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Current Conversation Patterns in the Republic of Ireland

Abstract

Twelve informants who completed a SICS questionnaire demonstrated that although Irish people still favour a combination of negative and positive politeness, as well as off-record communicative strategies, bald-on-record strategies are also becoming more frequently used. Irish greetings tend to be quite inventive and are often used only in Ireland. Small talk in Ireland is frequent; however, many informants indicated that it is most likely to occur in older generations. A popular small talk topic in Ireland is politics. Although it is a topic which is viewed as a taboo in many other nations, in Ireland it is acceptable to discuss the topic openly. It is unlikely that if one rings an Irish household that the person who answers the telephone will answer with more than just *Hello?* If you receive an invitation from an Irish friend, it is unlikely that this is more than just a polite phrase unless time and date are specified. At the end of a conversation one is most likely to hear an off-record response such as "I don't want to bother you any longer". However saying what one has to do now (if there really is something) or a phrase like "I have to go now, I have something else to do" are bald-on responses which are becoming more frequent. In Grice's terms the Irish come closest to the maxim of quantity, make your contribution as informative as possible without it being overly informative.

Sommaire

L'analyse des réponses données par douze personnes ayant rempli un SICS-questionnaire a montré que même si les Irlandais préfèrent toujours une combinaison de politesse négative et positive ainsi que des stratégies communicatives du type *off-record*, les stratégies du type *bald-on-record* deviennent de plus en plus fréquentes. Les salutations irlandaises ont tendance à être plutôt inventives et souvent ne sont utilisées qu'en Irlande. Le Small Talk est fréquent en Irlande ; pourtant, beaucoup de gens ont indiqué qu'il était le plus répandu parmi les générations vieilles. Un sujet typique du Small Talk en Irlande, c'est la politique. Même s'il est un sujet qui est considéré comme tabou dans beaucoup d'autres pays, en Irlande, il est accepté d'en discuter librement. Il n'arrive que rarement que, si on appelle un Irlandais à la maison, celui-ci dise plus que « Hello ? ». Si on reçoit une invitation d'un ami irlandais, il est peu probable que ce soit autre chose qu'une formule de politesse, sauf si l'autre donne l'heure et la date spécifiques. A la fin d'une conversation, on peut s'attendre à une réponse *off-record*, telle que « Je ne veux pas vous ennuyer pendant plus longtemps ». Cependant, il devient plus usuel de dire ce qu'on a à faire maintenant (si on a vraiment quelque chose à faire) ou de dire simplement « Il faut que j'y aille, j'ai autre chose à faire », ce qui seront donc des réponses de *bald-on*. En appliquant la terminologie de Grice, les Irlandais sont le plus proches de la maxime de quantité : donne autant d'informations que possible sans être trop informatif.

Zusammenfassung

Die Auswertung der Antworten von zwölf Informanten, die einen SICS-Fragebogen ausfüllten, zeigten, dass, obwohl die Iren immer noch eine Kombination aus negativer und positiver Höflichkeit sowie off-record-Strategien bevorzugen, bald-on-Strategien immer häufiger gebraucht werden. Irische Grußformen sind oft originell und werden meistens nur in Irland gebraucht. Small Talk ist in Irland sehr häufig, wobei die meisten Informanten darauf hinweisen, dass er am häufigsten bei den älteren Generationen vorkommt. Ein beliebtes Small-Talk-Thema ist die Politik. Während es in anderen Ländern oft als Tabu-Thema gesehen wird, ist es in Irland voll akzeptabel das Thema offen zu diskutieren. Es ist unwahrscheinlich, dass bei einem Anruf ein Ire sich mit mehr als *Hello?* meldet. Wenn man eine Einladung von einem irischen Freund bekommt ist es unwahrscheinlich, dass dies mehr als eine Höflichkeitsfloskel ist, außer, wenn der andere eine genauere Zeit und ein genaueres Datum gibt. Am Ende einer Unterhaltung hört man oft eine *off-record*-Erwiderung wie "Ich will dich nicht länger stören". Allerdings sind auch Erwiderungen wie "Ich muss noch etwas machen" (wenn es wirklich der Fall ist) oder "Ich muss los, ich habe noch zu tun" Strategien, die immer häufiger gebraucht werden. Innerhalb der Begriffe von Grice sind die Iren der Quantitätsmaxime am nächsten: Gestalte deinen Redebeitrag so informativ wie möglich, ohne dass er zu viele Informationen enthält.

1. Background

Traditionally, studies in relation to the lexicon, morphology and syntax of Irish English are plentiful; however, up until 2005 studies into conversational strategies and politeness norms in Ireland were much less frequent.

The first study in relation to either of these topics was on politeness in Ireland and was carried out by Jeffrey L. Kallen in the early 1990's. The conclusions and results of his studies were published in *Politeness in Europe*, edited by Leo Hickey and Miranda Stewart (2005). In his article, titled "Politeness in Ireland: 'In Ireland, It's Done Without Being Said'", Kallen stated that in order to comprehend "the full characterisation of Irish politeness [one] must consider the contradiction between the competing demands of silence as a face need, which will tend to favour negative politeness strategies, and the demands of what I term hospitality and reciprocity, usually favouring positive politeness." (Kallen: 2005: 131). Kallen also referred to the frequency of usage of off-record strategies in relation to politeness in Ireland (Kallen: 2005: 130-143).¹

Similar to this current *JELiX* project, *Politeness in Europe* also presented data in relation to a number of European countries. However it differed given the fact that each study was conducted using a different research method and focusing upon different aspects of politeness. For this reason the usage of a consistent method, i.e. *semi-expert interview on communicative strategies* (SICS) questionnaires, ensures that the comparison of data in the current handbook is an easier task. Also the current project focuses not on speech acts, more specifically: 1. greeting, 2. addressing, 3. small talk, 4. making an argument, 5. making and turning down an offer and 6. ending a conversation.

A second publication, this time focusing exclusively on Ireland, is *The Pragmatics of Irish English*, edited by Anne Barron and Klaus Schneider (2005). Although politeness norms and communication in Ireland are discussed, it does not deal with the issues of small talk or ending a conversation. This study will bridge this gap and enable us to compare the current situation in Europe, not only in different countries, but also in different nations, more effectively.

Raymond Hickey also refers to aspects of the "Pragmatics of Irish English" briefly in his publication *Irish English* (Hickey 2007). In 2006 Anne Barron published an article titled *Requesting in Irish English and English English: A Study of Intra-Lingual Regional Pragmatic Variation*, in which she carries out a cross-cultural pragmatic analysis of Irish English and English English (Barron: 2006). This was followed in 2008 by an article titled *The Structure of Requests in Irish English and English English*. In this article, as in the previous one, Barron once again attempts to differentiate between Ireland and England as regards language in use and what is considered polite in both countries. (Barron: 2008: 35). The study concluded "Irish English and English English requests to be remarkably similar on the level of the strategy chosen." (Barron: 2008: 56). She also refers to the "high level of autonomy in the Irish and English cultures, a characteristic which necessitates attention to the negative face of the hearer." Barron concludes that the only significant difference between Irish English and English English in relation to requests is "a more indirect request in Irish English". In one particular situation accessed it was seen that "Irish English head-act requests are characterised by a higher level of internal mitigation and a lower level of up-grading than the English head-acts." (Barron: 2008: 56). Barron also draws on the conclusions of Kallen's

¹ The terms *on-record strategies*, *off-record strategies*, *positive politeness* and *negative politeness* are used in Brown and Levinson's sense (1987).

research (as referred to above), which show Irish English “to be generally indirect.” (Barron: 2008: 57-58).

Barron states the fact that this is one of the first studies in relation to the comparison of the differences as regards the pragmatics or language usage of Irish English and English English and that studies in this field to date are “rather limited” (Barron: 2008: 35). She also states that as the scope of this current study is quite narrow it is difficult to draw a precise conclusion as regards exactly how similar or different the pragmatics of Irish English and English English may be and “that further research is needed to confirm or refute these generalised tendencies.” (Barron: 2008: 59).

All of these works have been published since 2005 showing us that studies as regards the pragmatics of Irish English and politeness in Ireland are growing. However, up until now there has still been a notable gap in relation to research into small talk and closing a conversation. In this current project we attempt to close this gap.

2. Data Collection

In order to collect data the SICS questionnaire (as published in this edition of *JELiX* [Grzega/Schöner 2008]) was edited (some additional questions were added) and uploaded onto the *Surveypro*² website. The use of this software enabled the author to reach a wider audience, as she was not living in Ireland at the time this study was carried out. E-mails were forwarded to professors, as well as current and former language students at the University of Limerick, the National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG) and Trinity College Dublin. EFL teachers at language schools across the country were also contacted. These groups were specifically targeted as they were considered to be in the best situation to access the current situation as regards communicative strategies in Ireland. The contents of the e-mail explained the project and requested that the recipient fill in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was accessible by clicking on a link to the *Surveypro* site, which opened the relevant questionnaire for the informant. There was a rather low overall level of response from professors and students alike, but the answers received allow us to draw a first picture nevertheless.

Twelve questionnaires were fully completed, twenty-one partially. For the purpose of this analysis, and in order to make use of all collected data, the relevant information from all twenty-one surveys has been used. The average age of informants was twenty-three, the youngest informant being twenty-one, the eldest twenty-eight. Although this means that the informants may show a bias in favour of the younger generation, it also makes for an interesting comparison to Kallen’s results from the early 1990’s (2005), as we can see new trends emerging within the younger generation who would not have been accessed in the previous study. 58% of the informants were male, the remaining 42% female. 53.84% of informants were students, 15.38% EFL teachers, 11.53% journalists, 11.53% other and 3.8% (which corresponded to one) lecturer and non specified teacher. There were no informants from Dublin, the capital, rather the majority of informants came from the west, south-west and south-east of the country i.e. primarily the counties of Cork, Galway, Kerry, Kilkenny and Waterford.

Conversation patterns in Irish *Gaelic* have been excluded from this survey as firstly it proved difficult to contact native Irish speakers with a linguistic background, and secondly due to the apparent lack of existing literature as regards the communicative strategies used by native speakers of Irish. As Irish is spoken by such a small percentage of the population of the Republic of Ireland (one percent of the population is considered fluent in the Irish language

² *Surveypro* is a free website where one can upload surveys, which can then be simply accessed by a URL.

(Hickey: 2007: 364) which when one considers that the population of Ireland is just over 4.2 million, we see how few people actually speak Irish on a daily basis. This population is also dispersed throughout the island of Ireland with little interaction between the various *Gaeltacht* (Irish speaking) communities. As virtually all of these 42,000 native Irish speakers are bilingual, the author believes that it would be fair to assume that the communicative strategies used by Irish speakers would be the same if not extremely similar to that of speakers of Irish English. This is further supported by the fact that Irish English is influenced by the structures used in the Irish language. For example in the Irish language there are no direct translations for *yes* and *no*. Instead if one asks for example:

Q.: *An bhfuil tú ag dul go dtí an siopa?* = Are you going to the shop?

The most likely response is:

A.: *Tá mé* = I am

or

Nil mé = I am not

This is just one example of what could be interpreted as an indirect response or an off-record strategy, whereas it is simply indirect due to the syntax of the Irish language. Such a response is commonly heard not only from native speakers of Irish but also by Irish English speakers.

3. Results

3.1. Addressing

As there is no pronominal distinction between formal and informal addressing in English, I at first considered omitting this question from the online questionnaire. However, I then considered the informal *ye* pronoun and in fact 30% of informants referred to this pronoun in their response. In Ireland, the form *ye* (or *youse* in local Dublin English) is commonly used to refer to *you* second person plural (Hickey 2007: 314).

At this point, I believe that it is also necessary to point out that addressing others by their first name has become extremely common in Ireland while addressing others by *Sir*, *Madam(e)*, *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, *Ms.*, etc. is now only common in quite formal situations. In actual fact “highlighting social differences in an exchange is generally frowned upon. Where there is an undeniable social cline between interlocutors the one with the higher social status may down-tone his/her parts of the exchange and background his/her social position.” (Farr/O’Keefe [2002: 42], quoted in [Hickey 2007: 373]).

3.2. Greeting

Irish people tend to be quite inventive when it comes to greetings and the following are greetings which were given by informants and are commonly uttered in informal situations³

- (1) 50% - Hey!
 How’s it going?
 Hi!
 What’s the craic?
 How are you?
 Howreya? [ˈhaɹjə]

- (2) 42% - Well!

It is common in Ireland to use *How are you?* or *How’s it going?* simply as a greeting and not as a question. In response to a question such as *How are you?*, an answer such as *Grand!*, *Fine*, *Not so bad*, *Could be worse* (Kallen: 2005: 130-143) is usually given and even expected, however it is not acceptable to tell strangers or casual acquaintances how you are

³ Note: All informants mentioned several possible terms of greeting.

really feeling or to go into detail in relation to health complaints. Kallen refers to this as “understatement” (Kallen: 2005: 134). *Well!* is often uttered, an abbreviated form of *Well, how are you?* Similarly, *Howreya* [‘haəjə] is the reduced form of *How are you?* (Hickey: 2007: 371) and is commonly used by young and old alike. *What’s the craic?* is also frequently used, however more so by the younger generations. The word *craic* is an Irish word which refers to “fun, good time, enjoyment on a social occasion, typically in a pub” (Hickey 2007: 364).

3.3. Small Talk

The following are the most common small talk topics in Ireland with people who are neither friends nor relatives:

- 100% - weather
- 80% - politics
- 80% - sports

Weather is a common topic of conversation across Europe (Grzega 2006: 226) and Ireland is no exception. Politics on the other hand is a topic which in many other countries is considered a taboo (Grzega 2006: 227). In Ireland discussing politics is not only acceptable but also extremely common. Discussions about politics generally involve complaining about national politics and politicians. “Well, you know, Fine Gael⁴ aren’t capable of governing the country.”⁵ (Hickey 2007: 375), “I’d say that within Fine Gael there’ll be a row about that.”⁶ (Kallen 2005: 136). It is quite common to give one’s political opinion or preference as well as openly supporting or opposing a particular political party, even when talking to strangers. So, in Ventola’s (1979) classification, the Irish do not abstain from using more personal/direct topics.

Although only referred to by one informant, I think that it is necessary to mention that there is another small talk strategy which is very common in Ireland. This is the practice of finding a common ground with an Irish stranger by finding common friends or acquaintances you may have. It starts by asking what part of the country the other person comes from, where they studied, where they work, etc. As Ireland is quite a small country, it is probable that you will have at least one common friend or acquaintance with the person with whom you are talking. The following comment was made by an informant referring to this particular practice: “... next would be where you are from in the country; try to figure out if you both know somebody - this is usually the case. For example, if somebody says they are from Dingle in Co. Kerry, it is common for the other person to say, ‘I know _____ from Dingle, do you know them?’ and usually they do.” Raymond Hickey refers to this phenomenon in his publication *Irish English* saying that in Ireland “Interaction is largely consensual and much emphasis is based on personal acquaintance. If this is not present, as in official exchanges, then patterns of interaction are favoured which would be typical of acquaintances or friends” (Hickey 2007: 371-372). He continues by saying that “a particular aspect of Irish social behaviour: when two Irish strangers meet in an unofficial context they search for a common acquaintance, or at least a common experience. On more than one occasion the author has found that the non-Irish in a company have been startled by the attempts on his part and that of another Irish person to find some common link on first meeting.” (Hickey 2007: 372).

⁴ Fine Gael is the main opponent of the political party currently in government, Fine Fail, and such a comment from a Fine Fail supporter would be quite common.

⁵ (WER, M50+) Taken from the ICE [= International Corpus of English].

⁶ Taken from the ICE.

Small talk is most common when:

- 80% - waiting
- 70% - queuing
- 40% - public transport and shops

Many people distinguished between queuing and waiting and many informants pointed out that small talk while queuing in a bank is the exception as it is neither common nor is it to be recommended (perhaps this is to do with the fact that discussing money is a taboo.) Traditionally, small talk on public transport is common. However, many informants also stated that this is more likely to happen with older generations, who, as was pointed out, practice more small talk in general:

- Informant 1: “A lot of middle-aged and older people would initiate small talk, more so than the younger generation.”
- Informant 2: “Teenagers are less likely to make small talk. Older people are more inclined to make small talk...”

Small talk is uncommon in the following situations:

- 70% - elevators
- 50% - toilets
- 30% - bank

Taboo topics include:

- 80% - sexuality
- 70% - religion
- 50% - money
- 40% - health issues/sickness

Sexuality, religion, bodily functions and pain (Grzega 2006: 240) are also international small talk taboos.

3.4. Answering the Telephone

As regards answering the telephone at home, all informants said that it is most common to answer simply with *Hello?*. We can conclude that in Ireland it is not common to give first name or family name when answering a private telephone as not one informant referred to this possibility in the survey.

At work the following combinations are the most frequently used:

Hello + own name/name of company/department

Hello + (own name) speaking + *How can I help you?*

Hello + name of company + own name + *How can I help you?*

3.5. Making and Turning Down an Offer

When receiving an invitation (e.g. to someone's home, to an event) or an offer (e.g. when you need help):

- 53.85% of the informants said that you can expect this to be an honest offer
- 15.38% said that it is only a polite phrase

However, I believe that the most interesting and perhaps relevant results in this case are the answers given by 30.77% of informants in the category of “other”. Informants responded that in Ireland it really depends on how well you know the other person and that unless an exact time and date is specified and the person shows visible enthusiasm as regards their invitation, you can assume that it is simply just a polite phrase and not in fact a genuine offer.

In relation to turning down an offer, a direct response is once again quite unlikely. For the less direct strategies themselves, there is no clear picture.

- 20.69% of informants said that a vague excuse like “No, I don’t have time.” or “No, I have something else to do.”
- 17.24% said a phrase like “(I don’t know yet) I’ll let you know”, though you will surely not contact the person again.
- 13.79% chose a phrase like “I will have to think about it”, though you won’t surely contact the person again.

3.6. Making an Argument

As regards making an argument in relation to ones’ own opinion, in Ireland the following would be the most common strategies:

- 20.00% = first, you say your opinion;
second, you give reasons, citing other persons
- 20.00% = first, you say your opinion;
second, you give reasons related to the issue itself
- 13.33% = first, you give background information, citing others;
second, you say your opinion
- 13.33% = first, you present diverse opinions and argumentations;
second, you say your own opinion

In response to this particular question we can see that there is no strong bias in favour of one particular politeness strategy over another.

3.7. Expressing Disagreement

As regards giving opinions and arguing in Ireland, there is a strong preference for negative politeness and off-record communicative strategies. This is evident from the following results:

- 26.47% = a phrase like “Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that ...”
- 20.59% = a phrase like “Yes, I see what you mean, but wouldn’t you also think that ...”
- 8.82% = people just say nothing at all and remain silent and people just make a disapproving look.

A direct “No” or “I think you have to think about this again” is virtually unheard of (each response was ticked by one informant only).

3.8. Ending a Conversation

For initiating the end of a conversation the answers of the informants do not reveal a clear picture. 26.09% claimed that people use a rather indirect strategy, namely a phrase like “I don’t want to bother you any longer”; 34.78% said that people use rather direct strategies, namely

- 21.74% = people say what they have to do now (if there really is something)
- 13.04% = people say a phrase like “I have to go now, I have something else to do”

It is also interesting to note that, while 57.14% of informants say that the other person will immediately let you go, 42.86% say that the other person will firstly try and persuade you to stay. So again, there is no clearly preferred strategy.

4. Summary

As Kallen concluded in his studies based on data gathered in the early 1990’s (Kallen 2005:

130), now in 2008 we can also conclude that off-record strategies, plus an unusual combination of negative and positive politeness, are the most common politeness strategies employed in Ireland. This is seen in relation to turning down an offer, where a direct response is quite unlikely and also as regards expressing disagreement, where one sees that there is a strong preference for negative politeness (apart from off-record communicative strategies). The reason for this Barron argues could be “the high level of collectivism in Irish society” as well as “the lower level of assertiveness in Ireland, or what Kallen (2005a) terms silence.” (Barron: 2008: 58) However, simultaneously, we can see from the results of “Ending a Conversation” that there is a slight shift taking place, whereby in some instances bald-on strategies are also becoming acceptable. In Grice’s terms the Irish come closest to the maxim of quantity, make your contribution as informative as possible without it being overly informative.

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first version received 12 August 2008
revised version received 19 September 2008