

'IRISH INFLUENCE': REFLECTIONS ON 'STANDARD' ENGLISH
AND ITS OPPOSITES, AND THE IDENTIFICATION OF CALQUES*

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In two recent papers in *SAP*, Raymond Hickey (1983a,b) describes some features of Hiberno-English (HE) syntax and pronominal usage, which he contrasts with those of 'Standard English' (SE). I think some of his attributions are debatable; and the two papers in general raise some interesting questions on two issues: the common and misleading use of 'SE' to mean 'southern British English', and the methodology for identifying morpho-syntactic borrowings.

My argument about the 'standard' is not about normativeness as such, or even Hickey's (implicit) equation 'Irish' = 'non-standard' (which a non-Anglicized speaker of HE might well find offensive). It is rather, in the first instance, about what — in an international Anglophone perspective, such as *SAP* ought to represent — should be taken as 'standard'. In the second instance it is about the danger of assuming that if a form occurs in, and is typical of, a (local) variety of English, and does not apparently occur in southern British English, it is (a) representative primarily of that variety, and (b) can legitimately be called 'non-standard'. This will be the burden of the first part of my paper.

The other major point will be dealt with later; it concerns the problems inherent in assuming that if a feature is representative of a particular variety, and if that variety is in contact with another language that has a parallel feature, the second language can be said to be a 'source' for the feature.

To provide a context for the first part, which will largely consist of disagreeing native-speaker judgements, I am a speaker of New York City English,

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of middle-class educated background, and — in my colonial way — as much a 'standard' speaker as my southern English counterpart. I will discuss Hickey's problematic examples in the order in which they appear in the two papers.

(i) The first example is:

(1) *The soup boiled over on me*

which he claims is 'normally' (1983a: 40) interpreted in HE as

(2) *The soup boiled over on a part of my body*

He then points out that in HE it has a second interpretation, like that of the German *Pertinenzdativ* (*Mir kochte die Suppe über*) — one might add also the Latin 'ethical dative' (cf. Hale & Buck 1903: § 372). He then suggests that this 'pertinence' interpretation is derived from Irish *orm*, and the like. And indeed, his Irish examples do translate literally in such a way as to suggest this kind of origin. But he also points out that there are univocal HE sentences with the *on NP* construction, e.g. if the lexical material is so chosen that a literal interpretation is pragmatically ruled out:

(3) *The fire went out on her*

In my English, the first reading (what he calls the SE one) is likely only if the lexical material involves boiling liquids or something similar. The unmarked reading of this collocation in general is the non-literal one; even in (1), unless a given utterance were accompanied by screams, or it was clear that I was standing by the stove, the usual reading would be: 'The soup boiled over (while I wasn't paying attention/ in spite of my having set the flame on "low"/ the way it always does when I answer the phone while I'm cooking)'. To express the content of (2) unambiguously, in the absence of clear situational cues, I would have to mention getting burned, or name the body part involved. So:

(4) *The soup boiled over on me* ≡ it boiled over [with nuances described below]

(5) *The soup boiled over on my hand/foot/tummy ...*

The *on NP* construction is a very common one, for a certain class of 'affected NPs':

(6) a. *Sam finked out on me again*

b. *The police finally pulled the plug on Capone*

c. *My cigar went out on me*

d. *This car always dies on me in cold weather*

e. *Sally's elaborate plans collapsed on her*

None of these support a literal interpretation with any case.

As normally used, *on NP* often has a 'habitual' sense; but it always implies 'negative effect'; I can not call to mind instances where *on me*, for instance, could be used for 'pertinence' pleasing to the affected person:

(7) a. **The meal turned out well on me*

b. **The car ran beautifully on me*

In fact, *on NP* is a regular and productive 'anti-benefactive' ('malefactive?'), the converse of *for NP*; substitute *for* for *on* in (7) and the stars vanish.

(ii) Hickey refers (1983a: 43) to 'over-representation of the definite article' in HE, e.g. in

(8) *He likes the life abroad*

(9) *We went to Dublin in the car*

He compares this (supposedly non-standard) usage to the Irish definite article with abstracts (e.g. *an fhealsúnacht* = *die Philosophie*, cf. normal English *philosophy*).

I think in this case he misinterprets both examples, which would be quite normal in my non-HE speech. Sentence (8) is actually not synonymous with *He likes life abroad*; the definite article 'reifies' the act of living, so (8) is not the same as *He likes living abroad*, whereas *He likes life* is. Of (9), he says that it is ambiguous, as *in the car* can mean 'in (some particular/known) car', or 'by car'. Again, I have both readings and both constructions normally available; if I'm not going to say *I'm going by car* I can say *I'm going in the car*, where the car does not have to indicate a known referent, but whatever car I might presumably have.

(iii) Use of the 'conditional' in questions and commands (1983a: 43f). Hickey's first example is:

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

for which he gives an Irish analogue with the conditional of (locative) *be* (Irish possessives are normally locatives of the possessor). Surely this is misinterpreted: it is a general strategy in English (and many other languages: cf. James 1982) to use past verb forms for 'distancing' or softening requests or orders. Thus (10) is more polite than *Have you got/do you have, would you get me a drink* is more polite than *will you*, etc. This is a simple function of the 'distal' character of the past as a temporal deictic, distancing a command from the present and thus weakening it (cf. extreme cases like *I was wondering if you might perhaps have...*). As far as I know there is no variety of English that *doesn't* do this.

He further suggests (44) that weakened imperatives, like

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

are 'not usually' interpreted in SE as 'get on with your work', but are in HE; and he traces this to an Irish imperative with a conditional. Aside from the fact that 'conditional' is a misnomer, my native speaker intuitions (if they are of any use) tell me that a softened imperative is the only possible interpretation of (11) as it stands. Indeed, I would find (11) normal, and could not imagine a conditional reading without a continuation ('...if I gave you a lolly/ didn't threaten to take away your teddy'). Note again the use of a past form in the extraposed protasis, here controlled by English sequence-of-tense rules, but indicating, like the past in the apodosis, a non-proximal 'deixis of attitude'.

(iv) In Hickey (1983b) we are given examples of supposedly HE (but not Irish-influenced) pronominal usage. A number of his examples are indeed as far as I know uniquely HE (*Himself isn't here*, 50); but a number are widespread throughout the English-speaking world, and certainly established in my own usage. For instance (*ibid.*):

(12) *Us wives have a hard time of it*

While I do not have other object-forms in subject position (like *them road-workers*, which is distinctly non-standard, but common in U.S. English, and non-adjectival *them aren't*, which is HE), I certainly do have (12). Not in more formal registers — and certainly not written, but it does occur in casual speech. I.e. one could say, I suppose, that casual registers of 'standard' speakers are less standard than more formal registers, which is something the sociolinguistics of the last twenty years has made quite clear. That is, there is a hierarchy of 'standard' styles, some of which overlap with stigmatized varieties. The same goes for other cases of non-nominative pronoun subjects, especially conjoined ones:

(13) *You and me have to do something about it*

This is solidly New York, if a bit non-U.

He also lists as HE as opposed to SE:

(14) a. *She saw he was uneasy by him fidgeting*
b. *There's no use us even trying*

Once again, (14a, b) are my natural casual forms; though I write the 'SE' ones (cf. the example in the paragraph under (3) above, 'in spite of my having set the flame on "low"'). Interestingly, in colloquial speech I would tend not to use either, but 'even though I set the flame on "low"'. Except in formal styles, my dialect shows a distinct preference for clauses with finite verbs rather than gerunds; but given the choice of a non-finite clause, I would use the object form in less formal registers, and the genitive in more formal.

(v) Hickey gives the following pair of sentences and attributions (1983b: 52):

(15) a. *The mother was on to me the other day about it* (HE)
b. *My mother was reminding me/reproaching me the other day about it* (SE)

The focus here (though it's not absolutely clear in the text) is on *the mother* vs. *my mother*; I do find *the mother* not native, but not e.g. *the wife, the boss*. What is more interesting is his undiscussed 'standardization' of *on to me*: certainly this is normal in many varieties of English (including my own, Scottish, and South African). Further, it does not generally have the restricted sense he gives it, but the more general one of 'in touch with':

(16) a. *I'll get on to him tomorrow about the insurance*
b. *Would you get on to the doctor for an appointment?*
c. *He was on to me yesterday about registering for a PhD*

All of the above has been, pretty much, one native speaker's 'introspective' response to data offered as characteristic of HE, and not of (southern British) SE, and by implication at least, characteristic only of HE. At least this is explicitly true of the material in Hickey (1983a), which is traced to Irish sources; or more accurately, imputed to Irish sources on the basis of Irish analogues, which is as I will argue below a very different thing. It can be said at this point, however, that it would be hard to make a case for an Irish 'substratum' affecting my (East European Jewish) New York standard. Certainly there were a lot of Irish speakers in New York at one time, but no real connection can be made; the argument below will suggest that even if coexistence of English and Irish *could* be well supported, it would not make much difference to the claim for influence. Just because something occurs in Irish and HE does not mean that the HE form — or any other form in another dialect — is calqued on Irish: even if there has been in the recent past, and for many speakers still is (at least in the west of Ireland) considerable bilingualism.

Here is a case in point. In Afrikaans, as in all West Germanic dialects except Yiddish, there is a general rule (on a purely surface interpretation) that finite verbs come second in main clauses and last in subordinate clauses. Thus:

(17) a. *Hy het dit gesê*
He has that/it say-past part
'He said/has said it/that'
b. *Hy was siek*
He was sick

- c. *Hy het gesê, dat hy siek was*
 He has say-past part *comp* he sick was
 'He said that he was sick'

If however the complementizer is deleted, and (usually) if there is also an intonation break at the end of the main clause, or at least a pitch-fall, the subordinate clause may have verb-second order; i.e. the sequence behaves like two paratactically associated main clauses:

- (18) *He het gesê, hy was siek*

(In the colloquial Afrikaans of younger speakers, this construction appears to be gaining ground over the older one.)

Given the sociolinguistic situation in South Africa, with the complex prestige relations between the two official languages, and the extensive bilingualism that obtains, it would seem reasonable to ascribe this 'penetration' of verb-second order into subordinate clauses to English influence, i.e. interpret it as a syntactic calque. This could be supported by calqued compounds in Afrikaans, e.g. *sypaadje* 'pavement', lit. side-path-diminutive <sidewalk (Dutch has *trottoir*), *grond-boontjie* 'peanut', lit. ground-bean-diminutive <*groundnut* (Dutch has *pinda*), and so on. (On English-Afrikaans relations see Lanham & Macdonald 1979: Introduction, chs. I–III; Raidt 1980: ch. 10 Lass & Wright 1985, to appear).

But in fact the verb-second construction occurs under precisely the same conditions in other West Germanic dialects, e.g. German and Frisian: a subordinate clause may be verb-second just in case it is not introduced by a complementizer. So German

- (19) a. *Er sagte, daß er krank wäre*
 b. *Er sagte, er wäre krank*

(Actually, the environment in German is a bit more extensive; subordinate clauses can be verb-second if introduced by certain overt markers, notably *denn*, which acts like a coordinating, not subordinating conjunction.)

In Frisian, the rule seems to be the same as in Afrikaans: if an overt complementizer is present, verb-final; if not, verb-second:

- (20) a. *Hy sei, det er it net werdwaen scoe*
 He says *comp* he it *neg* do-again shall
 'He says that he won't do it again'
 b. *Hy sei, hy scoe it net werdwaen*

(Examples from Sipma 1913 : 92).

So despite the contact situation in which Afrikaans is embedded, there is no case to be made for a syntactic calque. The subordinate verb-second

is either a convergent development in Afrikaans, Frisian and German (and Dutch, where it also occurs); or it is an inherited construction, dating from some earlier period in the history of West Germanic. Convergence is non-parsimonious, but can be argued for on the grounds that in the absence of overt marking of subordination, it is quite natural to take two paratactically associated clauses as both main clauses. (This is weakened for German, since the subjunctive in the subordinate clause could be taken as an overt marker.) Inheritance can be argued for on the grounds of the large-scale identity of the rest of the verbal syntax of the three languages.

The point is simple: structural parallelism, even in a bilingual setting, and even where the two languages are as structurally similar as English and Afrikaans, is not a guarantee of interference. Any case made for contact as the source of a feature has to be made in a comparative perspective, and has to exclude, by explicit argument, both convergence and common inheritance as possible sources. I conclude that Hickey's case for Irish origin for his HE parallels is at least not proven.

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