

## Considerations of the present perfect tense in Irish English

Ryo AOYAGI

### Introduction

There are a number of languages spoken and written in Ireland. Of the languages in Ireland, Irish and English are two main languages prominently used in Ireland. Irish is the only language to have originated from within the island while English was first introduced to Ireland in the Norman invasion and spoken by a minority, like a few peasants and merchants brought over from England. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, language shift occurred and replaced Irish with English as the first language for a vast majority of the population. Nowadays, there seems to be only a limited number of people who would claim Irish as their first language and who could be said to be fluent Irish speakers. As the result of the language shift, it is clear that English has now been the predominant first language all over the country. It is of interest to note that English in Ireland has been influenced by Irish Gaelic in one way or another and produced distinguishing characteristics of their own English, quite different from Standard English, which may be called Irish English. Of the characteristics of Irish English, a perfect tense is one of marked grammatical properties. The perfect tense in Irish English is periphrastically formed by *be after doing*, which may correspond to *have past participle* in Modern English. In this paper we shall consider some grammatical properties of the present perfect tense in Irish English, taking account of the historical development of the perfect tense in contrast to that of Modern English.

We usually use a periphrastic form with *have past participle* to express a present perfect tense in Standard English. Irish English does not have the same periphrastic form but a peculiar sequence of *be after doing*, which could have been created from Irish Gaelic as a sort of loan translation. Irish Gaelic does not have the same usage of a perfect tense as that of the periphrastic form in Modern English so that it came to have its own peculiar expression of a perfect tense. Put in different words, Irish English is said to create its own unique periphrastic perfect tense which consists of the similar words in meaning to the periphrastic form in Modern English. *After*, which plays an important role of an aspect marker in the verbal phrase, would signify perfect aspect in Irish English. The verbal perfect aspect phrase, *be after doing*, has become such a stabilized marker in Irish English that we can see the descriptive remark about the usages of it in OED.

It is very interesting to see that Irish people preserve the periphrastic construction out of the country, which can be seen in the works by Irish American writers. For example, Irish American writers such as Eugene Gladstone O' Neill often use the verbal phrase in their own works. Therefore, it is necessary to observe the examples of the verbal phrase in modern American writers, which can be counted as good examples of the verbal phrase which have broken through the borders of the countries in modern times.

### Previous Studies

Former studies show that *be after doing* may be referred to as a transplanted and notable grammatical feature. For example, Raymond Hickey (2000)<sup>1</sup> is the first man who treated the aspectual properties of the verbal phrase for the grammatical status. Former researchers like Filppula, Harris and Kallen did not describe any detail of the phrase because it is too difficult to describe and analyze the grammatical status of the phrase. On the other hand, Japanese author, Fujii Kenzo (2004)<sup>2</sup> accounted for the verbal form. He took up Eugene Gladstone O' Neill as a good example but he unfortunately could not account for any properties about it. He did make a simple list of examples. Also Tamami Shimada (2009)<sup>3</sup> mentioned only an Irish author, William Carlton but she took up *be after doing* phrase pretty well. Her approach was good enough to explain *be after doing* but she did not show us any examples from American writers. We should find more examples on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean and hope that the verbal phrase may be found not only in America but also in other countries in the world where an Irish people can be seen. In this paper we would like to find some examples of the verbal phrase in American writers, in particular, Irish American writers.

### The Grammatical characteristics of *be after doing*

The verbal aspectual form *be after doing* has two important characteristics. One plays a role of a perfect aspect, the other *hot news* or *high informational value*. To compare it with the present perfect tense in Standard English, there come up two outstanding features. First of all, it may be concerned with the perfect aspect. We can see the good role of the verbal aspectual phrase in the following example,

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<sup>1</sup> Palm Hickey Raymond "Models for describing The Celtic Englishes" II. Ed. Hildegard Tristram. Heidelberg: Carl Writer, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Fujii, Kenzo. *Amerika Eigo to Airisizumu*, 『アメリカ英語とアイリシズム』, Tokyo: Chuo Daigaku Syuppan,

<sup>3</sup> Tamami, Shimada. *English in Ireland Beyond Similarities*. Hiroshima: Keisuisha, 2010.

(1) I have seen him.

(2) I am after seein' him.

The both sentences express a perfect aspect. (1) is an example of the perfect tense form in Modern English and (2) an Irish English counterpart, the two forms have almost the same meaning as can be commonly seen in a perfect tense form, but (2) implies the time sphere nearer to the speech time than (1). In other words, Irish English form *be after doing* connotes the time sphere much closer to the speech time when the verbal phrase occurs in the periphrastic form.

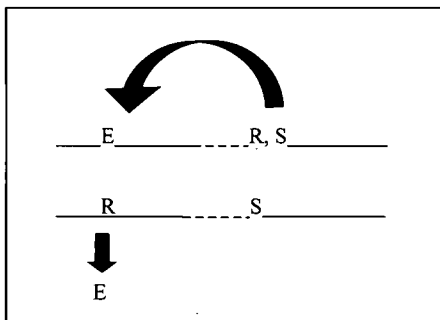
There is an obvious reason why the verbal form *be after doing* has a perfect interpretation in (2). The Irish English form *be after doing* can be used in the sentence with the present perfect interpretation together with a past time expression like *yesterday, this morning, ago* and *last*, which cannot be allowed to occur in Modern English.

(3a) He is after washing the car this morning.

(3b) He washed the car this morning.

Cf. He has washed the car this morning.

Sentence (3a) is a correct sentence in Irish English, but it is allowed to have a perfect sentence containing a time adverbial like *this morning* in Modern English. That is, a present perfect tense may occur with an expression of a point of past time in the same sentence. The grammatical properties of time and aspect in Modern English are conveniently accounted for in a representation of time and aspect proposed by Hans Reichenbach (1947)<sup>4</sup>. According to H. Reichenbach, perfect tense consist of three points of time which are called speech time (S), reference time (R) and event time (E). The following figure is proposed by H. Reichenbach (1947), where it is useful to appeal to the three points: the moment of speech (S), the reference time (R) and the event time (E) in order to account for the present perfect tense as well as the past tense.



<sup>4</sup> Reichenbach, Hans. *Elements of symbolic logic*. New York: The Macmillan. 石本新訳『記号論理学の原理』, Tokyo: Taishukan Syoten, 1982.

Looking at the figure above, it is easy to understand the differences of the time relations formed by the three time points between the past tense and the present perfect tense in Modern English. In the past tense, event time (E) is separated from the two other time points, reference time (R) and speech time (S) on the time axis. On the other, in the present perfect tense, speech time (S) is separated from the two other time points, reference time (R) and event time (E). The present perfect tense has horizontally marked time coverage beginning from past time up to speech time. This is the reason why the time adverbial pointing to a specific past time cannot occur in the present perfect tense in Modern English. But this does not apply to Irish English as can be seen in (3a). Therefore, the verbal periphrastic form in Irish English has different properties from that of Modern English. The descriptive properties in Irish English can be seen in OED, but no systematic explanation can be seen anywhere in grammars, articles and descriptive textbooks.

Why does Irish English adopt a grammatical rule that makes use of the verbal periphrastic form *being after doing* instead of the periphrastic sequence of *have past participle* in order to express the present perfect tense? Why did not they refine the same more brilliant piece of grammatical strategy as can be seen in Modern Standard English? The answer to the questions comes from the grammatical system in Irish Gaelic, lacking of the periphrastic perfect form with the corresponding sequence of *have past participle*. From the historical development of Irish English, it seems that Irish English is a historical product of creolization. At first, Irish Gaelic used to be a native language in Ireland, gradually lost its native status, replaced by English brought over from England ever long afterwards. This historical process produced a creole language, the so-called Irish English that is referred to as a mixed language between Irish Gaelic and English. As the result of this origin, Irish English has doubly marked grammatical properties in the verbal aspect system. It is absolutely necessary that Irish English establishes a little different system from English, as a newcomer language in Ireland. This seems to be the reason why the verbal periphrastic form *being after doing* has established a peculiar characteristic of conveying mixed meanings of present perfect tense and past tense in Modern English.

As we mentioned above, the periphrastic perfect phrase in Irish English has another peculiar role of conveying hot news or having high information value. This is in sharp contrast to that of Modern English because Modern English is lack of this role in the present perfect tense. Consider the following (4), (5) and (6):

- (4) Haven' t you told me?
- (5) Aren' t you after telling me?
- (6) Didn' t you tell me?

(4) and (6) are Standard English sentences, and (5) an Irish English sentence.

Why did Irish English adopt using *have + past participle* form as the way of expressing present perfect? The reason is that Irish English did not have a present perfect form, using *have + past participle* in Irish Gaelic but has the present perfect form using *be after doing* form. After English invaded the island, having *have + past participle* present perfect tense form from Britain, the two types of verbal perfect forms were well concurrently. This means that there is something abundant with it. Therefore they had to be preserved and used since then so that the older type of the verbal perfect form *be after doing* changed to take a middle position between a past tense and a present perfect tense. As the result of the change, the verbal periphrastic form *be after doing* came to imply the two semantic features as can be observed in the two tenses.

Furthermore, there is still another feature of *be after doing* form which plays a role of conveying *hot news* or having *high informational value*. To explain these features, we take up an example from the novelist Roddy Doyle (1958~), who was born in Ireland and awarded the Booker prize for his works of *The Comittments* in 1991.

(7) "I' m after rememberin' – I forget to bring mine back. It' s under me bed." (Doyle, 1991)

This example contains the verbal periphrastic form *be after doing* as in I' m after rememberin' . This sentence has not only a meaning of the speaker' s feelings that one remembered forgetting one' s bag under the bed but also has the additional information of "surprising" or "new information," implying to give us the feelings of being in excitement. Thus this sentence signifies that one has just remembered the form of *be after doing* in the sentence.

In addition, we look at another sentence from Irish poet W. B. Yeats (1865~1939) who was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1923.

(8) " 'he is shouting for more men to come against him,' said Conan, 'for he is just after killing your twelve comrades.' 'That is a sorrowful story' said the Kings son." (W. B. Yeats 1905)

We can see a rhetorical effect of focusing on the important things by putting "just" before *after* in the sentence. It has the effect of *be after doing*, which plays a role of having *high informational value* or conveying *hot news* together with emphasizeers of "just" or "only" in the sentence. Also by emphasizing of the temporal meaning by "exactly" or "just now," *be after doing* comes alive vividly in the sentence. This emphasis has the same effect as in the present perfect in Modern English. Therefore the emphasizeers like "exactly" or "just now" play an important role to have *high informational value*.

Consequently, the *be after doing* form has two semantic features, the *perfective* and the

other is *high informational value* or *hot news*. The *perfective* can represent the perfect at the vocabulary level. As a result it is possible that the event cannot be seen in the present perfect in Standard English which cannot be allowed to occur with the expressing of perfect tense and a point of past one time word like *yesterday*, *this morning*, *ago* and *last*. Moreover *be after doing* has *high informational value* or *hot news*, which emphasizes the simple meaning. In addition, one has the information of additional “surprising” or “new information” with implying to give us the feeling of the being excitement.

### **The historical background of *be after doing***

The usage of the *be after doing* was used around 1600 in Ireland for the first time. At that time they used what is referred to as Early Modern Irish, with *be after doing* preserving the same word sequence of word form until now. In Early Modern Irish used the form *bi iar* +verbal noun, each word corresponds to *bi* is *be*, *iar* is *after* and verbal noun is a gerund in Standard English. The form of *be after doing* is not restricted to the tense that can adopt both present perfect and future perfect in the earlier times. This means that it has changed to the narrow meaning little by little as can be seen in the following examples.

(9) “Fen beggars must be after choosing” (Purgatorium Hibernicum 1675)

(10) “Last year your honour gave me some straw for the roof of my house, and I EXPECT your honour will be after doing the same this year” (Maria edgeworth 1800)

(11) “-Ay, says Joe -Sure I’ m after seeing him not five minutes ago, says Alf, as plain as a pikestaff. -Who’ s dead?” (James Joyce 1922)

(9), (10) and (11) are all examples from Irish authors belonging to different periods. (9) is one of the oldest instances according to OED, (10) is the use as a future perfect in 1800 and (11) was written by James Joyce, who is a famous Irish writer. Therefore the verbal phrase of *be after doing* has been used by Irish authors, but the meaning has narrowed over time. The meaning of *be after doing* realized the desire or future event ever rather than spotlighting the pre-present perfect on the time-sphere. From the historical view point, *be after doing* has been changed little by little in comparison with *have + past participle*.

### **The examples in America**

We have been considering *be after doing* from the view point. All of the examples are quoted from Irish authors. Now there comes a question about the origin of the verbal phrase *be after doing*. Is this *be after doing* used in other worlds? This question can only be answered by giving concrete examples. According to the *OED* we can find the following.

- (12) “The construction is found in Irish English and in varieties of English in other parts of the world (especially North America), which were influenced by Irish English. It is also found in the English of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, where it reflects the equivalent construction in Scottish Gaelic.” (*OED*)

This quotation shows us that *be after doing* influence English varieties in other parts of the world especially in North America, of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. We focus on the variety in “North America” in (12). We look at the instances in North America.

Eugene Gladstone O’Neill (1888~1953) is an Irish American dramatist who is awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1936. Among many of his works, we choose “Anna Christie” (1921) in which the verbal phrases occur. The plot of it is about the main character Anna, who meets her father who left her alone 15 years ago and went to sea. In the ship, Anna met a man whose name is Burke. They fall in love but they had severe experience and cannot be together because of her father’s objects to their relation. This is an examples from *Anna Christie*:

- (13) “BURKE-[Suddenly bending down to her and grasping her arm intensely] Tell me it’s a lie, I’m saying! That’s what I’m after coming to hear you say.” (4)

The verbal phrase *be after doing* is used here for emphasizing the moment when Burke just arrived.

Then we turn to the second example in (14).

- (14) “BURKE-Let you shoot, I’m saying, and be done with it! Let you end me with a shot and I’ll be thanking you, for it’s a rotten dog’s life I’ve lived the past two days since I’ve known what you are, ‘til I’m after wishing I was never born at all!” (4)

We can see the peculiar sequence of present perfect verbal phrase *be after doing* to here we can feel an explosion of strong sentiment that occurs to Burke.

## Conclusion

We have so far considered the verbal phrase *be after doing* in Irish English from several points of view. From the grammatical characteristics of the verbal phrase we come to the conclusion that the verbal phrase has properties peculiar to Irish English different from Standard English. The *be after doing* form have the two semantic features, the *perfective* and the other is *high informational value* or *hot news*. Irish English did not have the present perfect form, using *have + past participle* in Irish Gaelic and then the verbal perfect form *be after doing* changed to take a middle position between the past tense and the present perfect tense. Also the verbal perfect form *be after doing* have *high informational value* or *hot news* in additional information of “surprising” or “new information,” implies.

The verbal form *be after doing* use can be seen in many Irish writers work but we can find this form in Eugene Gladstone O' Neill. One of the verbal form *be after doing* examples is used in North America.

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