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Palatalization in Dublin Irish: the extent of phonetic interference

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Abstract

This paper focuses on palatalization in Irish spoken by Dublin-based bilinguals with English as their first language. It has already been pointed out that English phonetics affects Irish speakers even when Irish is their first language, especially in case of palatalization. The extent of English influence on palatalization in Dublin Irish and the possible reasons behind its inconsistent use acquire special prominence not only in terms of phonetics, but also because in Irish palatalization performs phonological functions.

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1. Language contact in Ireland

The Irish language currently enjoys a rather controversial status: on the one hand, it is recognised as the first state language of Ireland [A], on the other – due to unfavourable social and extralinguistic circumstances Irish has been in gradual decline since at least mid-19th century (Ó Cuív, 1951). At the same time the language is still regarded by the country's population as a carrier of cultural heritage (Ó Riagáin, 1997) and “a central part of their national identity” (Hickey, 2009, p. 69). English, while being the second official language of Ireland [A], is in fact the language of most Irish people, and for many of them it is the only one they speak. Even those living in Irish-speaking regions, or the so-called *Gaeltachts*, are fluent in English and can easily switch to it when the use of Irish is impossible or unwelcome.

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Irish bilingualism is thus neither stable nor symmetrical – otherwise both languages would have been equally prestigious and had a similar number of speakers (Nelde, 1998, p. 294). As a result, most Irish speakers can nowadays switch to English when necessary, even within one sentence. In sociolinguistics the language of younger generations is often called ‘post-traditional’ or ‘non-traditional’ Irish (Ó Béarra, 2007), and the speakers themselves are referred to as ‘semi-speakers’ (Dorian, 1981; Lenoach, 2012; Ó Curnáin, 2012). They differ from older generations of speakers due to insufficient language competence and noticeable deviations in grammar and pronunciation (Dorian, 1981). Some researchers are even more vocal in their criticism of contemporary Irish, which in their view is “nothing more than an imitation of English” (Ó Béarra, 2007, p. 262). Thus, they insist that monolingual Irishmen would have been unable to communicate with today’s speakers as extensive knowledge of English is essential to understand them.

Interaction and mutual influence between contact languages have long been attested by scholars. Such influence is also known as language interference, or “instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language, i.e. as a result of language contact” (Weinreich, 1953, p. 1). Contact-induced language change requires “some knowledge of a second language at the level of the speaker and certain degree of bilingualism at the level of society” (Gómez Rendón, 2008, p. 25), otherwise innovative forms will not disseminate in the speech community and, consequently, will not affect the system of the language. Linguistic factors facilitating contact-induced change include typological similarity of contact languages, structural gaps, markedness of an element, equivalence of part of speech and frequency of use in the source language. Interference is not reduced to separate languages; in fact, it can also occur between different dialects of one language (Bondarko, 2000, p. 59).

In terms of pronunciation language interference and its extent are defined by a number of factors, including similarity of phonetic systems of the languages in contact (Best, 1995; Flege, 1995) and the age at which the speakers start learning or acquiring the second language (Munro, Flege, and MacKay, 1996; Baker, 2005). Thus, similarity between a sound of the speaker’s second language and a corresponding sound of his/her first language makes interference of the latter more likely (Best, 1995; Baker, 2005). Besides, it is believed that first language interference is more prominent in case of adult speakers (Munro, Flege, and MacKay, 1996; Baker, 2005). Some researchers also state that if a minority language comes into contact with another language, the latter is more likely to exert influence on the former (Seliger and Vago, 1991; Chang, 2010), frequently resulting in their convergence.

As for the current situation in Ireland, it should be pointed out that influence of the more prestigious and widespread English language on Irish occurs much more often than the opposite phenomenon, especially in urban speech (Tristram, 2007). English phonetic interference was already attested in 1990s when Nancy Stenson (1993) discovered that phonological adaptation of English loanwords into Irish was only partial. The fact that such words tended to be preserved in their original form rather than assimilated in accordance with the Irish phonetic system was explained by widespread bilingualism in the country (Stenson, 1993, p. 364). Interestingly enough, the speech of L1 Irish speakers is not free from phonetic interference either (Lenoach, 2012), and it becomes especially clear in the use of palatalization which is not a distinctive feature of English as opposed to Irish (Ó Béarra, 2007). Besides, in case of some speakers English phonemes (such as approximant /r/) can even replace the Irish ones (Ó Curnáin, 2007).

2. Palatalization in Irish

One of distinctive features of the Irish consonant system is the opposition of palatalized and non-palatalized consonants. Depending on the status of velar nasals, Irish has between 31 and 33 phonemes which are shown in the table below (see Table 1).

Table 1. Irish consonant system.

	Labial	Alveolar	Velar	Glottal
Nasals	m m'	n n'	(ŋ ŋ')	
Stops	p p'	t t'	k k'	
	b b'	d d'	g g'	

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