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Autor(en): **Zingg, Gisela**

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# Hiberno-English in Joyce's *Ulysses*

Gisela Zingg

James Joyce's *Ulysses* has never been systematically studied as a work largely written in dialect, i.e. Hiberno-English. This essay tries to show that Joyce's frequent use of Hiberno-English has a linguistic as well as a literary importance in the novel. The essay discusses the way some characters in *Ulysses* make use of Hiberno-English: including the effect the dialect has on the situation in which it is used, and what it reveals about the characters themselves. In those places where the dialect is used, either it has a specific importance for the action, or else it contributes to the specific identity of a character.

In the vast body of scholarship in Joyce, there are some studies of Joyce's language and many of Joyce's relationship to Ireland, but the combination of the two is strikingly lacking. By this I mean Joyce's representation of Ireland and Irish values through the use of language, or more specifically, through the use of Hiberno<sup>1</sup>-English, also called Anglo-Irish or Irish English. I will use the term "Hiberno-English," adopting the terminology used by many scholars and by the Irish themselves. I prefer the term "Hiberno-English" to the term "Irish English" because the term "Irish" not only refers to Ireland's population, but it is also associated with Irish Gaelic. This association I believe to be misleading, since it suggests that the only influence on the variety of English spoken in Ireland is Irish Gaelic, which is not the case. In this paper I wish to show that Hiberno-English in *Ulysses* serves a literary purpose. Since the novel has never been entirely studied as a work largely written in dialect, its use of dialect has not been regarded as having an important impact on either a linguistic or a literary level. Richard Wall's *An*

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<sup>1</sup> Hibernia is the Latin name for Ireland, "Hiberno" the prefix used for things specifically Irish.

*Anglo-Irish Dialect Glossary for Joyce's Works* (1987) records only a small selection of Hiberno-English, as does Visser's article "James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Anglo-Irish" (1942). In what follows I will attempt to show how Hiberno-English in *Ulysses* contributes to typify certain characters, and how it adds to the dramatic significance of a certain situation.

Before considering specific examples of Hiberno-English in *Ulysses*, I wish to look briefly at English as it is spoken in Ireland. The arrival of the Anglo-Normans in Ireland in 1169 marked the beginning of the gradual loss of the Irish<sup>2</sup> language. However, the historic situation in Ireland was such that the language contact was prolonged, making possible a significant influence of Irish on English. Between 1515 and 1700, known as the period of plantation,<sup>3</sup> the Irish people working for the planters were forced to learn English, but they often did so without fully understanding or mastering the system of the target language. Moreover, the planters from whom the Irish natives learned English were themselves cut off from the source of their native tongue and its development. This led them to be influenced by the Irish language in turn since the local people, speaking Irish, were their only contact. The influence of Irish on English in Ireland can be seen on the lexical, syntactic and phonetic levels. Hiberno-English contains words which are derived phonetically from Irish (e.g. "mavrone" from Ir *mo bhrón*: "my sorrow"), as well as direct translations, that is to say idioms or metaphors in the Irish language that are translated word by word into English (e.g. "silk of the kine" from Ir *a shíoda na mbó*). On a syntactic level, many structures characteristic of the Irish language system are transferred into English. However, there are also significant sources of influence on Hiberno-English other than the Irish language. These are expressions from Early Modern English or even from Old or Middle English. These expressions are considered archaic in Standard English<sup>4</sup> but are still in current use in Ireland.

Let us now look at Hiberno-English in the context of *Ulysses*. Readers of *Ulysses* do not immediately get the impression that they are reading a book largely written in a dialect in the way it would strike them when reading a play by Synge or O'Casey, or a novel by Flann O'Brien.

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<sup>2</sup> By Irish I understand Irish Gaelic.

<sup>3</sup> The seizure of Irish land by the English.

<sup>4</sup> By Standard English I understand the British variety of English which has undergone a process of standardization whereby it is organized for description in reference works such as grammars and dictionaries.

Joyce uses a technique that combines in a generally recognizable Standard English text, different dialects, different languages and various narrative styles. A work written in dialect always runs the risk of artificiality, because there is no agreed system of spelling for regional variants, and therefore the written form of a dialect can neither be entirely authentic nor complete. Joyce's aim, however, is to represent reality by rendering the thoughts and speech of his characters in the way they are most likely to occur in real life. Moreover, he uses the dialect only for specific symbolic purposes. By doing so, Joyce escapes the disadvantages that writing in dialect can bring.

Before proceeding to my analysis of Hiberno-English in *Ulysses*, I wish to give a brief outline of the work. The novel *Ulysses*, much of it modelled upon episodes in Homer's *Odyssey*, is set in Dublin on 16 June 1904. The reader follows the two main characters, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom through the day. Before Stephen and Bloom meet, their separate itineraries are treated in alternate sections. Eventually they meet in the Holles St. National Maternity Hospital. Bloom follows Stephen to the brothel quarter and later takes him to his home at 7 Eccles St. where Molly, Bloom's wife, lies in bed, mulling over her life in a soliloquy. The novel has, like the *Odyssey*, eighteen episodes or chapters. Most of them are written in a style distinct from that of the other episodes, and there is always a fusion of style with the subject matter. As we will see in the course of this discussion, the amount of Hiberno-English varies from chapter to chapter, due to the fact that the use of Hiberno-English does not suit all styles and subject matters. I would argue that Joyce does not use Hiberno-English for the sake of local tradition, but for more complex reasons related to the nature of his characters and their situations. When Joyce turns away from Standard English, he does so for a purpose. In what follows I propose to look at some characters and their use of Hiberno-English.<sup>5</sup>

Stephen lives in a Martello tower with the Englishman Haines and with Buck Mulligan, a Dublin medical student. Stephen is a character struggling to come to terms with his Irishness. He is an intellectual and a poet who nonetheless refuses to join the Irish cultural revival, believing

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<sup>5</sup> I am aware of the fact that some words, expressions or syntactic features – many of which can be explained by the Irish substratum – are not exclusively Hiberno-English, but they are still a part of the speech of the Irish population, or at least they were in Joyce's Dublin.

that its aspirations are misguided. For Stephen, the Irish Revival represents cultural suicide by cutting Ireland off from European culture and thought. He believes that the Irish, despite their attempt at escape, are still bound to Britain and Rome. In the opening pages of the book, Stephen encounters a milkwoman who for him personifies a type of Ireland:

Silk of the kine and poor old woman, names given her in old times. A wandering crone, lowly form of an immortal serving her conqueror and her gay betrayer, their common cuckquean, a messenger from the secret morning. To serve or to upbraid, whether he could not tell: but scorned to beg her favour<sup>6</sup>. (Ulysses 1.403-7)

The images of Ireland, "silk of the kine" and "poor old woman," are literal translations of the Irish *síoda na mbó* and *an t-sean bhean bhocht*. Stephen does not necessarily need to know the Irish expressions<sup>7</sup> since the English translation was current enough in Hiberno-English. But the amusingly paradoxical thing about this episode is that the woman can hardly be said to epitomize traditional Ireland for she does not understand Haines' speech in Irish.

-Do you understand what he says? Stephen asked her.

-Is it French you are talking, sir? the old woman said to Haines.

Haines spoke to her again a longer speech, confidently.

-Irish, Buck Mulligan said. Is there Gaelic on you?

-I thought it was Irish, she said, by the sound of it. Are you from the west, sir? (Ulysses 1.424-9)

Without knowing it, the milkwoman in this passage uses a Hiberno-English structure in "Is it French you are talking, sir?" influenced by the Irish *An í an Fhraincis atá tú ag labhairt*. Mulligan, on the other hand, is very conscious of his Hiberno-English expression "Is there Gaelic on you?" (from the Irish *an bhfuil Gaeilge agat*), which he uses in order to mock the Irish and their Hiberno-English dialect. Stephen notices the pretentiousness of the Englishman Haines and the milkwoman's deference to him and, more generally, to the English race, seeing it as a be-

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<sup>6</sup> The emphases in all the quotations are mine, and they serve to highlight the Hiberno-English expressions.

<sup>7</sup> From *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* we know that Stephen (or Joyce) had one single Irish lesson.

trayal of her origins. In general, it can be said that Stephen uses many Hiberno-English expressions, many of which can be explained by the Irish substratum. However, he neither thinks nor speaks in Irish, although one can assume that he knows some Irish. Mulligan's Hiberno-English is of a different kind from Stephen's.

Mulligan is a witty, cynical, blasphemous, but also a courageous Dublin medical student. Stephen, as we have seen, uses Hiberno-English neither in order to identify himself with the Irish people nor to mock them. Mulligan, on the other hand, clearly identifies Hiberno-English with the lower classes and the peasantry, and his use of the dialect is a conscious choice. Returning to the milkwoman episode, I wish to look at Mulligan's question to the woman "Is there Gaelic on you?" (*Ulysses* 1.427). Mulligan thinks he is speaking her dialect (which he considers uneducated). The milkwoman, however, does not grasp Mulligan's intention to poke fun at her dialect since she does not understand Irish and therefore knows nothing about the Irish substratum. Shortly before the milkwoman episode, Mulligan already pokes fun at the dialect when he

[. . .] said in an old woman's wheedling voice:

—When I makes tea I makes tea, as old mother Grogan said. And when I makes water I makes water. [. . .]

Buck Mulligan went on hewing and wheedling:

—So I do, Mrs Cahill, says she. Begob,<sup>8</sup> ma'am says Mrs Cahill, God send you don't make them in the one pot. (1.357-362)

Although the use of the non-standard verbal form might be a characteristic of the English spoken in Ireland,<sup>9</sup> it is definitely not an Irish substratum, it is simply non-standard (or very informal) speech, and that is exactly the point Mulligan wants to make. "Begob" and "God send" (the latter is a literal translation of *go dtuga Dia*) are certainly Hiberno-English expressions, but in the context it is clear that Mulligan uses them to mock the peasants and other uneducated people who use these expressions. Later, in the "Scylla and Charybdis" episode (ch. 9), where Mulligan discusses literature with his friends in the National Library, he again refuses to look seriously at Irish traditions, and he ridicules them.

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<sup>8</sup> "Begob": corruption of "by God."

<sup>9</sup> This is typical non-standard English and also occurs in other varieties.

He delivers an amusing speech which is a good parody of Hiberno-English.

–It’s what I’m telling you, mister honey, it’s queer and sick we were, Haines and myself, the time himself brought it in. ‘Twas murmur we did for a gal-lus potion would rouse a friar, I’m thinking, and he limp with leching. And we one hour and two hours and three hours in Connery’s sitting civil waiting for pints apiece.

[. . .]

–And we to be there, mavrone, and you to be unbeknownst sending us your conglomerations the way we to have our tongues out a yard long like the drouthy clerics do be fainting for a pussful. (9.558-566).<sup>10</sup>

For someone familiar with J.M. Synge, it is obvious that Mulligan’s object of parody is the language of Synge’s plays. Although the linguistic structures and the vocabulary are definitely Hiberno-English, in the muddled context in which they are used, they come across as merely bad grammar. Delivering his speech “in a querulous brogue” (9.556-7), it is obvious that Mulligan once again is laughing at the Irish peasants and also at Synge. Mulligan knows enough Hiberno-English to give a good parody of Synge, and he certainly has read or seen Synge’s plays. The complexity of Mulligan’s character lies in the fact that, on the one hand, he is interested in Irish Revival literature as he reads works by writers like Synge. On the other hand, he clearly despises Synge. Mulligan associates the Irish language and Hiberno-English with a lack of education and with the peasantry. What Hiberno-English provides for him is a means for indulging his sheer delight at poking fun. Mulligan’s interest in Irish values is tempered by his ridiculing them.

Contrary to Mulligan, Bloom seems to take no interest in Irish values, neither promoting nor rejecting them. This goes perfectly with his character, which is that of a person of little consequence in his world. Throughout the whole day he is the outsider, rarely getting his say. Bloom’s speech also differs from Stephen’s in that it is simpler and more basic in its content. At first glimpse, Hiberno-English seems to be almost absent from his speech. At a closer look, however, it is striking that he actually does use quite a bit of Hiberno-English – and this oc-

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<sup>10</sup> “Gallus”: “wild, mischievous”; “and” + -ing: Ir *agus* can imply that two actions or events occur simultaneously; “mavrone”: from Ir *mo bhrón* “my sorrow, alas”; “do be”: in Irish, the distinction between habitual and non-habitual forms is much more marked than in English; “pussful”: from Ir *pús* “mouth.”

curs, above all, in his thoughts. The preferred Hiberno-English structure of Bloom's thoughts is the omission of the relative in subject position, most likely due to the fact that thoughts in general tend to be more elliptical and less influenced by normative control than speech. The language of his thoughts reveals that Bloom is very much a Dublin man, at home with the slang idioms and the colloquial expressions. I wish to single out a few examples where Bloom omits the relative in the nominative.

It's the blood sinking in the earth ø gives new life. (Ulysses 6.771)

Here's this nobleman ø passed before. (Ulysses 13.1053)

It is striking that in the "Circe" episode (ch. 15), where Bloom is hallucinating, Irish and Hiberno-English words and structures appear far more often than elsewhere in his speech.

[Let me be going now, woman of the house, for by all the goats in Connemara I'm after having the father and mother of a bating. (15.1961-2)

You're after hitting me. (15.2914)

Slán leath. (15.220)

A streamer bearing the legends Cead Mile Failte and [. . .]. (15.1399)]<sup>11</sup>

In general, we notice that Bloom's Hiberno-English passages are very short and always embedded in Standard English, which gives the impression that his use of Hiberno-English is unconscious. Bloom uses Hiberno-English neither in order to identify himself with Ireland nor to distance himself from her. From what we know, Bloom has a fairly basic education but considering his language, we can assume that his teachers succeeded in eradicating the dialect in favour of Standard English.

I will treat the "Cyclops" episode (ch. 12) separately because it differs considerably from the others in the extent of Hiberno-English used. This chapter is concerned with nationalism, and in this sense the national language plays an important role. The episode is a satire of all versions of Irish nationalism. The Citizen, one of the main characters,

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<sup>11</sup> "Let me be going": direct translation from *Ir lig dom imeacht*, "woman of the house": direct translation from *Ir bean an tighe*, "after" + -ing: indicates that an action has recently been finished; "father and mother": "very severe"; "bating": HE pronunciation for "beating"; *Slán leat*. "save with you, goodbye"; *Céad míle fáilte*. "hundred thousand times welcome."



epitomizes narrow nationalism, and he embodies the cyclops, a one-eyed creature. He turns out to have a limited perspective and a restricted view of the world, one that places an exaggerated value on Irish tradition. The episode takes place in a pub, and the tone of the discussion is colloquial, taking the mode of an oral tale, full of “says I.” Of the Irish language the Citizen says, “It’s on the march” (12.1190). He himself uses many Irish words, but most of them are commonplace expressions and do not demand a deeper knowledge of the language. He does talk to the dog in Irish (12.705) in a speech which, however, is not rendered directly, so that we cannot really judge the quality of the Irish. Earlier he has already ordered the dog to “bi i dho husht”<sup>12</sup> (*Ulysses* 12.265). However, the Citizen seems to be aware that the dog will not understand his command in Irish and thus accompanies it with a kick in the ribs. There is another mention of the Citizen speaking in Irish where the speech, again, is not rendered. The narrator reports that “the citizen [is] getting up to waddle to the door, [. . .], and he cursing the curse of Cromwell on him, bell, book and candle in Irish, spitting and spitting out of him” (*Ulysses* 12.1783-6). We do not know whether the Citizen’s curse is fluent or correct Irish or whether it is, once again, an accumulation of Irish words which are not accurately used. In the whole chapter there is no evidence that the Citizen really knows Irish. The Irish words which the Citizen does use are mostly out of place, although he deliberately uses as many Irish and Hiberno-English expressions as possible, probably to demonstrate his so-called commitment to nationalism.

So Terry brought the three pints.

–Here, says Joe, doing the honours. Here, citizen.

–Slán leat, says he.

–Fortune, Joe says I. Good health, citizen. (*Ulysses* 12.817-20)

*Slán leat* means “goodbye” (literally “safe with you”) and it is said to someone going away. What the Citizen intends to say is either *Sláinte* (“to your health”) or *go raibh maith agat* (“thank you”). The narrator seems to have noticed the Citizen’s faux-pas and ironically wishes him “good health.” In the following example the Citizen gets it wrong again:

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<sup>12</sup> It literally means “be in your silence,” thus “be quiet.”

[The Citizen] lifted in his rude great brawny strengthly hands the medher<sup>13</sup> of dark strong foamy ale and, uttering his tribal slogan Lambh Derg Abu, he drank to the undoing of his foes [. . .]. (12.1210-3)

“Lambh Derg Abu” means “Red Hand Hurrah,” a slogan of Ulster Unionism. The Citizen seems to be so desperate to use whatever Irish expression he knows that he is unaware that this one is actually opposed to the nationalist cause which he supports so ardently.

The narrator of this episode, whose language is something else altogether, is another interesting character. His Hiberno-English dialect is very marked and, unlike that of the Citizen, extremely consistent. It is clear that it comes naturally to him and that, unlike the Citizen, he does not use it in order to make a point. An interesting difference can be seen in the narrator’s and the Citizen’s use of the same Hiberno-English idiom – but with a different effect. The Citizen’s question to his dog “What’s on you Garry?” (*Ulysses* 12.704) is a literal translation from the Irish *Cád tá ort?* In Irish, states of mind and physical sensations are expressed as nouns followed by the preposition *ar*. In Hiberno-English the preposition is translated into English (“on”) and “What ails you?” becomes “What’s on you?”. The narrator employs the same idiom when he says “*Arrah*,<sup>14</sup> give over your bloody coddling, Joe [. . .]. I’ve a thirst on me I wouldn’t sell for half a crown” (*Ulysses* 12.141-2). As opposed to the Citizen’s, the narrator’s idiom is not forced and it is consistent with his language in general. Apart from the expression “I have a thirst on me” (derived from the Irish *tá tart orm*), the added phrase “I wouldn’t sell for half a crown” gives it a Hiberno-English flavour. It is interesting to note that the narrator plays so aptly with words derived from Irish, using them mainly to poke fun at the Citizen and his extreme nationalism.

To conclude we can say that Joyce often uses dialectal features to draw our attention to the larger impact that languages in Ireland had on a social as well as national level. Language and dialects have important meanings in *Ulysses*. Dialect, however, cannot easily be represented on the page, and Joyce opted to write mainly in Standard English, aiming at an educated, modern and not exclusively Irish readership. Hiberno-English, however, is not necessarily absorbed into Standard English.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ir meadar*, “a drinking vessel.”

<sup>14</sup> Interjection: “now,” “but,” “really” (phrase to indicate that a situation is not to be taken too seriously).

Rather, what we have is a fusion of the two. The reason for the use of the dialect is not the same for every character. For Stephen, Irish and Hiberno-English and the values attached to these languages are important in his struggle to come to terms with his Irishness and his obligations as an Irish poet writing in English. Mulligan, on the other hand, consistently makes use of Irish and Hiberno-English for a satirical purpose. His sneers at the peasants, and at everything seen as traditionally Irish, are at their most cutting when he uses Hiberno-English himself. Although his Hiberno-English is most of the time exaggerated, it is clear that he understands the mechanism of the dialect. Bloom, conversely, does not seem to use the languages discussed in order to adopt a stance. In public he is more at ease with Standard English (as opposed to the dialect) which he would have been taught at school. The unpleasant Citizen from the "Cyclops" episode speaks Irish or Hiberno-English most inappropriately, and Joyce thereby satirizes his chauvinistic, one-eyed perspective of nationalism. Furthermore, we can see that the use of Hiberno-English not only serves to register the social and cultural gap existing between Stephen and his peers and the Irish peasantry; it also allows Joyce to comment ironically on Irish chauvinism (especially in "Cyclops"). Apart from these more obvious purposes, that is to say the indications of class distinction and the objects of Joyce's own ironic perspective, we should not neglect the fact that on many occasions, Hiberno-English contributes to the comedy of certain situations and conversations.

Almost every chapter is written in a style of its own, and there is always a fusion of style with the subject matter. With regard to Hiberno-English, this fusion of style and subject matter is striking, and it shows that Joyce made a conscious decision as to where and when to use Hiberno-English. If we take a quantitative approach, (see Fig. 1) we notice that the "Cyclops" episode contains the highest number of Hiberno-English features. The episode takes place in a pub, the tone is colloquial, and the speakers are mostly middle-class Dubliners. These facts justify the amount of Hiberno-English. In "Scylla and Charybdis," Mulligan is one of the few characters who speaks in Hiberno-English. As we have seen, he does so in order to mock the writers of the Irish Revival. The fact that the other characters do not speak in dialect is justified by the occasion and the setting, which brings together a number of erudite Dubliners discussing literature in an elevated, dignified tone. Mulligan's ironic interventions in Hiberno-English are designed to add humour to

the lofty atmosphere. The “Oxen of the Sun” episode (ch. 14), which is concerned with the evolution of the English language, contains a large amount of Hiberno-English slang. Again, the style is appropriate to the subject matter. Moreover, we notice that Joyce’s interest in slang serves historical purposes. The “Ithaca” episode (ch. 17), on the other hand, is almost devoid of Hiberno-English. The tone of this episode is scholastic and scientific, and the language is hyper-rational. Hence, the use of dialect would not be appropriate. We have seen that *Ulysses* is a polyphonic novel where every voice suits the subject matter. In the “Aeolus” episode (ch. 7), for instance, the style is that of newspapers, and therefore we find almost no Hiberno-English in this episode. Moreover, in philosophical or reflexive passages (e.g. in “Proteus” (ch. 3), where Stephen contemplates the meaning of life’s changes), we hardly find any Hiberno-English features. This, again, makes sense since philosophical topics are rarely treated in dialect. By using Irish and Hiberno-English, Joyce keeps them alive, showing his interest in them and the values attached to them. The unconventional use that Joyce makes of Standard English, Irish and Hiberno-English draws our attention to the complicated relation between language and society in Ireland.

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