

What I speak is not a dialect of English

The importance of “non-standard English” in Art and Literature

Well, bout ye? Fáilte to this aul lecture. Amn't I quare and glad to be giving this wee speech, especially, as I'm after teaching yousuns for the last lock a' days. So, sit yous there, we'll get a bit of whisht, and ye can listen to me flap my gob, and hopefully I won't get so nervous I'll cowp and end up boking. I'd be wild scundered.

Now for those of you who don't quite understand what I've just said there, I'll break it down a bit for you. But first let me explain. I grew up and still live in Belfast, Northern Ireland. My voice, my accent, my dialect is of that place. However my parents both grew up in farms in the countryside; my father from South Tyrone on the Irish border, my mother in what's called the “Ards Peninsula” - in the South East of Northern Ireland. Some of my accent and dialect come from them. I also have lots of cousins and friends in Dublin and Mayo and Cork and no doubt I've picked up bits and pieces from them. I've also spent a lot of time in England... although I might have subconsciously tried to block out any of that influence in how I speak. So to summarise, all these influences mean I speak Ulster-Hiberno-English. Hieirnia being the Latin for Ireland, literally “The Land of Always Winter” which is lovely... Hiberno-English meaning the English that is spoken in Ireland, and Ulster Hiberno English being the form of Hiberno English spoken in the Northern province of Ulster, where Northern Ireland is.

This dialect has a number of influences. It's obviously heavily shaped by “standard” English. When I say “standard” English I'm generally referring to the English that is taught in schools all over the UK, all over the world really as the “right” or “correct” way to spell, write, speak English - and part of this lecture will be to challenge that assumption. There is no one “correct” way to write or speak English. But that's what I mean when I say standard English. Ulster-English is similar to standard English in that I'm assuming you at least recognized that I was speaking English at the top there. Even if you didn't understand all of the specific vocabulary.

Let's break it down and look at the other influences. First of all it's influenced by the Irish language.



For those who don't know Irish is one of the Gaelic languages, alongside Scottish Gaelic and Manx - spoken in the Isle of man - these are under the umbrella of Celtic languages which also includes Breton, Cornish and Welsh. The English language first came to Ireland in a major way with the Anglo-Norman invasion in the 12th Century. The number of English speakers faded over time, and the Norman settlers were often known as being "more Irish than the Irish themselves" and adopted the culture and language of their new land. It was only later with the Tudors in the 16th Century that English started to become the dominant language on the island. Through conquest, advantages in trading in the English language, and a series of draconian statutes known as The Penal laws - Irish was overtaken by English as the dominant language - however the English that was spoken, and still is spoken in Ireland today, is heavily influenced by that Irish Language, both in vocabulary and grammar. Let's look at vocabulary first.

Well, bout ye? **Fáilte** to this aul lecture. Amn't I quare and glad to be giving this wee speech, especially as I'm after teaching yousuns for the last **lock a'** days. So, sit yous there, we'll get a bit of whisht, and ye can listen to me flap my **gob**, and hopefully I won't get so nervous I'll cowp and end up boking. I'd be wild scundered.

Here we have failte, which literally means welcome in Irish, so just a direct loan word. And Gob, which is the Irish word for the mouth of an animal, or a beak - and is now a loan word for mouth in general. Then we have Lock 'a or "lock of" - meaning "a lot of" - we'll have good lock a pints tonight you might say. From the Irish word loca meaning "a pile of" or "a wad of". Three words there - welcome, mouth and "lot of"

It's also influenced by the grammar of the Irish language. So it's not just loan words, but sentence structure, as Irish people started learning English, they kept many of the grammatical rules of Irish when they started speaking English. Even today you will have people who speak no Irish whatsoever - they will still use these grammatical rules. The Irish language has no verb meaning "to have" - for example in the Irish language you wouldn't say "I have money" the literal translation would be "There is money at me".

Well, bout ye? Fáilte to this aul lecture. Amn't I quare and glad to be giving this wee speech, especially as I'm after teaching yousuns for the last lock a' days. So, sit you there, we'll get a bit of whisht, and ye can listen to me flap my gob, and hopefully I won't get so nervous I'll cowp and end up boking. I'd be wild scundered.

This also applies to talking about the past. In Standard English I could say "I have taught you". But as Irish doesn't have the word "have" this comes into Hiberno-English as "I am after teaching you" - this tense is often called "the hot news perfect tense" - as it's like things are hot off the presses!

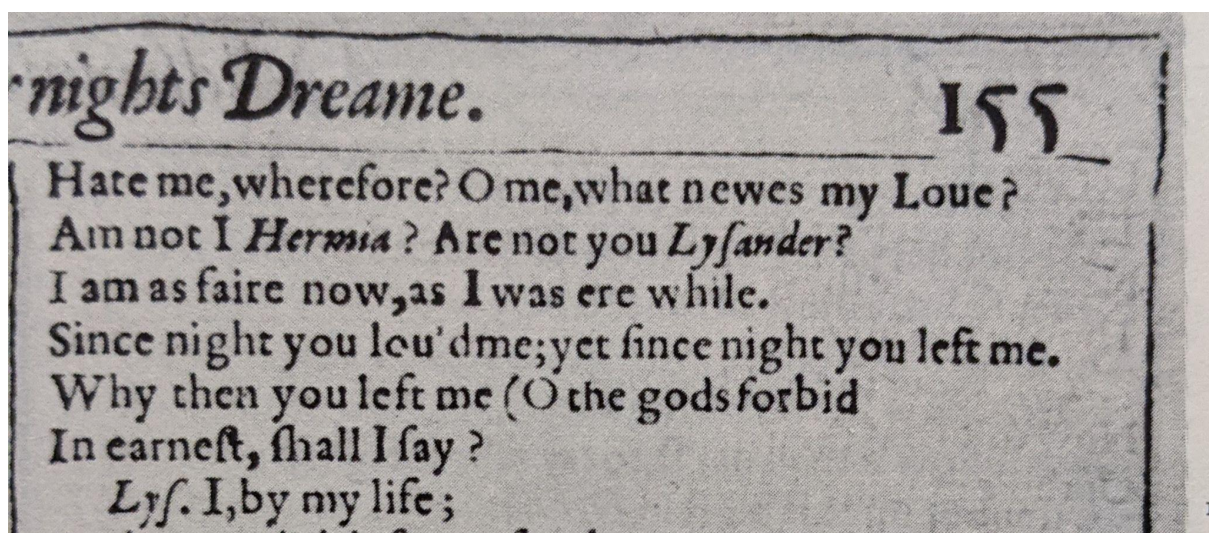
Then the plural "you" or the plural second person pronoun. This might have come from Irish, or literally any other language in the world which has a second person plural pronoun. Even Standard English used to have a singular and plural second person pronoun - "thou" singular and "ye" plural. But now only has the one word to cover both cases "you". In almost every other English dialect around the world you see attempts to rectify this. In the Southern United states you get "y'all", in the Appalachian area you get "yinz" in East Coast America you can get "you guys" "yous guys", Barbados has "wunna" Jamaica has "oona" other Caribbean English dialects have "youall or allyou". And in Ireland there is "ye" "yiz" and particularly in Ulster "yous" or "yousuns" - which you'd also find in Scotland. You also find places where they say "you lot, you mob, you people" - It seems people really want to use a plural second person pronoun.

Then we have words or phrases or grammar which would have been present in standard English in the past, and have since fallen out of use, fallen out of fashion - language is in a way something which goes in and out of fashion after all.

Well, bout ye? Fáilte to this **aul** lecture. **Amn't I** quare and glad to be giving this wee speech, especially as I'm after teaching yousuns for the last lock a' days. So, sit yous there, we'll get a bit of **whisht**, and ye can listen to me flap my gob, and hopefully I won't get so nervous I'll cowp and end up boking. I'd be wild scundered.

So we have “aul” or “auld”- an older form of old. Often used as an intensifier, as it is here. Welcome to this aul lecture, welcome to this old lecture, welcome to this lecture. “Whisht” - quiet, silence - a word which you would rarely hear in The UK or America but is said very often in Ireland.

I find the old grammar quite interesting - so in standard English you would say “aren't I” in Ulster English you would say “amn't I, a contraction of “am not I” which I find very Shakespearean! “Am not I quare and glad!” This is a word order you find very often in Shakespeare. For example in A Midsummer Night's Dream:



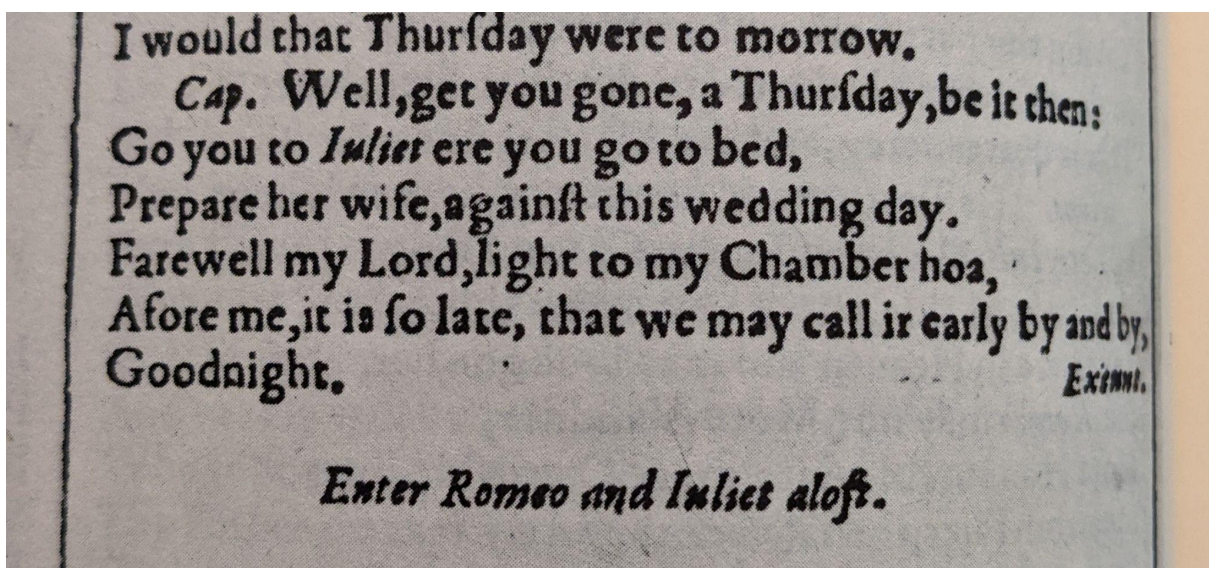
HERMIA

Hate me! wherefore? O me! what news, my love!
Am not I Hermia? are not you Lysander?

In Ulster English “Amn’t I Hermia”? You would hear that on any street in Belfast... well as long as you knew someone called Hermia which admittedly might be quite rare.

Well, bout ye? Fáilte to this aul lecture. Amn’t I quare and glad to be giving this wee speech, especially as I’m after teaching yousuns for the last lock a’ days. So, sit yous there, we’ll get a bit of whisht, and ye can listen to me flap my gob, and hopefully I won’t get so nervous I’ll cowp and end up boking. I’d be wild scundered.

And another grammatical structure familiar to Shakespeare would be the addition of “you” or “yous” after verbs when giving orders. “Go you there!” “sit you down” “shut you up”. A lovely example from Romeo & Juliette.



CAPULET

Wife, go you to her ere you go to bed.

So... I'm not saying that Ulster speakers are all by their nature wonderful Shakespearean actors... although I obviously am... but there are certain elements to the way we speak which makes Shakespeare make slightly more sense to me than it would to someone who spoke Cockney for example.

We also have words that come from The Scots language - or Ulster Scots when it is used in Ulster. This is where you get into the arguments between "what is a language and what is a dialect" - the famous phrase "a language is simply dialect with an army". Scots is either a very distinct dialect of English, or it is a language which shares the same root language as English - Alngo-Saxon - and developed down its own path to become its own unique language. Rabbie Burns the famous Scottish Poet who wrote Aul Lang Syne - he wrote in Scots. From which we get the wonderful "ode to the haggis"

Fair fa' your honest, sonsie face,
Great chieftain o the puddin'-race!
Aboon them a' ye tak your place,
Painch, tripe, or thairm:

Translated into Standard English would be

Good luck to you and your honest, plump face,
Great chieftain of the sausage race!
Above them all you take your place,
Stomach, tripe, or intestines:

The Scots language came over to Ulster during the Ulster plantations when Scottish Families, mostly Protestants, were moved into Ulster and given the best land, in order to subdue the local Catholic population. The language that they spoke developed and became "Ulster Scots" - again there is fierce argument as to whether or not this is a language or a dialect. But it gives us the wonderful ulster scots phrase:

“The biggest prata is gai affen boase in the middle.”

It means the same as “not all that glitters is gold” and literally means...

“The biggest potato is very often hollow in the middle”. Which I think is just lovely.

Well, bout ye? Fáilte to this aul lecture. Amn't I quare and glad to be giving this **wee** speech, especially as I'm after teaching yousuns for the last lock a' days. So, sit yous there, we'll get a bit of whisht, and ye can listen to me flap my gob, and hopefully I won't get so nervous I'll **cowp** and end up **boking**. I'd be wild **scundered**.

Now if we go back to my opening phrase - ulster scots words in here would be “wee” meaning small - but generally used as a filler word in Ulster English. Anyone who tries to buy anything at a supermarket will hear “you want to pop your wee card in the wee machine there and enter your wee pin when you're ready”. We also have “cowp” meaning to fall over. Scundered meaning embarrassed. And Boking or “boke” which means to be sick or to vomit, which is personally my favourite word in the whole world. It is wonderfully onomatopoeic. Boke. These all come from scots.

Finally there's a few words / phrases which are hiberno English words which don't seem to have a unique throughline to another language - they are their own thing.

Well, bout ye? Fáilte to this aul lecture. Amn't I quare and glad to be giving this wee speech, especially as I'm after teaching yousuns for the last lock a' days. So, sit yous there, we'll get a bit of whisht, and ye can listen to me flap my gob, and hopefully I won't get so nervous I'll cowp and end up boking. I'd be wild scundered.

Well as a greeting. Well to mean hello. Well. That would be quite common around the border regions - South Armagh, South Down, Louth. "Bout 'ye?" a contraction of "What about you" meaning "how are you". "Well, bout ye" - "Hello, how are you" - "Quare" a corruption of "queer" which is used as an intensifier, normally with an "and". Quare and happy, quare and sad. Very happy, very sad. And "wild" or "while" without the d which is again another intensifier - used in the same way as "very". While scundered - very scundered - very embarrassed.

So there we go - that is my opening paragraph explained. Complete with etymologies and reasonings for how I speak. I'll say the whole thing again now that you know what it all means and where it's all came from.

Well, bout ye? Fáilte to this aul lecture. Amn't I quare and glad to be giving this wee speech, especially as I'm after teaching yousuns for the last lock a' days. So, sit yous there, we'll get a bit of whisht, and ye can listen to me flap my gob, and hopefully I won't get so nervous I'll cowp and end up boking. I'd be wild scundered.

But why should you care? Why are we talking about all this and why does understanding what I just said help anyone? Unless you are all planning on penning your mangum opus about a young lad from Belfast - in which case I'm glad I could help.

Well the main reason I wanted to go through all that was to show that what I spoke at the top of this lesson is not “bad English” - it might be different to “Standard English” but it’s not bad or incorrect, it’s simply different. If I was to present that in front of my teacher at school for example or if my parents heard me speaking like that - I might have been told that is “incorrect” or “wrong”. As Seamus Heaney says in his poem “‘Clearances’

I’d naw and aye
And decently relapse into the wrong
Grammar which kept us allied and at bay.

It’s not wrong grammar, and Heaney knew it wasn’t wrong grammar. He was a master of Ulster-English. It follows a set of rules which are agreed upon by those who speak that dialect. Like all languages or dialects. It’s not something that I plucked out of thin air - and indeed many of the rules and influences have a long and important history. And this is the same with any dialect of English. As well as Ulster English in Ireland we have Cork English, D4 Dublin English - in the UK there’s Scottish English, Brummie, Geordie, Lancastrian, Essaxon, Kentish, Multicultural London, Bristolian - and then you go around the world - Jamaican Patois, AAVE, Indian English, Appalachian English, MidAtlantic, Hawaiian Pidgin, Hong Kong English, Sierra Leonean English, Australian Aboriginal English, Maori English, Torres Straight English - there are as many English dialects as there are countries the English have invaded... which means there’s a bloody lot of them!

There’s an interesting dialect of English which has developed amongst staff who work for the EU - normally called Euro English - it is very jargon heavy - for example “boss” is normally said as “hierarchical superior” - which shows how it has its origins as a bureaucratic language. It also “corrects” for want of a better word - “false friends” between English and other European languages. False friends are words which sound the same but have different meanings.

So in standard English where you would say “current” - so our “current head of sales is John” in Euro English you say

“our actual head of sales is John”

Because “actual” sounds more similar to German aktuell, Dutch actueel, French actuel, Spanish actual, Portuguese atual, Italian attuale, Czech aktuální, Polish aktualny. These words all mean “current” in standard English, so in Euro English they change the meaning of “actual” to mean “current”.

So hopefully I have convinced you, if you needed convincing, that dialects of English have as much history as many rules and conventions as “Standard English” - grand - but why should we celebrate them? Just because they are complex and detailed doesn't mean we should champion them. But I believe we should. Here's why.

And my arguments for using, highlighting, celebrating, teaching various dialects of English through novels, plays, just through using speech - can sort of be broken down into three sections - and they all have different sort of angles or takes on it.

1. Useful from writer's Point of View - The more specific you are, the more universal you are.

So this is advice I would give to any writer. It's advice I've been given before. “Be more universal by being more specific.” It seems paradoxical, but the more specific your writing is, the more that you try and fully capture a piece of truth in a very specific instance, often the more it resonates with people - even if they are so far removed from that specificity. The more you try and water something down, the more you try to paint things in broad brush strokes - the less realistic it will become and the less people will care. Writers sometimes don't want to alienate readers or viewers who don't share the same experience as them - this is often the case with Irish writers bringing work to the UK or English writers bringing work to America - but you'll just end up with something that isn't authentic to anywhere and no-one believes in. Take for example the number of US remakes of UK sitcoms which have all failed spectacularly eg: The Inbetweeners. It in particular captured a very specific British Suburban teenage experience - when they tried to remake it and put it in an American setting it just failed. It wasn't specific to American suburban teenage experience - unlike the film superbad - which was a homegrown American film about the US Suburban teenage experience - and was hugely successful.



There's a Belfast play. It's called "Man in the Moon" by Pearse Elliott. It's set in Lenadoon housing estate in West Belfast, and deals with a newly unemployed man reminiscing about friends and family who have killed themselves. It's also a comedy, it's hilarious. But it is a frank discussion about suicide in West Belfast. It's fully written in a West Belfast vernacular and the script is littered with obscure references and shout outs to West Belfast. The theatre company brassneck took that show on tour to America. I was told by the director that they spoke to many people who didn't have any knowledge of Belfast or the Troubles or anything, and he said what always stuck with him was an elderly couple from Harlem who said "We didn't get it all... but we got it all". Meaning they didn't understand all the references or the specific words from the West Belfast dialect - but they fully understood the emotional truth behind everything. The more honest you are to your place and your characters - including their dialect - the easier it will be to get the emotional truth.

Here's another one, it's not just emotional truth - as writers we should be trying to delight and surprise and dazzle the reader or the listener. And if we stick to "Standard English" - the English of politicians, the English of schoolteachers and news readers and CEOs - there is no delight in that. Give me the language of coal miners and fishermen and farmers, and aul lads propping up a bar stool and young kids in the school yard - that's where language sings. That's where you can find the turns of phrase which make you stop and think, and smile. Don't have a character say "He'd talk about his winnings but not about his losses" when they can say the wonderful phrase told to me by a man on the Irish border "He'd tell ye how much he won at the bingo but he wouldnae tell ya how much he spent at the bingo". It's just wonderful, it's beautiful, I love it. I do think the Irish pride ourselves in our strange command of English - we batter and abuse the language until it does what we want it to. There's a wonderful quote from a review of Irish writer Brendan Behan's play "The Borstal Boy" - "The English language brings out the best in the Irish. Rarely has a people paid the lavish compliment and taken the subtle revenge of turning its oppressor's speech into sorcery."

But I think that's not just in Irish, I think if you look at any local dialect around the world you will find equally wonderful turns of phrase and interesting ways of speaking which can help you delight the reader.

As well as the joy and delight in dialects - specific language can paint a picture so much faster and clearer than standard English. Look at the opening to *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh:

THE SWEAT WIS lashing oafay Sick Boy; he wis trembling. Ah wis jist sitting thair, focusing oan the telly, tryin no tae notice the cunt. He wis bringing me doon. Ah tried tae keep ma attention oan the Jean-Claude Van Damme video.

Immediately when I read that I am transported to a tiny flat in Scotland. There is no messing around there. You get the character, you get what he's about, you know where you are. Say for example he wrote the opening paragraph like this:

The sweat was pouring off Sick boy. He was trembling. I was just sitting there focusing on the television, trying not to notice the cunt. He was bringing me down. I tried to keep my attention on the Jean-Claude Van Damme video.

I mean you kind of get it? But it's not as immediate, you're not as quickly drawn/ So from a very practical point of view, as a writer, the language you use can paint a picture and the language your characters use can say so much. What they say, the words they use, the words they don't use, their grammar - that will tell your audience more about your character than a million descriptions. Particularly in writing dialogue - we are often trying to capture how real people speak - how can you do that if you don't understand the dialect of those real people?

And my second point is a bit grander I suppose, a bit more lofty.

2. Participation in Society

This is more esoteric I suppose. But I genuinely believe that in order to participate fully in a culture, you need to see yourself represented in your culture's media. Or maybe not media but... you need to see yourself reflected in those who have power, or you will never believe that you can have power or you will be able to hold power. Language, dialect, accent - that is a very strong part of people's identity. It really is "who you are". If you are constantly being told by teachers or authority figures - that how you speak is "wrong" - either directly as in "don't talk like that" or indirectly as in, not seeing or hearing anyone with your voice speak in parliament or present a radio station - that is severely going to knock your confidence. Or what it will do is make you turn away from "mainstream culture" and towards other subcultures which value you and value how you speak.

I'm going to show a tweet from Digby Jones, a member of the British House of Lords commenting on Alex Scott, a former professional football player and current television presenter - who's from East London after she presented some coverage on the BBC of the recent Olympics.



Lord Digby Jones

@Digbylj



Enough! I can't stand it anymore! Alex Scott spoils a good presentational job on the BBC Olympics Team with her very noticeable inability to pronounce her 'g's at the end of a word. Competitors are NOT taking part, Alex, in the fencin, rowin, boxin, kayakin, weightliftin & swimmin

6:44 PM · Jul 30, 2021 · Twitter for iPad

550 Retweets 5,013 Quote Tweets 4,983 Likes

Referring there to the East London vernacular of dropping Gs at the end of words. Now this annoyed me, this riled me up - here is a man who holds a lot of political power broadcasting to the thousands of people who drop their "G"s at the end of words - a perfectly valid dialectical feature - saying that they are wrong. They're not wrong. So I had to respond to him. This is what I said.



Michael Patrick @micktheejit · Jul 31



Enough! I can't stand it anymore! People who speak in RP accents spoil good presentational jobs on the BBC Olympics Team with their very noticeable inability to pronounce their 'r's at the end of a word. Competitors are NOT referred to as a "runnah, rowah, boxah & swimmah"



Lord Digby Jones @Digbylj · Jul 30

Enough! I can't stand it anymore! Alex Scott spoils a good presentational job on the BBC Olympics Team with her very noticeable inability to pronounce her 'g's at the end of a word. Competitors are NOT taking part, Alex, in the fencin, rowin, boxin, kayakin, weightliftin & swimmin

[Show this thread](#)

Referring to people with RP accents (posh english accents) as such that Digby Jones would have - and their inability to pronounce Rs at the end of words, it is a non rhotic accent. It's all dialects, some just have more prestige than others - which is absurd. This extends to all aspects of life. There is a real shame and class issue around dialects, particularly in the UK. Which I do not like.

I want to share with you now a great poem by Black Country Poet Liz Berry - Homing - where she talks about her relationship to accent. The Black Country accent in particular. How her mother was too ashamed to use her accent and how she wishes she would.

Audio here: <https://poetryarchive.org/poem/homing/>

Homing (2014)

Liz Berry

For years you kept your accent
in a box beneath the bed,
the lock rusted shut by hours of elocution
how now brown cow
the teacher's ruler across your legs.

We heard it escape sometimes,
a guttural uh on the phone to your sister,
saft or blart to a taxi driver
unpacking your bags from his boot.
I loved its thick drawl, g's that rang.

Clearing your house, the only thing
I wanted was that box, jemmied open
to let years of lost words spill out –
bibble, fittle, tay, wum,
vowels ferrous as nails, consonants

you could lick the coal from.
I wanted to swallow them all: the pits,
railways, factories thumping and clanging
the night shift, the red brick
back-to-back you were born in.

I wanted to forge your voice
in my mouth, a blacksmith's furnace;
shout it from the roofs,
send your words, like pigeons,
fluttering for home.

Now this idea of belonging or respecting class... This is obviously a bigger issue than accents and dialects. It comes up in policing for example, if the police force in a certain area all look and talk a certain way, come from the same background - and the community they police are from a different background - that's going to cause issues. Ultimately people need to feel like their culture and identity are respected and represented in the wider cultural conversation. And you know, I'm not in charge of police force hiring policy, nor can I try to ensure there are more female MPs or CEOs from different ethnic backgrounds - but I am a writer, so one thing I can try to do is to make sure that when I write and when I write characters is that they talk in underrepresented voices.



So for my last play for example I toured the Irish border. An area which has been thrown into the spotlight due to Brexit, the area which has the potential to be the most affected by a hard border if the British Government chose to get rid of article 16 - and an area which will have it's fate decided by people who live hundreds of miles away in London, an an area which is often underrepresented in media. I toured the Irish border, interviewed over 100 people from this specific rural area of Ireland, and turned their voices into a play. It might not change the world, but for the rural people who saw the play it hopefully made them feel connected to the cultural conservation, and for those from Belfast, Dublin or London who saw the play - it hopefully made them think about the people who live on the border just a little bit.

3. Preserving Culture

This is my final point on this. So for better or for worse, English is at the moment the world's lingua franca. It is the most spoken language in the world and the third most spoken native language in the world. This is what happens when you have the British Empire spreading the language around the world initially, followed by the huge global superpower of the United States - both as a cultural superpower and an economic one - pushing the spread of English

around the world. Now this is obviously a double edged sword. If we are to live in a globalised world - we need to communicate. And in the absence of a true neutral language, Esperanto never really took off, why shouldn't it be English? It's a language like any other, and with a lot of people speaking it we can communicate with as many people as possible.

However language isn't just a method of communicating, it shapes how we think. Once we put words to an idea, that idea is cemented into our thinking, and other ideas are weakened. An example that is often cited is Kayardild, a language spoken in northern Australia, requires a speaker to continually orient themselves according to the cardinal directions. Where an English speaker would orient things according to their own perception – my left, my right, my front, my back – a speaker of Kayardild thinks in terms of north, south, east and west. As a consequence, speakers of Kayardild (and those of several other languages that share this feature) possess “absolute reckoning”, or a kind of “perfect pitch” for direction. They always know where the cardinal directions are. It also means removing one's self as the main reference point for thinking about space. As Evans, a scholar of this language, writes, “one aspect of speaking Kayardild, then, is learning that the landscape is more important and objective than you are. Kayardild grammar literally puts everyone in their place.”

Another example of this is the Irish language - where we talk about emotions. In the Irish language if you wanted to say “I am sad” you would say “Ta bron orm” which means “there is sorrow on me” - it can also be used in the same way as “i am sorry” - “There is sorrow on me”. This way of thinking, of thinking as emotions being things that are “on you” on “at you” rather than sadness being something that you are inherently. I am sad. There's a school of thinking that this quirk of language means it is easier to think of yourself as separate from your emotions - which can be very helpful when dealing with issues around mental health for example.

So as the English language spreads around the globe, like a linguistic McDonalds, getting rid of local languages and installing its own - what wonderful ways of thinking will we lose? What useful, different interesting ways of thinking and communicating will be lost forever?

Now obviously one way to prevent this is to encourage minority languages, it is to encourage and promote and put funding into the preservation and teaching of lots of different languages. However, I maintain that another way to do this is to steal and pilfer those other ways of thinking from our other languages and put them back into English. Why can't English speakers try and use the cardinal directions at all times? Or say "I have sadness on me"? Or in other words if the Irish Language is going to die, I may damn well make sure that the English I speak is as Irish as possible. As the English language spreads around the world it will not just replace other languages, it will become infected by them, and we must embrace this infection. The very fact that English is the world's lingua franca means the English no longer own it, and nor do the Americans - nobody owns it because it belongs to everyone. And if it belongs to everyone, everyone is free to do with it as they choose. To paint it mad colours, smash it's windows in, break it in half and glue it back together upside down and back to front. And it is that malleability that makes it perfect fun to play around with as a writer.

ALEC MCGOWEN STEPHEN REA
JAMES McDANIEL
in
SOMEONE WHO'LL
WATCH OVER ME
Written by
FRANK MCGUINNESS

I'm going to end on reading a passage from Someone Who'll Watch Over Me by Frank McGuinness, who is a playwright from county Donegal in the North West of Ireland. This play is based on the memoir of Brian Keenan, who was a Belfast writer held hostage in Lebanon in the late 80s. This section is dialogue between Michael, an English character and Edward, an Irish character.

MICHAEL: Honestly, the Irish have the most attractive accent but their coarseness is so self-defeating. Without it, I do believe they would have the most beautiful dialect of English.

EDWARD: Dialect?

MICHAEL: Hiberno-English can be quite a lovely dialect. Those Elizabethan turns of phrase, those syntactical oddities, which I believe owe something to Gaelic, the sibilants –

EDWARD: You called it a dialect.

MICHAEL: It is a dialect. Hiberno-English.

EDWARD: What I speak is not a dialect of English.

MICHAEL: Then what do you call it? Portuguese?

EDWARD: Call my language what you like. It is not a dialect of English.

MICHAEL: You are a profoundly ignorant man.

EDWARD: Am I? Listen, times have changed, you English mouth, and I mean mouth. One time when you and your breed opened that same mouth, you ruled the roost, you ruled the world, because it was your language. Not any more. We've taken it from you. We've made it our own. And now, we've bettered you at it. You thought you had our tongues cut out, sitting crying in a corner, lamenting. Listen. The lament's over. We took you and your language on. We took you and your language on, and we won.

Thank you very much.