

# Syntax and Prosody in Language Contact and Shift

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## *Abstract*

It is true that scholars concentrate on a certain linguistic level in order to reach the greatest depth in their research. But this general stance should not lead to a complete neglect of other levels. When considering a multi-level phenomenon such as language contact and shift, concentration on a single linguistic level can have the unintended and unfortunate consequence of missing linguistically significant generalisations. This is especially true of the main division of linguistic research into a phonological and a grammatical camp, where syntacticians miss phonological generalisations and phonologists syntactic ones. In the present paper the interrelationship of syntax and prosody is investigated with a view to explaining how and why certain transfer structures from Irish became established in Irish English. In this context, the consideration of prosody can be helpful in explaining the precise form of transfer structures in the target variety, here vernacular Irish English. The data for the investigation will consider well-known features of this variety, such as unbound reflexives, non-standard comparatives and tag questions. Furthermore, the paper points out that, taking prosodic patterns into account, can help in extrapolating from individual transfer to the community-wide establishment of transfer structures. In sum, prosody is an essential element in any holistic account of language contact and shift.

## *1. Introduction*

The case for contact should be considered across all linguistic levels. However, those authors who have been examining this recently, Corrigan, Kallen, Filppula, McCafferty, to mention the more distinguished among them, have not as a rule considered phonological factors in their investigations. If one looks at structures which could be traced to transfer from Irish (Hickey 1990: 219), then

one finds in many cases that there is a correspondence between the prosodic structures of both languages. To be precise, structures which appear to derive from transfer show the same number of feet and the stress falls on the same major syntactic category in each language (Hickey 1990: 222). A simple example can illustrate this. Here the Irish equivalent is given which is not of course the immediate source of this actual sentence as the speaker was an English-speaking monolingual.

- (1) a. A... *don't like the new team* at all at all. (WER, M55+)  
[<sub>1</sub> ' ' <sub>1</sub> ' ]
- b. *Ní thaitníonn an fhoireann nua le hA... ar chor ar bith.*  
[<sub>1</sub> ' ' <sub>1</sub> ' ]  
 [not like the team new with A... on turn on anything]

The repetition of *at all at all* creates a sentence-final negator which consists of two stressed feet with the prosodic structure WSWS (weak-strong weak-strong) as does the Irish structure *ar chor ar bith*. This feature is well-established in Irish English and can already be found in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, e.g. in the stories of John Banim (1798-1842) written in collaboration with his brother Michael.

## 2. Unbound Reflexives

Consider now the stressed reflexives of Irish which are suspected by many authors (including Filppula 1999: 77-88) of being the source of the Irish English use of an unbound reflexive.

- (2) *An 'bhfuil 'sé 'féin 'is'tigh 'in'niu?* ‘Is he himself in today?’  
 [INTERROG is he self in today]  
 IrE: ‘Is 'him'self 'in 'to'day?’

The strong and weak syllables of each foot are indicated in the Irish sentence and its Irish English equivalent above. From this it can be seen that the Irish reflexive is monosyllabic and, together with the personal pronoun, forms a WS foot: *'sé 'féin* [he self]. In Irish English the equivalent to this consists of a reflexive pronoun on its own: *'him'self*, hence the term ‘unbound reflexive’ (Filppula 1997 c), as no personal pronoun is present. If both the personal and reflexive pronoun were used in English, one would have a mismatch in prosodic structure: WS in Irish and SWS (*'he 'him'self*) in Irish English. One can thus postulate that the WS pattern of *'him'self* was interpreted by speakers during language shift as the prosodic equivalent of both the personal pronoun and reflexive pronoun of

Irish  $\text{,s}\acute{\text{e}} \text{'f}\acute{\text{e}}\text{in}$  and thus used as an equivalent of this. Later a distinct semanticisation of this usage arose whereby the unbound reflexive came to refer to someone who is in charge, the head of a group or of the house, etc.

Table 1. *Third person unbound reflexives*

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*It was himself that would not go and the reason he gave was he would be in dread I'd have nothing after he going.* (IEL, 1854, County Cork)  
*The following night himself went back there.* (TRS-D, M64-2, M)  
*'Twas himself who answered the phone that time.* (WER, F55+)

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Such unbound reflexives occur most frequently in the third person singular, masculine or feminine. This restriction derives from the discourse scenarios in which an unbound reflexive is used: the focus is on a single person in a discussion between two or more other individuals.

However, there is a related usage in the second person where a reflexive is used without an accompanying pronoun for the purpose of emphasis. This usage is also paralleled by Irish, where *tú féin*, lit. 'you self' (or *sibh féin* in the plural) can be found. As with the unbound reflexives in the third person, Irish uses a pronoun + reflexive which is prosodically equivalent to the bare reflexive in English, i.e. it consists of a SW foot:  $\text{,t}\acute{\text{u}} \text{'f}\acute{\text{e}}\text{in}$ .

Table 2. *Bare second person reflexives in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature*

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*... but, avourneen, it's yourself that won't pay a penny when you can help it ... let us go to where I can have a dance with yourself, Shane ... 'Tis yourself that is,' says my uncle. (William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, 1830-33)*

*Is it yourself, Masther Hardress? ... Faith, it isn't yourself that's in it, Danny ... (Dion Boucicault, *The Colleen Bawn*, 1860)*

*It's yourself that'll stretch Tim Cogan like a dead fowl ... it's yourself that's to see the sintence rightly carried out ... (Dion Boucicault, *Arrah na Pogue*, 1860)*

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In *A Survey of Irish English Usage* the sentence *Himself is not in today* was used to test acceptance of such unbound reflexives. It should be said here that these are regarded as stereotypically Irish, as a stage Irish feature which is avoided nowadays as several respondents in the survey pointed out to the author. The mean acceptance across the 32 counties was 22%. The seven counties with a score higher than 25% were Waterford, Limerick, Tipperary, Galway, Armagh,

Kerry, Kilkenny. Donegal had 19% acceptance and the core Ulster Scots counties of Antrim and Down showed only 5% and 8% respectively. The latter score lends credence to the view that the stressed reflexives of Irish were responsible, via transfer, for the rise of unbound reflexives in Irish English.

### 3. Immediate Perfective

Another example of prosodic match can be seen with the well-known immediate perfective of Irish English which corresponds, in the number of stressed syllables, to its Irish equivalent.

- (3) a. *She's*      *after breaking the glass.*  
                               [<sup>1</sup> |    |    |    |    | ]  
       *Tá sí*        *tréis an ghloine a bhriseadh.*  
                               [<sup>1</sup> |    |    |    |    | ]
- b. *He's*        *after his dinner.*  
                               [<sup>1</sup> |    |    |    | ]  
       *Tá sé*        *tréis a dhinnéir.*  
                               [<sup>1</sup> |    |    | ]

This consists in both languages of three or two feet depending on whether the verb is understood or explicitly mentioned (it is the number of stressed syllables which determines the number of feet). In both languages a stressed syllable introduces the structure and others occur for the same syntactic categories throughout the sentence.

A similar prosodic correspondence can be recognised in a further structure, labelled ‘subordinating *and*,’ in both Irish and Irish English.

- (4) a. *He went out* *and* *it* *raining.*  
           ‘He went out although it was raining.’
- b. *Chuaigh sé amach* *agus* *é* *ag cur* *báistí.*  
           [went he out and it at putting rain-GEN]

Again there is a correlation between stressed syllable and major syntactic category, although the total number of syllables in the Irish structure is greater (due to the number of weak syllables). The equivalence intonationally is reached by having the same number of feet, i.e. stressed syllables, irrespective of the distance between them in terms of intervening unstressed syllables. And again, it is a stressed syllable which introduces the clause.

#### 4. Responses

A prominent feature in Irish is the lack of a word for ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Questions are replied to in the affirmative or negative by using a form of the verb *be*, in the negative if required.

- (5) *An bhfuil tú ag dul go dtí an cluiche amárach?*  
 [INTERROG is you-SG go-NF to the match tomorrow]  
*Tá.* [ta:] [ , ' ]      *Níl.* [n<sup>h</sup>i:l<sup>h</sup>] [ , ' ]  
 [is]                      [not-is]

The single word verb forms are frequently spoken with a fall-rise intonation (indicated by [ , ' ] below), and this was evident in the speech of the informants recorded for *A Collection of Contact English* (a series of recordings made of bilingual Irish speakers by the author during various stays in the Irish Gaeltachtaí).

- (6) *Are you getting support from the EU for sheep farming? (RH)*  
*I am.* [ , ' ] (CCE-S, M60+)

A fall pattern (without the rise in *tá* and *níl*) is found with a stressed short vowel which occurs when negating something in the past.

- (7) a. *An raibh tú riamh i Meiriceá? Ní raibh.* ['] CCE-S, M60+)  
 [were you ever in America]      [not was]  
 b. *Did your brother work on the farm, as well? (RH)*  
*He did not.* ['] (CCE-W, M75+)

#### 5. Comparatives

Yet another case where prosodic equivalence can be assumed to have motivated a non-standard feature, concerns comparative clauses. These are normally introduced in Irish by two equally stressed words <sup>1</sup>ná <sup>1</sup>mar ‘than like’ as in the following example.

- (8) *Tá sé i bhfad níos fearr anois <sup>1</sup>ná <sup>1</sup>mar a bhí.*  
 [is it further more better now      not like      COMP was]  
 ‘It’s now much better than it was.’

Several speakers from Irish-speaking regions, or those which were so in the recent past, show the use of *than what* to introduce comparative clauses.

- (9) a. *It's far better than what it used to be.* (TRS-D, C42-1, F)  
 b. *To go to a dance that time was far better than what it is now.*  
 (TRS-D, C42-1, F)  
 c. *Life is much easier than what it was.* (TRS-D, C42-1, F)  
 d. *They could tell you more about this country than what we could.*  
 (TRS-D, M7, M)

It is true that Irish *mar* does not mean 'what,' but *what* can introduce clauses in other instances and so it was probably regarded as suitable to combine it with *that* in cases like those above. From the standpoint of prosody, <sup>1</sup>*than* <sup>1</sup>*what* provided a combination of two equally-stressed words which match the similar pair in equivalent Irish clauses.

The use of *than what* for comparatives was already established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is attested in many emigrants letters such as those written from Australia back to Ireland, e.g. the following letter from a Clare person written in 1854: *I have more of my old Neighbours here along with me than what I thought* (Fitzpatrick 1994: 69). It is also significant that the prosodically similar structure *like what* is attested in the east of Ireland, where Irish was replaced by English earliest, e.g. *There were no hand machines like what you have today.* (SADIF, M85, Lusk, County Dublin). The following table provides more examples of this structure.

Table 3. *Two-word conjunctions*

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'than what': *I can shop cheaper in Raphoe than what I can do in Letterkenny.* (TRS-D, U18-2, F)

'like what': *There were no machinery in them days like what there is now.* (TRS-D, U41, F)

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### 'Nor' for 'than'

Phonetic similarity and a degree of semantic match can promote transfer, cf. the expression *More is the pity, I suppose.* (TRS-D, M42, M), probably from Irish *Is mór an trua, is dóigh liom.* [is big the pity, is suppose with-me], where Irish *mór* is matched by English *more*.

In comparatives, there would seem to be a similar case of such phonetic influence. This is where *nor* is used instead of *than*. Dolan (1998: 186) mentions this feature in his dictionary, as does Macafee (ed., 1996: 236 *nor*<sup>2</sup>) in the *Concise Ulster Dictionary* and Taniguchi (1956: 42f.) gives examples from literature. The basis for this usage is the Irish conjunction *ná* = [nɑ:] 'than' which is phonetically similar to English 'nor' (the Irish English pronunciation of this would have been with an open vowel: [nɑ:r]).

- (10) *Tá sé níos láidre ná a dheartháir.*  
[is he more stronger than his brother]

*Nor* in the sense of ‘than’ is attested throughout the early modern period. The earliest case is from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and the usage was common well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century as attestations from the Banim brothers and William Carleton show.

Table 4. ‘*Nor*’ for ‘*than*’

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a) Earliest attestation  
 ... *de greatest man upon eart, and Alexander de Greate greater nor he?*  
 (John Dunton, *Report of a Sermon*, 1698)

b) 19<sup>th</sup> century examples  
 ... *bud you, Shamus, agra, you have your prayers betther nor myself or Paudge by far;*  
 (John and Michael Banim, *Tales of the O’Hara Family*, 1825-26)  
 ... *and what was betther nor all that, he was kind and tindher to his poor ould mother ... Jack spoke finer nor this, to be sure, but as I can’t give his tall English ...*  
 (William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, 1830-33)

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The likely Irish provenance is supported by the fact that there are no examples of *nor* ‘than’ in either the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts* or the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence Sampler*. However, the picture is very different in the *Helsinki Corpus of Older Scots*. This is divided into four sub-periods, three of which were examined here: 1500-1570, 1570-1640, 1640-1700. In the 80 files of these sub-periods there were 8 finds for *rather nor* and 6 for *rather than*, 8 finds for *better nor* and 7 for *better than*, and 6 finds for *further/farther nor* and 1 for *farther than*. Representative examples are shown in the following table.

Table 5. ‘*Nor*’ for ‘*than*’ in texts from the *Helsinki Corpus of Older Scots*

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... *sche was assured that I loued hir ten tymes better nor hym; ‘she was assured that I loved her ten times better than him’; *Memoirs of his Own Life by Sir James Melville of Halhill, 1549-1593*; ed. T. Thomson, Edinburgh, 1827.*

*seing they are worthie of credit in a gritter matter nor this alreddy beleuit.* ‘seeing they are worthy of credit in a greater matter than this already believed.’ (1590) *The Works of William Fowler ...*; ed. H.W. Meikle, Edinburgh and London, 1936.

... *albeit I wish yiou neiuer to kenne the mater farder nor sall be speired at yiou.* ‘albeit I wish you never to know the matter farther than shall be speared

at you.’ Alexander, Earl of Dunfermline, Chancellor, to Thomas, Lord Binning, Secretary of Scotland, 26<sup>th</sup> September 1613.

*and he (?) suld make hir far better nor euer sche was?* ‘and he should make her far better than ever she was?’ (1576-1591) *Criminal Trials in Scotland, 1488-1624*; ed. Robert Pitcairn, Edinburgh and London, 1833.

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## 6. Tag questions

There is a high degree of similarity between the tag system in English and Irish. Tags in English are an early modern development, with attestations beginning in earnest in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (though they may well date from much earlier than this). They only assume anything like their modern distribution from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

Tag questions in present-day Irish English are comparable to those in more standard forms of British or American English. They generally keep to the practice of reverse polarity between anchor and tag, e.g. *Her mother is a great singer, isn't she?* (WER, F55+). Positive-positive polarity is found, e.g. *He has to go to England again, has he?* (DER, M60+), though instances of negative-negative polarity do not seem to occur, unless the tag is introduced by *sure*, e.g. *It's not worth your while, sure it isn't?* (WER, F55+).

One respect in which Irish English differs from other varieties is in the use of *is it?* as a question tag, something which is attested abundantly from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. If one considers the situation with English in England then the relative scarcity of *is it?* as a question tag is obvious. There are just two instances in Shakespeare's plays, one is in the 'Four Nations Scene' of *Henry V: It is Captaine Makmorrice, is it not?*, and one in *Twelfth Night* (Act I, Scene V): *From the Count Orsino, is it?* Neither the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts* (early modern section), nor the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence Sampler* has any instances of *is it?* as a tag. This contrasts strongly with the textual record of Irish English. With the major prose writers of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century one finds that *is it?* occurs abundantly as a general question tag.

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### Table 6. 'Is it?' as a general question tag in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Irish English

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*'Where did - I come from, is it?'; 'How am I coming on, is it?'; 'Will I give you the shovel, is it?' (William Carleton, Ned M'Keown)*

*'So Ireland is at the bottom of his heart, is it?'; 'So this is Lord Clonbrony's estate, is it?'; 'So then the shooting is begun, is it?' (Maria Edgeworth, The Absentee)*

*'Myles of the ponies, is it?' (Gerald Griffin, The Collegians)*



‘... a regiment of friars is it?’; ‘That fools should have the mastery, is it?’  
(Samuel Lover, *Handy Andy, A Tale of Irish Life*)

Any verb phrase is possible in the anchor clause as the following examples show. *Blight me, is it?* (John Millington Synge, *The Tinker’s Wedding*, 1909), *Make me, is it?* (John Millington Synge, *The Well of the Saints*, 1905), *You wouldn’t, is it?* (John Millington Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World*, 1907). Indeed the anchor clause often just consists of a noun or noun phrase, e.g. *Shaun, is it?* (Dion Boucicault, *Arrah na Pogue*, 1864), *Your oath, is it?*. *Michael Feeney is it?* (Lady Gregory, *Hanrahan’s Oath*), *A salary, is it?* (Shaw, *John Bull’s Other Island*, 1904), *Liar, is it?* (John Millington Synge, *The Tinker’s Wedding*, 1909), *Mr. Grigson, is it?* (Sean O’Casey, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, 1923).

The Irish model for such usage is the general question tag *an ea?* ‘is it?’ which can be placed at the end of a sentence or phrase, e.g. *Níl sé agat, an ea?* [is-not it at-you, is it] ‘You don’t have it, is it?’ Irish *is ea* has many functions, for instance, in copulative sentences, e.g. *Múinteoir is ea é* [teacher is it he] ‘He is a teacher’ (Ó Dónaill 1977: 467). It is also used to open a sentence, e.g. *Is ea anois, a chairde, tosóimid* [is it now, friends-VOCATIVE, begin-we-FUTURE] ‘Alright, friends, we’ll start now’ (Christian Brothers 1960: 213). It is even used as an opener in questions, e.g. *Is ea nach dtuigeann tú mé?* [is it that not-understand you me] ‘Don’t you understand me?’ (Ó Dónaill 1977: 468). Such instances would seem to be the source of a similar usage in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Irish English as attested by many authors, especially in drama:

- (i) *Is it a cripple like me, that would be the shadow of an illegant gintleman ...*
- (ii) *Is it for this I’ve loved ye?*
- (iii) *Is it down there ye’ve been?*

(Dion Boucicault, *The Colleen Bawn*, 1860).

- (iv) *Is it that I vexed you in any way?*
- (v) *Is it that you went wild and mad, finding the place so lonesome?*

(Lady Gregory, *Hanrahan’s Oath*).

The use of *is it* in sentence-initial and sentence-final position has fared differently in later Irish English. Its occurrence at the beginning of a sentence is not that common, perhaps because it is felt to be stage-Irish, at least typical of writers like Gregory and Synge. At the end of a sentence *is it* can be found quite commonly, consider these attestations from the author’s data collections: *Ye’re going to Spain for a few weeks, is it?* (WER, F50+); *They’re issuing new [parking] discs, is it?* (WER, F75+); *So, he wants to sell the garage, is it?* (DER, M35+); *She wants to study in Dublin, is it?* (RL, F55+).

A peculiarity of the *is it?*-tag in Irish English is that the negative, which would be *is it not?*, does not seem to occur. In the texts by Carleton which were examined in this context there were 42 instances of the *is it?*-tag with only one of the negative tag: ... *that's an island, I think, in the Pacific--is it not?* (William Carleton, *The Black Baronet*). In present-day Irish English, the negative *is it not?* is virtually unknown. This appears strange given that in Irish the negative tag is frequent, e.g. *Tá tú ag foghlaim Gaeilge, nach bhfuil?*, lit. 'is you at learning Irish, not is-it'.

The reason is that the negative tag *nach ea?/nach bhfuil?* 'not it'/'not is-it' did not transfer to Irish English and so is not represented either in 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers or in present-day varieties to any significant extent. The only three instances in the twenty-three 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century drama texts in *A Corpus of Irish English* are all from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* which has no features of vernacular Irish English at all.

There still remains the question of why *nach ea?/nach bhfuil?* did not transfer to *is it not?* although *an ea?* did to *is it?* The reason probably lays in the number of syllables. Both *an ea?* and *is it?* have two syllables but *nach ea?* and *is it not?* differ in that the latter has three, but the former two. The syllable mismatch probably inhibited the transfer of the Irish structure to English during the language shift, another example where prosody, here the number of syllables, played a role in language contact and transfer.

## 7. Conclusion

The conclusion to be drawn from the above examination is that prosodic factors, especially the number of stressed syllables, played a role in the transfer of syntactic structures during the language shift from Irish to English. This shows how different language levels are intertwined and that investigations which only consider one level, or at least those which exclude suprasegmental factors, are likely to miss linguistically significant generalisations in the field of language contact and shift.

## Abbreviations

WER	<i>Waterford English Recordings</i>
DER	<i>Dublin English Recordings</i>
CCE-S	<i>A Collection of Contact English (South)</i>
CCE-W	<i>A Collection of Contact English (West)</i>
TRS-D	<i>Tape Recorded Survey of Hiberno-English Speech – Digital</i>
SADIF	<i>Sound Archives of the Department of Folklore (UCD)</i>
M	Male speaker
F	Female speaker

Age references are approximate, e.g. M75+ refers to a male speaker over 75 years of age, W55+ to a female speaker over 55 years of age.

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