

# The “English” Language in Ireland

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(Illustrations by PAUL YOUNG).

## INTRODUCTION

A casual conversation between two Irishmen might differ greatly from a conversation between either of the same two Irishmen and an Englishman. The differences could include,

- 1 The pronunciation or accent
- 2 The words and expressions or dialect.

For example, an Irishman might comment,

“Ye niver miss the watter till the well runs dry,”

while his English counterpart might be more likely to say,

“One should appreciate more fully the gifts one is given in life.”

Here the word “watter” is pronounced differently to the way in which the standard speaker of English would sound it, and the same meaning is communicated in two entirely different ways. The reasons for the differences are to be found in the history of how the English language has been influenced by the Gaelic language over the past few centuries, but especially from the years of the Potato Crop Failure in the mid 19th century.

### **The Decline of Irish and the spread of English**

In military terms, the Gaelic supremacy in Ireland suffered three major defeats in the 17th century : at the battle of Kinsale 1603, at the hands of Cromwell in the middle of the 17th century, and during the Williamite wars ending in the Treaty of Limerick 1691. As a result, political power and possession of land lay in the hands of the new English planters. The Penal code, designed to abolish “popery” was introduced at the start of the 18th century and this further oppressed the native Irish population, enduring as it did for most of that same century. By this stage English was the official language of Parliament, of the courts and of commerce and while it was still only spoken by a small minority of the total population of the island, that minority exerted a major influence on Irish affairs of the time.

The final blow to the fate of the Gaelic language, which was still used as the vernacular until 1845-8 by an estimated population of six million people, came with the so-called “Great Famine,” when in round figures a million died and a million emigrated to America on the coffin-ships. From then on the poor Irish classes realised that if they were to make a bid to improve their lot in life they must learn the English language which offered them far greater opportunities of raising their status in life. Indeed many of them also were prepared to reject their faith for that of the Church of England, and it is an indication of the success of the propaganda of the Catholic clergy that many more did not take this particular route to bettering themselves financially. In turning to the English language, the Irish were encouraged by the most influential Irishman of the early 19th century, Dan O’Connell.

Irish was now seen as an impediment to progress, as a language of the inferior classes, as the language of the ignorant and uneducated, as somehow primitive and barbaric. The English may have lost the propaganda war for the religion of the Irish, but they scored a clear victory for the propaganda war of the language of the Irish. In the remaining half of the 19th century there was a sudden and remarkable linguistic shift to the general use of English, so much so, that Professor Eoin Mac Néill was able to comment at the start of this century that scarcely 50 people in Ireland could read and write Irish!!!

There were, and still are of course, several pockets where Irish survived if only bi-lingually beside English, but the importance of Irish as a language of officialdom was minimal from this time onwards, until to some degree, its position was protected, though never successfully restored since the new state was set up in the 1920s.

Such was the haste to learn English however, that the people spoke and practised the new tongue at every available opportunity, and when their knowledge of the new language failed them they resorted to the old familiar Gaelic. Hence a mongrel-tongue came into existence, and the language of the Irish people even until today, though decreasingly so, is English flavoured and peppered with Gaelicisms. This is nothing new however, for the English language has in the past borrowed heavily from Latin and Greek, and in more recent times from Norman or French. Thomas Davis thus saw fit to refer to English as "that mongrel of a hundred breeds," and while his intention was to discredit the language, this is not necessarily viewed by modern linguistic scholars as a weakness or impurity in a language but rather as a sign that language like the people who use it, changes and grows and expands and develops.

The purpose of this short paper therefore is to highlight the fact that some of the phrases, expressions, idioms and words, used by Irish people everyday, owe their origins to the Gaelic language once spoke by all our ancestors, whether from the highlands of Gaelic-speaking Scotland or from Ireland. The items in question are largely ignored by standard English dictionaries, the authors of which are either ignorant of their existence or unwilling to recognise them but treat them as slang or impurities of speech. In the same way that the language itself declined in use due to the negative attitudes towards it which were cultivated by those who, for their own reasons wished to kill it off, it is noticeable that the usage of these Gaelicisms is also falling into rapid decline as we live in an era when "Standard English" and "Received Pronunciation" are being projected by the media as more acceptable than other dialects and accents and are being imitated by an increasing number of Irish people, who wrongly accept that their own brand of speech is inferior, and consciously or otherwise make an effort to speak like BBC newsreaders.

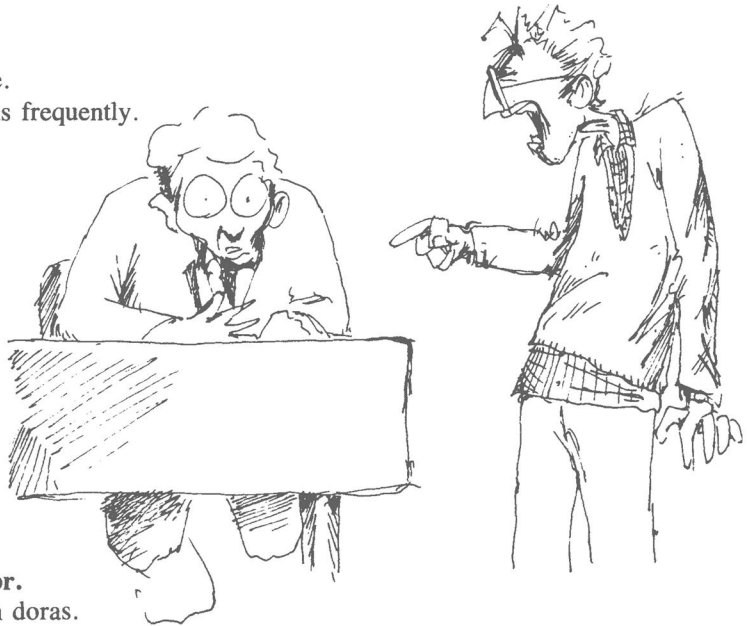


"IT'S HARD TO BATE A BOUL  
A' BROOSY!"

## List 1 :— Idioms, Expressions and Phrases.

Key : E = English; G = Gaelic; M = Meaning

- E If you don't do that now **I won't be grate with you.**  
 G Mura ndéanann tú sin ní bheidh mé mór leat  
 M Said to a child, meaning that you won't be friends with him.
- E You're only **robbin' Peter to pay Paul.**  
 G B'é creach Peadair is dfól Póil agat é.  
 M Stopping a gap with an item that's already needed elsewhere.
- E A body's not safe on the roads **the times that's in it.**  
 E Ní bhíonn duine sabháilte ar na bóithre an lá a bhfuil inniu ann.  
 M Nowadays, in recent times.
- E I wud know her **out of her brother.**  
 G D'aithneoinn as a deartháir í.  
 M I would recognise her from her brother.
- E Don't be **buttin' in** on me.  
 G Ná bí ag cur isteach orm.  
 M Don't be interrupting me while I am speaking. Properly "puttin'."
- E I wudent **put it past him.**  
 G Ní chuirfinn thairis é.  
 M I am willing to believe that he would be capable of doing such a thing.
- E He wouldn't do a **hand's turn.**  
 G He dhéanfadh sé iompadh láimhe.  
 M He wouldn't do any work whatsoever.
- E He **be's** in our house every fiddle-fart.  
 G Bíonn sé i dtoigh s'againne gach ré bomaite.  
 M To indicate a regular occurrence that happens frequently.
- E He broke the plate **on me.**  
 G Bhris sé an pláta orm.  
 M It was my plate that he broke.
- E What's the **hurry on you?**  
 G Cad é an deifir atá ort?  
 M Why are you rushing?
- E If she's given me the fiver **atself.**  
 G Dá dtabharfadh sí na cúig phunt féin domh  
 M If she had even given me the £5.
- E Ate **your fill** till your heart's content.  
 G Ith do sháith go gcloinn tú an t-ocras.  
 M Eat what it takes to satisfy your appetite.
- E When the row started we **made for the door.**  
 G Nuair a thoisigh an bruíon rinne muid ar an doras.  
 M We headed in the direction of the door.
- E Thon boy's an **able** gentleman.  
 G Tá an diúlach udáí ábalta.  
 M That fellow is a crafty sly person.



"SHUT YE R GUB"

- E **Live oul horse and you'll get grass.**  
 G Mair a Chapail agus gheobhair féar.  
 M Said when someone is expected to be patient in their hopes of gaining some reward which will never materialise.
- E **Put on ye.**  
 G Cuir ort.  
 M Dress yourself.
- E **Tik aff ye.**  
 G Bain duit.  
 M Undress yourself.
- E **What are they at?**  
 G Cad é 'tá siad á dhéanamh?  
 M What are they doing?
- E It would **tik you to** keep a close eye on thon boyo.  
 G Ghlacfá súil ghéar a choinneáil ar mo dhuine.  
 M One would need to be careful about him.
- E **Since we lit the candle we'll burn the inch.**  
 G Ó loisc muid an coinneal loiscfimid an t-ortalach.  
 M Since we've gone this far we might as well carry on.
- E He sailed in **with one arm as long as the other.**  
 G Tháinig sé isteach agus lámh amháin chomh fada leis an lámh eile.  
 M He arrived empty-handed.
- E Sure yous **had no call to do that.**  
 G Ní raibh cáil ar bith oraibh sin a dhéanamh.  
 M There was no need for you to do that.
- E **Atin bread is soon forgotten.**  
 G An t-arán a itear is gairid a théann sé i ndearmad.  
 M Past favours are soon forgotten.
- E **I'm not at myself the day.**  
 G Níl mé agam féin inniu  
 M I'm not feeling up to form.
- E That's **smashin'.**  
 G Is maith sin.  
 M That is wonderful
- E He's **after** hittin me.  
 G Tá sé i ndiaidh mé a bhualadh.  
 M He has just this moment hit me.
- E She was only **lettin' on.**  
 G Ní raibh sí ach ag ligint uirthi.  
 M She was merely pretending.
- E Take your coat **for fear of** the rain.  
 G Tabhair leat do chóta ar eagla na fearthainne.  
 M In case it rains.
- E **He let a helluva roar outa him.**  
 G Lig sé béic uafásach as.  
 M He shouted at the top of his voice.



"HE MAKES A RIGHT PRAKASS OF  
 HIMSELF WHEN HE'S DRUNK!"

- E **He'd stale the cross off an ass's back.**  
 G Ghoidfeadh sé an cros den asail.  
 M He is a kleptomaniac.
- E **You'll have your work cut out to bate him.**  
 G Beidh obair agat eisean a bhualadh amach.  
 M You'll find it challenging to beat him.
- E **God I cudent face that.**  
 G A Thiarna, ní thiocfadh liom m'aghaidh a thabhairt ar sin.  
 M I couldn't approach that or attempt to do that.
- E **Thon boy wud blow a pig's head on you.**  
 G Shiabfadh an boc sin ceann muice ort.  
 M That fellow would fill you full of lies.
- E **I put it on the long finger.**  
 G Chuir mé ar an mhéar fhada é.  
 M I postponed it.
- E **Larnin' your granny to suck eggs.**  
 G Ag foghlaim do do mháthair bráchán a dhéanamh  
 M Advice to one who is more knowledgeable than the advisor.
- E **Many a man tied a knot with his tongue that his teeth will never lose.**  
 G Is iomaí fear a cheangail snaidhm lena theanga nach scaoileann sé choíche lena char  
 M Advice to think carefully before talking.
- E **The stormy day's not the day to be mending the thatch.**  
 G Ní hé lá na gaoithe lá na scolb  
 M Don't attempt a task at an inopportune time.
- E **Ye had better be alone than in bad company.**  
 G Is fearr uaigneas maith ná drochchuideachta.  
 M Said when in the company of someone you don't like.
- E **A bad mower blames the scythe.**  
 G Is doiligh speal a fháil do dhrochbhainteoir  
 M A poor tradesman blames the quality of the tools not himself.
- E **She missed her market.**  
 G Tá sí thar a margadh  
 M Said about a spinster who may have spurned an opportunity to wed.
- E **God between us and all harm.**  
 G Dia idir sinn agus an t-olc  
 M Said as a protection against fate in the future.

## P

He makes a right prakass (prácas = mess) of himself when he takes drink.  
 Take a drop of poteen (póitín = illicit whiskey).  
 Thon field grew nahin only poreens (póirín = small potatoes).  
 Thon's a good crop of pretties (préataí = potatoes).  
 Don't be given me the oul plamass (plámás = sweet-talk).

## R

He went over an awful ramass (ráiméis = nonsense) of stuff.

**S**

Shift yer spags (spág = large foot).

She was wearing a very snazzy (snas = shine) rig-out.

The slane (sleán = turf-spade) is the boy that wud tire you.

Tik aff yar sliggins (sliúchán = soft shoes).

Sure the wine 'ill coup thon oul shalfasky (seal foscaidh = temporary hut made of wattle and twigs to shelter priests saying Mass in penal times).

Tak a sate on that soogan (súgán = straw-rope) chair.

Take a skillet (sciléad = small pot) of water out of that pail to mik tay.

Now its a rough shanty (seantoigh = old house).

Don't coup into the sheugh (seoch = drain).

He wud need a clout on the back of the head with a scraw (sraith = sod).

It smashed into smithereens (smidiríní = fragments).

He used to keep a sheebeen (síbín = illicit drinking-house).

Take a slug (slog = draft) of that.

He was all dickied up with his kilt (cuilt = cloth) and sporrin (sparán = purse).

It luks like there'll be a wee smur (smúr = light rain).

Mind you they grew from dam all only skillaunes (sciollán = cut potatoes used for seed).

Its a hefty sturk (storc = young bullock) of a baste.

Them slats (slat = wooden rods) wud need a while in the flax-hole.

He's been out all day shiggin' (síogán = small hut) corn.

Boys it wasn't half sheebowin (síobadh = gusting wind) last night.

**T**

Teem (taom = strain) the spuds there, I'm dying of the hunger.

Go up and ask the loan of the trahook (tráth = rope twister).

The cobbler put on a theeveen (taoighín = small side) to keep me feet dry.

It took me a while to twig on (tuig = understand) what he meant.

**W**

Whisht (éist = listen) till I hear me ears.

**Acknowledgement**

I wish to thank John Johnston from Belleek, Co. Fermanagh who passed on to me some excellent examples given here of gaelicisms found in West Ulster which he collected.

**List 2 :— Words****A**

They came from all arts (aird = direction) and parts.

**B**

**He had a tidy patch on his britches (bríste = trouser).**

**It's hard to bate a boul a' brootyin / broosy (brúitín = mashed potatoes).**

Blethers (bladar = foolish talk) and nonsense.

**He had a good tight bart (beart = bundle) of hay under his arm.**

**They live down a long loanin (lóinín = lane).**

**Mik a quick bannack (bonnóg = cake) of bread.**

**He slid over the broo (bruach = bank) and into the sheugh (Seoch = drain).**

**We get barn brack (báirín breac = bread with currants) at Hall' eve.**

**I heared the banshee (bean sídhe = fairy woman) wailin'.**

**Sup up them broth (bruith = boiled soup).**

**C**

**Put the creel (craol = basket of wickerwork) on the donkey.**

**The roof blew aff the pig-craw (cró = hut).**

**Thon boy could cap (ceap = turn) mice at a crossroads.**

Chuck chuck chuck (toic toic toic = come for calling fowl).

There's clabber (clábar = mud) on your boots.

**D**

I'd be lost without me oul doodyin (dúidín = clay-pipe).

She pigged ten good ones and a drawlyin (dreoilín = wren, but also runt).

Put a dul (dol = noose) on that rope.

Sure you have only a bit of faraban (féar bán = short white grass) there.

She only sold a ferkin (feircín = small measure) at the butter-market.

**G**

Shut yer gob (gob = bird's beak).

Thon boy's only a gom (gom = idiot).

The crop was dirty with gillgowans (giolla gabhann = type of weed).

I'll have less of yer oul guff (guth = voice or backtalk).

Ye have a hole in yer gansy (geansaí = pullover).

Throw that on the greeshock (gríosach = burning embers).

There wasn't a geeg (gíog = chirp) out of her.

There's bread galore (go leor = plenty) on the table.

Where's me gallasses? (gealas = braces for trousers).

She let an unmerciful gulder (goldar = roar) out of her.

You're a clane gorb (gorb = glutton).

I have a great grah (grá = love) for the onions.

**K**

I see you're kitter-paw (ciotóg = left-handed)

The dog was keening (caoineadh = crying) at the moon.

Put yer fut on that keerogue (ciaróg = beetle, cockroach).

## L

Stop laggin (lag = weak) behind.

A lassogue (lasóg = spark) came outa the lamp and singed me hair completely.

That ewe's a breaker, we'll have to langal (langal = tether) her.

## M

He was mantogue (mantóg = speaking with a slur due to lost teeth) drunk.

Sure you wudent meet the likes of her at the nine fairs and the marga more (margadh mór = season fair).

Thon mollye (maol = having no horns) is fair puttin on the beef.

There was a mehal (meitheal = work party) of men at the thrasher.

It would hardly buy ye a meshkin (meascán = amount of butter) of butther.

## N

He had the guts of a five-naggin (noigín = measure of whiskey) bottle in him.

## P

He makes a right prakass (prácas = mess) of himself when he takes drink.



"STOP LAGGIN BEHIND"



"THERE'S CLABBER ON YOUR BOOTS!"