguistic change-in-progress. These broader issues are given brief mention in the conclusion.

“D4” in the Sociolinguistic Imagination
The one account to date of the D4 phenomenon by a linguist (Hickey 2007 and refs. therein) has treated it as yet another instance of linguistic change-
in-progress governed by system requirements (e.g., maximization of contrast, minimization of homophony) in an autonomous phonological system.

“Anyone over 40 in present-day Ireland cannot fail to have noticed that the pronunciation of English has changed markedly,” writes the linguist Raymond Hickey in a memoiristic account of his studies of Irish English aimed at a general reader; “[t]he changes which have taken place all emanate from Dublin and have been picked up with great enthusiasm by certain sections of the population” (Hickey 2005c:42):

A new jet set has arisen and the people working in information technology have reached levels of wealth which the Irish previously could only have dreamed of. The new generation of Irish are sophisticated, urbane, international in their outlook and definitely do not want to be associated with what they see as a backward Irish way of life. In Dublin the trendy people do not want to be associated with lower-class Dubliners and avoid the local accent like the plague. In order to dissociate themselves from others, speakers often change their speech to make it even less like that of those they wish to distance them[elves] from. That is the origin of the new pronunciation of English in Ireland. Fashionable Dubliners developed new modes of speech which were diametrically opposed to those of the locals. (Hickey 2005c:42-43; emphasis added)

In a valuable series of technical descriptive works, Hickey has divided the varieties of Dublin English (DE) into two main categories which he calls local and non-local; within the non-local category are two varieties dubbed Mainstream and New (or Fashionable) DE—this last being more or less equivalent to what we term “D4” in this paper (Table 1 below):

Table 1. Dublin English varieties, according to Hickey (e.g., 2007:354)

1. local Dublin English
2. non-local Dublin English
   a) Mainstream Dublin English
   b) New Dublin English

The most salient points of phonetic contrast between what Hickey calls “Local Dublin English” (popularly known as a “Dub accent”) and “New,” “advanced,” or “fashionable Dublin English” (aka “D4”) consist in the handling of vowels and diphthongs, of certain consonant articulations,
especially in the dental and alveolar area, and in the degree or pervasiveness of lenition of [t] in certain environments.

The most obvious vowel contrasts are treated by Hickey under the rubric of what he calls the ‘Dublin vowel shift;’ this shift, he asserts, “started about twenty years ago (mid 1980s) and has continued to move along a recognizable trajectory. In essence, the change involves a retraction of diphthongs with a low or back starting point and a raising of back vowels” (Hickey 2007:355). Below in Table 2 is a highly compressed summary of Hickey’s description of some of these typical vowel contrasts.

**Table 2. Salient vowel contrasts in “local,” “mainstream” and “new” Dublin English (after Hickey 2005b, 2007)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lexical sets</th>
<th>Local DE [“Dub”]</th>
<th>Mainstream DE</th>
<th>New DE [“D4”]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRICE</td>
<td>[əɪ]</td>
<td>[əɪ]</td>
<td>[əɪ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHOICE</td>
<td>[ɑɪ]</td>
<td>[ɔɪ]</td>
<td>[ɔɪ], [ɔː]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THOUGHT</td>
<td>[ɔː]</td>
<td>[ɔː]</td>
<td>[ɛʊ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOAT</td>
<td>[ɻo]</td>
<td>[ʊ̞ʊ]</td>
<td>[ɛʊ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOUTH</td>
<td>[aʊ]</td>
<td>[ɛʊ]</td>
<td>[ɛʊ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 summarizes Hickey’s analysis of phonological contrasts in the highly salient area of so-called *th-* ("tee-haitch") sounds.

**Table 3. Alveolar stops vs dental fricatives (after Hickey 2005b, 2007)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lexical sets</th>
<th>Local DE [“Dub”]</th>
<th>Mainstream DE</th>
<th>New DE [“D4”]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THINKER</td>
<td>[tɪŋkə]</td>
<td>[tɪŋkə]</td>
<td>[θɪŋkə]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TINKER</td>
<td>[tɪŋkə]</td>
<td>[tɪŋkə]</td>
<td>[tɪŋkə]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BREATHE</td>
<td>[bɹiːd]</td>
<td>[bɹiːd]</td>
<td>[bɹiːd]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BREED</td>
<td>[bɹiːd]</td>
<td>[bɹiːd]</td>
<td>[bɹiːd]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“The acoustic sensitivity of the Irish to the shift from dental to alveolar,” Hickey opines, “derives not least from the merger that can result from it. To Irish ears the retraction of the dental stops to an alveolar position is immediately noticeable and stigmatized because it is typical of low-prestige speech” (Hickey 2007:353).
Table 4. Changes in the Dublin English vowel space (Hickey 2007:358)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vowel space of older mainstream speech</th>
<th>Vowel space of new pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Vowel space of older mainstream speech" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Vowel space of new pronunciation" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hickey's account of the basic phonetic values involved in D4 is adequate for descriptive purposes—see Table 4 for a comparison of the vowel space of “older mainstream” and “new” Dublin English (modeled on Labov 1966); indeed, his recent work is the only attempt to describe recent changes in Dublin English in the scholarly literature to date (Hickey 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007). His commitment to seeing these as normal processes of linguistic change-in-progress in autonomous phonological systems, however, poses problems for his analysis.

Take, for example, the categories “Local DE,” “Mainstream DE,” and “New DE” themselves: in his analysis, these are treated as if they were more or less self-contained, autonomous linguistic varieties, each with its own set of phonological features, subject to normal processes of linguistic change—and yet his definitions of them seem to be based on putative facts about speakers rather than phonological systems. The speakers of the Local DE are “those who use the historically continuous vernacular in the capital”; these are people “[who] show the strongest identification with traditional Dublin life of which the local accent is very much a part” (Hickey 2007:354). Speakers of non-Local DE, by contrast, “do not identify with what they see as a narrow and restricted local culture.” He further subdivides this group into a “mainstream” and “new” (or “fashionable”) non-local varieties. It is this latter “new” variety whose speakers most “clearly reject...a continuing association with low-prestige Dublin” (Hickey 2007:354): These are the “D4s.”

Supra regional or nonlocal varieties arise, according to Hickey, out of what he calls ‘dissociation.’ ‘Dissociation’ for Hickey is the opposite of accommodation; it is “reactive in nature, i.e., it implies that there is a
variety or set of varieties with features intuitively recognizable to others in contact with it, and that these other speakers develop strategies to distance themselves linguistically from the group(s) showing distinctive features” (Hickey 2000a:303). Dissociation often results in what Hickey calls supraregionalization, “an historical process whereby varieties of a language lose specifically local features and becomes less regionally bound.” While ‘dissociation’ seems to be something that speakers do, supraregionalization seems to be something that happens to linguistic varieties (see, e.g., Hickey 2003:351).

Hickey’s analysis seems to grant an active and agentive role to speaker consciousness with one hand, only to take it back with the other. As a type of normal sociolinguistic change, supraregionalization is “actuated” by “a consciousness of the provinciality of one’s own language and the presence of more mainstream varieties” (Hickey 2003:351); but once so actuated, it proceeds mechanistically through the normal phases of propagation and termination in the speech community, and during these phases, speakers function as passive and unconscious “carriers” in the wave-like spread of a chain-shift or other regular (exceptionless) phonological change.

As to the “social motivations” of these sound changes, Hickey’s account of the dramatic changes in Irish society since the 1980s is sketched in rather lightly. Describing Dublin as “a typical location for language change” given increases in population during the postwar period in the 20th century and “an economic boom in the last fifteen years or so,” he reasons that “the increase in wealth and international position has meant that many young people aspire to an urban sophistication which is divorced from strongly local Dublin life” (Hickey 2000a:310-311). This formulation somehow manages both to keep the sociodemographic processes driving language change perfectly separate from the linguistic practices that bring the change about, and to suggest that the relationship between them is a commonsense affair (“…has meant that…”).

But Hickey’s account of a linguistic change motivated by “the desire of speakers to hive themselves off from vernacular forms of a variety spoken in their immediate surroundings” (Hickey 2000a:310) simply restates the problem in a different register.

In fact, the phonological “voice” of “D4” is defined by distinctive and emblematic sound segments—see the charts above—that are themselves “negative” creations, set in opposition to, and in avoidance of, certain other already emblematic sound segments, specifically those that identi-
fy and delineate two groups of Irish Others: lower-class Dubliners, and the rural Irish. Debate rages on in the newspapers and in the Irish media as to whether “the D4 accent” looks to America or England for phonological inspiration (or to Australia, or to the American TV sitcom *Friends*); even though they can’t agree on what “D4” is an imitation of, all seem to agree that it is an imitation—that it is, in fact, “imitation” as opposed to “real” or authentic. It is no one’s “native” accent—it is always “put-on”—and by the same token, there is no one in Ireland today who would identify “D4” as the way they themselves speak. The English language, then, becomes a site for the expression of a particular kind of split subjectivity in Ireland, a society where the primary linguistic emblem of national belonging is still Irish (Gaelic), and English is generally regarded, when it is regarded at all, as a tool of convenience as well as colonialism.

“D4”: Moral Panic in Print

The “D4” phenomenon in Irish English has not escaped the notice of journalists, commentators, and casual observers. It is interesting to observe the emphasis that commentators in print and online place on the very *sounds* of “D4,” and the strong responses that these sounds elicit. In the materials examined here, these range from laughter, to disdain, to pity, to disgust, to a parody of homicidal rage.

Journalists at socially conservative national newspapers like the *Irish Independent* and the *Sunday Independent* (known locally as the *Indo* and the *Sindo*, respectively) have been all too ready to employ the well-worn journalistic trope of language endangerment in their efforts to hold the “D4” accent up to ridicule and disdain. “If our accents are integral to who we are then Ireland is suffering a collective identity crisis,” warns the *Irish Independent* in an article that ran under the headline “It’s just like so the end of Irish accents” (Power 2005): “Across the country, people are abandoning their regional lilts and embracing that flat quasi-American inflection colloquially known as the Dublin 4 accent, according to language experts. As a result, the traditional Irish brogue—and its many variations—may be in mortal danger.”

The story is one of many in which newfound economic prosperity is linked in a direct and unmediated fashion to a rejection (especially by the young) of “Irishness” in English speech—though the exact nature of this linkage, or why such a connection should be necessary or natural, is no
clearer here than it was in Hickey’s account. “Encouraged by the economic transformation of the past decade to shun all that is provincial and idiosyncratically Irish, an entire generation is tripping over itself to embrace a way of speaking it perceives to be modern, progressive, and fashionable,” Power’s article begins, citing as an authority the compiler of the popular *Dictionary of Hiberno-English* (Dolan 1994). The new accent “is being adopted as a badge of progressiveness, an explicit rejection of provincial ‘backwardness’” (Power 2005). “How can we save our regional accents?” the article asks. “By encouraging the young to have greater pride in where they come from” (Power 2005). Another *Indo* commentator deployed the always robust disease metaphor: “Having originated in South County Dublin, Dort-speak has spread like an out-of-control Winter vomiting bug” (Bielenberg 2008). In the contagion narrative, women are the main culprits—and the function that these journalistic texts may be performing in articulating a felt need to police young women’s (moral panic-inducing) behavior deserves its own treatment. Women also have weaknesses, the (female) reporter points out:

> It does seem to be a female phenomenon….I came across countless women in college who had only lived in Dublin a wet weekend and yet spoke in anything but those regional tones with which they were brought up. However, their true colours emerged when they were drunk—no longer did they possess the capabilities to control and purposely alter their colloquial drawl. (Byrne 2007)

Above and beyond the rather obvious gender discourse, the passage raises fundamental questions about concepts of Irish personhood and the place in them of values of authenticity: the women revert to their local accents when drunk, suggesting a link between ‘diminished capacity’ and a true Irish self (*in vino veritas*, or at least, sociolinguistic authenticity; cf. Coupland 2000, 2003).

The article is typical of many others in my large collection, insofar as it lays the blame for “the nationwide proliferation of this D4 accent” on “the Celtic Tiger and the economic transformation over the past decade, which has made us shirk all that is both characteristically and stereotypically Irish,” and more specifically on “the cosmopolitan, sophisticated Sex and the City lifestyle that Dublin now provides” (Byrne 2007). It concludes by exhorting readers of the *Sindo* to “lament the decline of the rural accent because, with more young country folk explicitly rejecting their
roots and opting to speak in the most contrived and ear-numbingly-irritating accent, it’s becoming endangered, while Dortspeak is fast becoming the language of the nation” (Byrne 2007).

Note the emphasis on “ear-numbing irritation.” Already in the early 1990s, “the Dublin 4 accent” was being described in the pages of the *Indo* as “aurally offensive,” an “utterly (and they use that word often) affected and unnatural noise” (Looney 1991).

It is important to notice the way that journalists—and the subeditors who write headlines—cannot seem to resist the urge to “lapse into” the very accent they are purportedly denouncing, so that in the act of denouncing it they end up recirculating tokens of it. Consider the following headlines (examples could be multiplied):

Do you fancy a ‘point’ at the ‘boor’? Ita O’Kelly puts the accent on how we judge people by the way they speak (O’Kelley 1991)

Why you no longer have to worry about your accent…unless, of course, ur still using thut drudful ‘Dublin Fur Dort Loin’ drone (Fottrell 2001)

Dortspeak is here to stay—in a rindabite sort of way (Anderson 2004)

It’s just like so the end of Irish accents. Across the country people are abandoning their old-fashioned regional lilts and brogues for a modern D4 quasi-American twang created by TV (Power 2005)

Country cousins, don’t give up your lovely lilt to, loike, tawk Dortspeak (Byrne 2007)

Janey Mac! Irish-English is Banjaxed, so it is…Dort-speak is killing off our distinctive accents and expressions, a UCD professor said this week (Bielenberg 2008)

“A Horribly Sharp Attack of the Senses”: D4 Online

Internet message boards in heavy use among Irish university students provide an avalanche of representations, rationalizations, and denunciations of “D4.” One commenter on a *boards.ie* discussion thread entitled *D4 accent—does it bother you?* (initiated July 4, 2008 at 15:10)³ weighs in within the first two minutes of the thread’s existence to say, “I despise it,
it’s just feckin awful” (‘Alanstrainor,’ at 15:12); a few minutes later, another (‘DaBreno,’ at 15:21) observes:

Sure you cant help it if its what you grew up with it but the amount of people who in a short space of time modify their own accents to speak like this is brutal. I know a few fellow native Mayo people who went D4 in a matter of months. Turns my stomach. Tis more of a mindset than an accent.

Any accent that is acquired “in a matter of months” could not possibly be authentic, by this reasoning (cf. Coupland 2003). Nor, one might add, would its acquisition be a further example of “linguistic change-in-progress” governed by the structural dynamics of an autonomous phonological system. ‘Jimbo’ (at 19:13) relates a similar anecdote—but style-shifting into “D4” in an evaluative coda:

I know someone who moved to Dublin a while back and has now magically picked up a strong D4 accent. The only thing that gives her away though is, when she’s drunk, she forgets herself and starts talking in a Cork accent again. Very cringeworthy, loike.

To the earlier poster (‘DaBreno’) who had complained of his “fellow native Mayo people” adopting D4 accents, ‘thebiggestjim’ responds (at 23:14) with an anecdote of his own:

I have seen this Phenomenon also, it cracks me up. A mate of mine has two different accents and lingo for different occasions. His Mayo accent for when he is with his common country friends, and his D4 accent when he is with his D4 lady. He has been caught out a few times whilst in the company of both. He even started calling himself Mike instead of his usual Mick. This D4 accent makes me laugh more than boiling my blood but then again I don’t have to listen to it every day thank God.

A later contributor to the same thread (‘Maz,’ on February 21, 2008 at 12:27 p.m.) calls “the D4/American” accent “THE most irritating accent I have ever heard”—and produces a token via direct quotation:

I’m a culchie, I dont try to hide the fact but girls from here coming home at the weekends with the “O.M.G, wall I was like totally roight” statements make me sooo frickin mad
Other contributors offer up sociological explanations of the “D4” phenomenon. According to another poster (‘upmeath,’ on 6 May 2005 at 18:39), it was in the mid 1990s that “the quarantine on the artificial accent front was destroyed”:

all these idiots all over leinster whose daddys got jobs in intel, hewlett packard, nec, etc...suddenly had the money to get a bus to dublin in the mid 1990s, then they had the money to go to grafton street, and the quarantine on the artificial accent front was destroyed. it IS artificial. nobody spoke like that in dublin 30 years ago, did they?

“d4ishness should die,” ‘upmeath’ concludes—and no sooner than s/he does so, shifts into “D4”: “it’s a state-of-mind, it’s a disease, and the real upper class of the country should just shun it or we’ll soon have corkonians and galwegians giving it loads too, roysh?” Notice: the admonition to “the real upper class” is to avoid (shun) the D4 accent, so that no one will confuse them with the Culchies (from Cork and Galway) who have “put it on.” Phonological avoidance has a kind of infinite generative capacity.

Many comments explicitly connect the artificiality of the “D4” accent directly to its very sounds; one example is the following (from ‘MonkeyTennis’ at 23:13): “the thing most people find annoying about it is that its just fake. No one naturally talks like that. It grates on my ears.” In another discussion on another board (on the topic “That new D4 accent”), ‘superfrank’ (on June 6, 2007 at 16:51) writes: “It’s really infuriating to hear. I had a girlfriend with one before and it wrecked my head. It’s a horribly sharp attack of the senses.”

A YouTube clip entitled D4 that masquerades as a bit of “found” documentary footage stages the spectacular destruction of the much despised D4s. Filmed at Sandymount Strand (in Dublin 4), the short film presents a parodic re-enactment of the 9/11 attacks, only this time a small plane crashes into the twin smokestacks of the Poolbeg Generating Station (known locally as Pigeon House; the twin smokestacks with their distinctive white and red bands are among the tallest structures in Ireland, and are visible from all over Dublin).

The camera follows four D4 girls out onto the strand as the attack takes place. As the twin smokestacks become engulfed in smoke and flames behind them, the girls blithely carry on taking snapshots of themselves, only occasionally taking notice of what is going on. “Ohmigod [əˈmɪgəd]!”
says one, “this is Baghdad, it’s like that movie *Crash* [ˈkraʃ]!” (‘Baghdad’ is rhyming slang for ‘mad’). Another asks: “Is Obama attacking?”

One of the girls ignores the attack, busy texting on her mobile phone; at one point she holds the phone out and addresses one of the others: “I just heard you gave Fintan a shawshank in the Wesley TK Maxx!” To this affront her interlocutor responds, “Sara, you mud slut!” Sara responds with “Whatever!” and the camera stays on her as she stands there petulantly chewing bubblegum. A spinning metal object can be seen in the distance, flying rapidly through the air from the smokestacks toward her; just as she has blown a large bubble with her bubblegum, she is suddenly and very graphically decapitated by the flying metal object. Blood spatters the camera lens. Her headless body collapses onto Sandymount Strand. Male voices can be heard in the distance yelling “Oh my God!” in D4 accents, and then we see both of the twin smokestacks collapse.

This is a very accomplished piece of work (its producer is a graduate of the Irish Film Institute). Since it was posted on April 4, 2008, the film has been viewed 11,072 times (as of August 30, 2009), and has generated 93 comments, a sampling from which appears below—here we observe again the same set of recurring elements noted above: identifications of “D4” as “a disease;” an emphasis on the sound of the accent as in itself painful to the ears; expressions of (misogynistic) rage and aggression directed at its speakers (up to and including homicide and/or suicide); and, of course, ventriloquiations of the accent using the established conventions of deviant spellings. Some apply the disease metaphor:

DuMbGuM (1 year ago)
D4… it’s a disease… lolz.

Others ironically subvert or erase the framing of the film as fiction:

catsmokinpot (1 year ago)
I’m glad those sluts are dead, those accents alone made me want to go postal on their asses.

Others emphasize phonological/auditory pain:

kerpenguin (11 months ago)
Hahaha… oh yes – this is excellent. Their accents hurt my ears.

Luckily, “D4” is no one’s “native” accent:
PinkiLilli (11 months ago)
If i actually talked like that, I'd pull on a gun on myself.

Others prove that class rage is no respecter of the boundary between reporting—or imitating—speech, and reported or imitated speech:

happymondaze (7 months ago)
Class vid, well made but even when its imitating dublin 4 people it still makes my blood boil, they are truly the scum of ireland, give me a council estate anyday over them types

Many others simply adopt a “D4” voice:

RabnII (1 year ago)
EW MOI GAWSH LOIKE TOTAL ACE MOVIE

pacificspotted (10 months ago)
funny! althay seriously goys oy faynd that a bit offensive roysh?

In one comment, a reporting voice written as if in a relatively “neutral” accent frames a quotation rich in “accented” speech; the reporting voice returns after the quotation to produce an evaluative ‘coda’ (here, hahaha) which invites readers to align themselves collusively with the reporter in a stance of bemusement (or worse) towards the quoted material, and the (kinds of) speakers who animate it (Moore 2007, n.d.):

ciaranburke5 (1 year ago)
I love the way thers a d4 watchin this ryt now saying: “OH moy gowd loike those gurls souynd rodiculous!! haw haw I hate d-foysrs!” hahaha

The comment from ‘ciaranburke5’ also makes another vitally important point about the place of “D4”—and of “D4s”—in a contemporary Dublin-centric social imaginary: the “D4s” in the reported speech are shown disparaging the “D4” accent, in the “D4” accent, unbeknownst to themselves.

**Conclusion**

Needless to say, the Irish do not enjoy an exclusive franchise on linguistic self-loathing. Labov famously described New York City as “a great sink of negative prestige” where New Yorkers’ views of their own English were concerned (Labov 1966:499). “The dominant theme in subjective evalua-
tion of speech by New Yorkers,” he wrote, “is a profound linguistic inse-
security” (Labov 1966:500). He concluded that “the term ‘linguistic self-
hatred’ is not too extreme to apply to the situation which emerges from
the interviews” (Labov 1966:489).

Closer to Ireland, one can observe double-binds of accent anxiety similar
to those described above. Macaulay observes that “it would be possible to
present a fairly impressive picture of ‘linguistic self-hatred’ in Glasgow”
(Macaulay 1975:153). Macaulay’s interviewees routinely distinguished
between a general Glasgow accent of which they generally approved, and
what they called a ‘broad’ one, linked to working-class identities, which one
university lecturer described as “‘the ugliest accent one can encounter, but
that is partly because it is associated with the unwashed and the violent’”
(Macaulay 1975:154). And yet Macaulay notes that, “it would have been dif-
ficult if not impossible to use the method of Labov’s Index of Linguistic
Insecurity” to analyze the Glasgow data, “because the notion of ‘correctness’
in pronunciation is explicitly problematic in Glasgow, as in most of Scotland,
on account of nationalistic feelings” (Macaulay 1975:152).

Many of Macaulay’s findings for Glasgow are echoed in Watt’s (2002)
more recent study of Tyneside English. Linguistic insecurity is rampant, and
yet “many Tynesiders view RP [Received Pronunciation] very negatively: resen-
tment against any perceived form of ‘southern hegemony’ and ‘cen-
tralized aggression’ pervades Tyneside society” (Watt 2002:55). One com-
mentator wonders if Tyneside English “may be at greater risk from its own
image” than from external forces, insofar as it is seen as “indelibly linked
to ‘working-class status’ and with it ‘a traditional/reactionary life-style’”
(Watt 2002:55).

Watt acknowledges the shortcomings of the variationist approach when
he remarks that “standard interpretations” of his data “might invoke the
system-internal forces…that govern coordinated movements of vowels in
chain shifts. However,” Watt continues, “certain problems attend the
assumption that the progress of vowel changes is dictated more by the
requirements of an autonomous vowel system than by the communicative
and social needs of speakers” (Watt 2002:56).

And yet the intensity of linguistic self-loathing in places like Glasgow
and Tyneside, and the indexical “strength” seen to emanate from certain
“accented” forms of English speech, never quite reaches the levels seen
above in public discourse about “D4” in Ireland. This is, perhaps, not sur-
prising when one considers the somewhat unusual position of the English language itself in an Irish history of oppositional self-fashioning.

Indeed, the contemporary discourse of moral panic surrounding “D4” reproduces many of the tropes used by Irish cultural nationalists from the mid-19th century to Independence in denouncing—and attempting to contain, if not to extirpate from Irish soil—the English language itself.

The charter document of modern Irish cultural nationalism is an essay by Douglas Hyde, the founder of the Gaelic League and the first President of the Republic, entitled “On the Necessity for the De-Anglicisation of Ireland” (Hyde 1991 [1892], see Crowley 2005:128-163). The aim of Hyde’s intervention was “to show the folly of neglecting what is Irish, and hastening to adopt, pell-mell and indiscriminately, everything that is English, simply because it is English.” The Anglophone Irishman, according to Hyde, would find himself in “a most anomalous position, imitating England and yet apparently hating it” (Hyde 1991 [1892]).

Hyde and his colleagues in the Gaelic League saw the growth of the English language in Ireland as the spread of a disease: “an internal cancer that is eating away at the heart and soul of Ireland,” according to the reformer Agnes O’Farrelly (1874-1951; quoted in Crowley 2005:148-149). George Russell (AE), Crowley notes, “cited the perils of Anglicization, which were leading to ‘moral leprosy’ and ‘racial degradation’” (Crowley 2005:156, cf. French 2009).

Contemporary media discourses about D4 echo these earlier discourses of moral panic almost point-by-point; the only difference is that now it is a particular (new, and inherently “artificial”) accent of English that is the target of anxiety, rather than the language as a whole. The journalist’s blundering image of “a generation tripping over itself to embrace a way of speaking it perceives to be modern, progressive, and fashionable” (Power 2005), for example, more than faintly echoes Hyde’s Anglophone Irishmen “adopting pell-mell and indiscriminately everything that is English, because it is English.”

And yet this is not a story of plus ça change... The “D4 accent” emerged in a period when Irish society was undergoing wrenching and fundamental economic and sociodemographic change. In the 1980s, the recession-plagued Republic of Ireland had the highest net out-migration rate in the EU. By 2002, it had a booming economy and the highest net in-migration rate in the EU, with refugees and asylum-seekers accounting for about ten percent of the roughly 250,000 people who came to live in the Republic between
1996 and 2002 (Cronin 2005:10). A study carried out in January-February 2006 identified 167 languages currently in use in Ireland, but noted that “somewhere in excess of 200 is probably a more accurate figure” (Gallagher 2006, O’Brien 2006). And so the Republic—and especially Dublin—became the site of what Blommaert (2010) calls linguistic “superdiversity” during the “boom” years of the Celtic Tiger, long before the economic collapse.

In this respect, the moral panic surrounding “D4” in contemporary Ireland finds a more interesting parallel in Sweden than in the British Isles. Christopher Stroud (2004) describes the moral panic that arose around a “new” linguistic entity called “Rinkeby Swedish” (RS), which he defines as “a potential, imagined, ‘pan-immigrant’ variety of Swedish” though he opines that it is better described as a concept that “ostensibly refers to some recurring and pervasive linguistic characteristics of the Swedish spoken by immigrants” (Stroud 2004:197), than as an actually existing dialect or linguistic variety.10

Like my preceding discussion of “D4,” Stroud’s discussion focuses on “public accounts of Rinkeby Swedish, that is, talk around and about the notion in public discourse,” and his argument is that RS “offers a powerful metaphor for how Swedish Self and ethnic Other are represented and contested, which allows it to be used ideologically and by proxy, in debates on governance, power, and inter-ethnic conflict” (Stroud 2004:197, all emphases in original).

Stroud concludes that “RS comprises a powerful and subtle means for the exclusion and stigmatization of migrants in Swedish public spaces, at the same time that the significance of speaking Swedish is resymbolized” (Stroud 2004:197). Stroud’s analysis of his material is intended to show “how different practices of speaking Swedish become tied to values and attitudes in ways that position speakers of RS as particular types of people” (2004:197).

More than this, RS “was, initially…highly stigmatized in the sense that it was perceived as a ghettoized form of immigrant Swedish, an outcome of a lack of exposure to sufficiently rich networks of native (monolingual) speakers, and something to be avoided at all costs by native Swedes…. Many in the concerned public have warned of the almost contagious nature of such speech practices, and the danger of incorporating RS into ethnic Swedish households” (Stroud 2004:199).

So many of the themes associated with “D4” are here; and yet there are obvious differences. In the popular media, which always purports to ventriloquate the popular imagination, Rinkeby Swedish originates in ghet-
toized communities of poorly integrated immigrants who have had “inadequate exposure to Swedish social networks”; from there it spreads via contagion to native Swedish young people who adopt it as a badge of urban “cool” and negative prestige.

“D4” originates in communities of rich but deracinated Irish people in the leafy enclaves of South Dublin, and spreads from there to native Irish young people from Roscommon or Cork, who adopt it as a badge of the positive prestige associated with urban and suburban Dublin, and “the Sex and the City lifestyle” on offer there. (This image of Dublin, of course, is itself rooted in some decades of internal “immigration” from the Irish countryside and rural hamlets to the major urban centers.)

The moral panic of D4 is in no way explicitly about immigrants; but the sudden and pervasive presence of large numbers of ethno-racial and linguistic Others in Irish society forms an essential part of the context in which mere phonology could be freighted with such contentious (and deep-rooted) meanings. “D4” as an accent and as a “state of mind” became the object of public moral outrage at the same time that Irish society was being transformed by a sudden economic boom, coupled with a sudden influx of migrants from within and beyond the EU—a period when Enda Kenny, the leader of the largest opposition party (Fine Gael), felt it necessary to assert that Ireland was a “Celtic, Christian society.”

The speakers of D4 are not the immigrants who “refuse to integrate,” but their mirror image: they are the “native Irish” who actively dissociate themselves from their congeners, co-nationals, and kin—people whose very existence is the symptom of an Irish society dis-integrating from within. Even before the current economic collapse, the “D4 accent” was seen as an emblem of the worst excesses (to use the newspaper phrase) of the “Celtic Tiger” period, and its speakers (“D4 people”) were often portrayed as hate figures.

No doubt about it: some Irish people became very rich during the “Celtic Tiger” period and especially during the property boom—Irish house prices doubled between 2000 and 2006; bank lending for construction increased by 1,730 percent between 1999 and 2007—but other people did not (O’Toole 2009). Bear in mind that this is a small society (population 4 million) in which everybody either knows, or knows someone who knows, everybody.

Today, after the bank guarantees and bailouts, the budget deficit represents 32 percent of Irish GDP, and 300,000 newly-built houses sit empty in over 600 “ghost estates” (O’Toole 2009). Some people who made for-
tunes have lost them; others who had no fortunes to lose are losing more as government “austerity” programs hit the most vulnerable first.

The Trinity College Dublin economist Morgan Kelly has predicted correctly every wrenching twist and turn of the Irish economic crisis, and until recently has been rewarded with schoolyard sneers from the governing Fianna Fáil party (he is now rewarded mostly with official silence). In the *Irish Times* of Monday November 8, 2010 Kelly confesses that when I wrote in The Irish Times last May showing how the bank guarantee would lead to national insolvency, I did not expect the financial collapse to be anywhere near as swift or as deep as has now occurred. During September, the Irish Republic quietly ceased to exist as an autonomous fiscal entity, and became a ward of the European Central Bank. (Kelly 2010)

Here is what Kelly sees for the future of Ireland:

As ordinary people start to realize that this thing is not only happening, it is happening to them, we can see anxiety giving way to the first upwellings of an inchoate rage and despair that will transform Irish politics along the lines of the Tea Party in America. Within five years, both Civil War parties are likely to have been brushed aside by a hard right, anti-Europe, anti-Traveler party that, inconceivable as it now seems, will leave us nostalgic for the, usually, harmless buffoonery of Biffo, Inda, and their chums. (Kelly 2010)

As class divisions harden and economic misery spreads, further research into the fate of the “D4 accent” will become more urgent, more revelatory, and more dangerous.

**ENDNOTES**

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2 Table 5.13, “Comparative vowel values of local, mainstream and new Dublin English” (Hickey 2007: 357), with MOUTH data added (from Hickey 2007:329).


Shawshank is rhyming slang for ‘wank’; TK Maxx is a low-end clothing retailer, here serving as rhyming slang for ‘jacks,’ a colloquial term for a public toilet; Wesley is short for The Old Wesley Rugby Club, a legendary Dublin 4 dancehall for teenagers; see Lillo 2004 for a discussion of Irish rhyming slang.

Accessed from http://www.youtube.com/user/Lukiebaggs on August 9, 2009.

Labov’s Index of Linguistic Insecurity was based on his informants’ evaluations of 18 different words that can be pronounced in two different ways; subjects were asked to identify which pronunciation s/he thinks is “correct,” and which pronunciation s/he “actually uses” (Labov 1966:476). As Macaulay observes, “the most obvious problem is to know what the respondents understood by ‘correct’” noting that “the two pronunciations of a number of them (e.g., tomato, vase, aunt, tune, new) could be taken as representing a contrast between British and American English” (Macaulay 1975:148).

The emblematic Geordie utterance is “The English divvent want we and the Scots winna have we” (Watt 2002:54)—and Watt’s Tyneside consultants readily offered up “evaluations such as ‘if you were about to undergo brain surgery and met the surgeon beforehand you would be horrified to hear him speaking in a broad Geordie dialect’” (from a Tyneside student; Watt 2002:55); another opined that “Geordie sounds like ordinary English spoken backwards’” (Watt 2002:55).

Though Rinkeby Swedish, like D4, can be characterized: “Rinkeby Swedish refers to an emergent variety of Swedish that supposedly originated in the borough of Rinkeby in Northern Stockholm.…RS is characterized by: a specific ‘foreign-sounding’ phonology; lexical items borrowed from many different languages; productive hybrid morphologies; and a typologically unmarked or simplified syntax and morphology in relation to standard Swedish” (Stroud 2004:199).

It was Morgan Kelly that the then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Bertie Ahern had in mind on July 4th, 2007 when he ventured off-script to tell the audience at the biennial conference of Ireland’s largest trade union that “Sitting on the sidelines, cribbing and moaning is a lost opportunity. I don’t know how people who engage in that don’t commit suicide.” He apologized later the same day: “That was a bad choice of words if I said it that way,” he said. “I’m very involved with the suicide action groups, apologies if I said it that way. I was just using it as an example of people who are always against things” (Edwards 2007).

The two “Civil War parties” are Fianna Fáil and Fianna Gael, the governing party for most of the Republic’s history post-1937, and the main opposition party, respectively; ‘Biffo’ is a nickname for the current (November 2010) Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, and a disparagement of his home County (an acronym: Big Ignorant Fucker From Offaly); ‘Inda’ is a nickname for Enda Kenny, the leader of Fianna Gael (an imitation of his Co Mayo accent).

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