

Irish English in America –with particular reference to its pronunciation and the history of the immigrants–

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the influence of Irish English on American English. It is a well-known fact that American English differs from British English in some aspects of pronunciation, vocabulary, usage and grammar. One question arises here – What made American English acquire these different characteristics? One answer might be that the number of Irish immigrants was very large so they influenced American. This paper mainly aims at interpreting the impact of Irish pronunciation with reference to the background of Irish immigrants in America.

1.1 Previous research

Former studies show that Irish English has influenced American English but this is not clear in detail. Both of these Englishes have been discussed separately and as a result the mutual relationship has not been made clear. According to Fujii Kenzo (2006)¹ it is often said that Irish English is the root of American English. The research of American population reveals that Irish-Americans occupy the second place in America (the first is Germany) in terms of immigrants. They started to Cross over into America in the seventeenth century and the number of immigrants reached a peak in the mid-nineteenth century because of the Potato Famine in Ireland. As a result of this famine, the number of Irish immigrants remarkably increased, which is closely related to the influence of Irish English on the pronunciation of that of America, Discussing the history of the immigrants in this paper will lead to a deeper understanding of the contact between Irish and American Englishes.

1.2 Definition

First of all, let us give a definition of Irish English and American English. In Todd (1999)², the definition of the standard Irish English (hereafter, IE) goes thus: the definition

¹ 『アメリカ英語「語法と発音」』 . Tokyo: Nan-undo, 2006.

² *Green English: Irish Influence on the English Language*, Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1999, P57.

Planter English=Planter English is represented by two varieties, namely Anglo-Irish and Alter Scots. Anglo-Irish is variety of English spoken over most of Ireland. It is descended from the English brought to Ireland by planters from England, modified by contacts with Irish, Ulster scots and Hiberno-English.

Hiberno-English= this is a range of English spoken by people whose ancestral mother tongue was Irish.

Also Hickey (2007)³ says about Irish English:

In the present study, the simpler, more neutral label *Irish English* is used. There is no substantial objection to the term. It refers to varieties of English in Ireland (internal distinctions can be made additionally) and is parallel to labels like Canadian English and Australian English.

On the other hand, American English is defined as the standard General American (hereafter, GA): “It is based on the type of American English which may be heard, with slight variations, from Ohio through the Middle West and on to the Pacific Coast.” (Prator & Robinett, 1972)⁴.

2. Pronunciation

American English is often noted to be different from British English. Particularly pronunciations /r/ and a short vowel /a/ are features peculiar to American English. There arises one question how these differences occurred and developed in America. R-pronunciation does not occur in Received Pronunciation (hereafter RP) now, while on the other hand in GA /r/ is pronounced after vowels and at the end of words. That was starting in the seventeenth century and ended in the eighteenth century. This phenomenon is called R-Dropping (Wells, 1982)⁵. Therefore r-pronunciation already disappeared in Britain in the eighteenth century and it had no influence on American English at that time. However today GA has r-pronunciation influenced from IE which is based on Gaelic in Irish homelands. When they brought English into Gaelic, they did not have the pronunciation /ə/ and instead of it they used r-pronunciation.

To take some examples, the word *start* is pronounced /stɑ:t/ in GA and IE but /sta:t/ in RP. In the former /r/ is pronounced after a vowel. The word *far* in GA and IE is pronounced /fɑ:ə/ but in RP /fa:/. Here /r/ is pronounced at the end of the word. The reason why these two types of pronunciation /r/ are the same in GA and IE because GA received the influenced from IE in pronunciation /r/. Let us give some concrete examples from a

³ *Irish English*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p5.

⁴ *Manual of American English Pronunciation*. New York; Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972, x.

⁵ *Accent of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1982, 218.

British author James Joyce, who was born in Ireland and wrote a novel *Ulysses*.

ours thunder and the seas. Israel is weak and few are her children: Egypt is an host and ierrible are her arms. (*Ulysses*, 137)⁶

Here in the underlined words in this sentence occurs /r/ pronunciation⁷. This is typical /r/ pronunciation often heard in IE.

Next let us focus on the short vowel /a/. This is also another feature of IE pronunciation which GA has in common but RP does not. For example *hot* is pronounced /hat/ in IE and GA, but /hot/ in RP. To confirm this, let us quote the following example form *Finnegans Wake*.⁸

Hey? What all men? Hot /hat/? His tittering daughters of. Whawk? (*Finnegans Wake* 215)⁹

Thus IE and GA have the same pronunciation, and we can think that as for the above points in pronunciation. GA is based on IE.

Fujii (2006) gives common points about IE and GA, they saying that /h/ is lost at the beginning of words like *head*, *hope* and *herb*, which are pronounced /ed/, /oup/, and /ə:b/ respectively. This way of pronouncing was brought into America from Ireland and Irish people brought them from the slums of London too. As a result this pronunciation came to be often heard in America.

3. Irish immigrants

Irish immigrants started to immigrate into America from the seventeenth century and a lot of Irish Americans live in America now. Since they were apprentices or prisoners at first, America was probably the island of banishment for them. In the eighteenth century, the number reached five hundred thousand, who mainly stayed in New York and Boston and that place was called New England. They were also very poor like those in their homeland even in America and they worked under British people there. Irish immigrants increased continuously during the nineteenth century. The number of immigrants reached the peak in the middle of this century. Across the whole of Ireland a Potato Famine broke out in 1845. Potatoes for the Irish were principal food and important products but they were damaged by an unidentified virus and as a result people had a poor harvest. This famine continued for ten years from 1845 until 1854 and took away a lot of lives because of

⁶ *Ulysses*.; Tokyo: Hon-No-Tomohya, 1992.

⁷ I confirmed /r/ pronunciation from Joyce's reading *Ulysses* in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhW0TrzWGml>.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtOQi7xspRc>.

⁹ *Finnegans Wake*. London; Faber& Faber Limited, 1966.

starving. Irish people could not stay in their country and many of them looked for a new world. Through ten years, more than two million Irish people emigrated to America. Irish immigrants reached America, settled in New England and worked under the British people continually. As physical laborers, they worked chiefly for mining, construction of canals, roads and railroads. As the number of Irish immigrants increased, they could not live in New England and they were forced to move west. Therefore they further spread throughout the American continent.

In the later nineteenth century, the third wave of immigration rushed to America mainly from Poland, Turkey, Greece, Italy and Hungary. Those immigrants also engaged in the same physical labor as Irish people did. As a result, Irish were able to have more status than them regarding working. There were two reasons for this. One is that they are white and the other is that they can speak English. They were treated differently from black people at the time of the Civil War and often in the nineteenth century because they were not colored. And they were able to speak English, what is called the weapon of communication, which the immigrants of the third waves did not have. Through their work, they rose in their position using English as the medium between an employer and employee. Reclaiming a wider place they taught English to the third wave of immigrants, which increased the number of Irish-English speakers in America.

The distribution map¹⁰ shows that Irish-Americans have spread almost all over America in 2013. There are four places where the density of their population is high—New York, Boston, Chicago and San Francisco. They have been settling in New York and Boston since their ancestors or the early immigrants lived there. Chicago is the industrial and mining city where they worked. And San Francisco is the gold and coal mining city along the Pacific coast of America and they worked there, too. We are able to find that Irish-Americans widened the territory westwards judging from these situations. As a result, Irish-Americans earned money, with having the third wave of immigrants under themselves, and they spent it on the education for the next generation because they lived in poverty in both Ireland and America and they could not receive any education. Thus people began to appear who played active parts in the political or specialist works. The most famous family is the Kennedy family, particularly John F Kennedy (1917~1963), who assumed the thirty-fifth presidency as a fourth-generation Irish-American. Thus as seen in this example a lot of Irish people came to occupy an important position at work, earn money, and spend it for their children. As they live in a wide area and enjoy political and social activities in

¹⁰ As for the map, see
www.trulia.com/vis/irish-america/

America, Irish English has spread all over America. It is becoming an important linguistic element in American English.

4. Conclusion

Irish people established a basis of American English, therefore American English has many same features as Irish English does, especially in treating sounds /r/, /a/ and /h/. The main reason why American English came to share common features with Irish English is the extra-linguistic one that Irish people came to America as immigrants in the middle of the eighteenth century because of Potato Famine. Irish people raised their position through their language, Irish English. Also they not only used their language but also taught it to the immigrants of the third wave. As a result, Irish English spread all around America.

This time in this paper I focused only on pronunciation, but there are other common elements between these two Englishes. The next focal points would be placed on usage and vocabulary. By means of these investigations, we would be able to get a deeper understanding of influences of Irish English on American English. Irish English changed in America time advanced because it had language contacts with other languages spoken by diverse people living in America. It would be needed to take this into consideration for developing the further discussion of American English.

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