Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, 5, 2 (2013) 123–135

# Irish English Stereotypes.
## *A Variational Pragmatic Analysis*

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**Abstract.** The aim of the paper is to examine common Irish English stereotypes in cinematographic representations of Irish English with special reference to pragmatic features and sociopragmatic norms. After giving an overview of some of the ways in which the concepts of 'stereotype' and 'stereotyping' are defined and used in sociolinguistics and sociopragmatics, selected features of the Irish English pragmalect (the use of pragmatic markers, the performance of speech acts such as requests, compliment responses and thanks minimizers) will be discussed and contrasted with the (highly stereotypical) representation of Irish English in the films *Intermission* and *The Guard*.

**Keywords:** stereotypes, variational pragmatics, Irish English, pragmalinguistic features, sociopragmatic norms

## 1. Introduction, rationale, structure of the paper

It is often noted in sociolinguistics (cf. e.g. Jaworski and Coupland 2006: 44) that conversational partners make judgements about each other's social background as well as personality traits on the basis of trivial linguistic choices in terms of pronunciation features, intonation, lexical or morpho-syntactic variants. Pragmalinguistic features such as the use of pragmatic markers or the manner in which particular speech acts are performed are even more prone to trigger social stereotyping as well as "personality extrapolations" (cf. Tannen 2006a: 460). Moreover, as Thomas (1983) notes with reference to cross-cultural pragmatic failure, offensive national stereotypes such as 'the abrasive German', 'the obsequious Japanese', 'the insincere American', and 'the standoffish Briton' can most likely be traced back to insufficient exposure to the respective speech communities' pragmalinguistic practices. In intracultural communication, where communication problems are less often anticipated, it is even more important to raise awareness about differences in pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic norms.

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In the present paper I will use Irish English as an example of such differences. The aim of the paper is twofold, firstly, it is to examine cinematographic representations of Irish English with special reference to pragmatic features and sociopragmatic norms, the second aim is to contrast the stereotypes depicted in such representations with the actual pragmalinguistic features of Irish English based on the most recent findings of variational pragmatics.

The structure of the paper is as follows: in the first part of the paper I will provide an overview of some of the ways in which the concepts of 'stereotype' and 'stereotyping' are defined and used in sociolinguistics and sociopragmatics, next, I will discuss negative stereotyping with respect to the use of pragmatic markers as salient features of pragmalinguistic norms and conversational styles. In the second part of the paper selected features of the Irish English pragmalect (the use of pragmatic markers, the performance of speech acts such as requests, compliment responses and thanks minimizers) will be discussed and contrasted with the (highly stereotypical) representation of Irish English in the films *Intermission* and *The Guard*.

## 2. The concepts of 'stereotype' and 'stereotyping' in sociolinguistics and sociopragmatics

### 2.1. The concept of stereotype in the variationist paradigm

In the classical Labovian model the term 'stereotype' is used with reference to a particular type of linguistic variant. According to Labov (1972), there are three types of linguistic variants: 'indicators', 'markers' and 'stereotypes'. The three-way distinction reflects the social significance/stratification of a particular variant as well as the degree to which speakers are aware of the social significance of particular forms. In the case of 'indicators' members of a particular speech community attach no social significance to the use/choice of a particular form, while 'markers' reflect social stratification which speakers are usually aware of. 'Stereotypes', in Labov's classification, are variants that are readily perceived and commented on (rightly or wrongly) as salient in the speech of particular social or ethnic groups, nationalities, etc. An item of any linguistic level can be a stereotype in this respect, whether it is a phonological, suprasegmental, morphological, syntactic, lexical or pragmalinguistic feature of the particular variety it is associated with.

It is important to note that the variationist paradigm was originally developed for the analysis of the social stratification of phonological features, the methodology was later extended for the study of other formal features such as morpho-syntactic

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and lexical variation. Variationist studies of discourse-pragmatic features are even more recent. Moreover, as Pichler (2010) notes, studies of phonological and morpho-syntactic variation and change have been "relatively homogeneous and congruent in focus and methodology" (2010: 582), while there is remarkable heterogeneity in the study of discourse-pragmatic variation due to the "lack of a coherent set of methodological principles" (ibid.).

The formal-functional distinction is relevant to the analysis of stereotypes in the Labovian sense, as well. The identification of formal stereotypes is straightforward: formal variants complement each other, can be substituted by each other and they have to occur in a particular place for the sentence to be considered well-formed by native speakers. In contrast, the use of functional features is seldom obligatory, they are rarely in complementary distribution, and it is usually the frequency of a particular functional variant which provides a clue to its distribution across different discourse genres, social/regional/ethnic groups etc. If we take Irish English (henceforth IrE) as an example, formal stereotypes about IrE include the use of [t] in *think*, the use of dental, rather than alveolar [t] and [d], the use of the after-perfective, resultative-perfective, etc. (cf. Hickey 2007: 207ff). Although there are a few pragmalinguistic features that are easy to identify formally, such as the use of pragmatic markers (cf. section 3.1.), most functional stereotypes take the form of impressionistic qualifications of Irish conversational style such as Irish 'indirectness', 'retinence', 'evasiveness' and 'implicitness' (cf. Moynahan 1995: 178).

Another basic difference between formal and functional stereotypes is the fact that while the use of formal variants is completely arbitrary, the choice of pragmalinguistic features is motivated by sociocultural norms, which, in turn, are influenced by fundamental cultural values (cf. Spencer-Oatey 2000: 43).

## 2.2. 'Stereotype' and 'stereotyping' in interactional sociolinguistics and sociopragmatics

In interactional linguistics and sociopragmatics the term 'stereotype' is used very similarly to the way it is used in social psychology, i.e. as a set of "beliefs shared by in-group members about how one's own and other groups are characterized by certain traits and behavioural tendencies which may be positive or negative" (Bourhis and Maass 2005: 1587). Stereotyping has evaluative as well as cognitive aspects, as for the former, Quasthoff defines stereotypes as "the over-generalizing, evaluative judgements that everybody disapproves of but nobody seems to be able to do without" (1978: 2), while Gumperz posits that conversationalists rely on certain knowledge schemas, that is, "stereotypes about variant ways of speaking to categorize events, infer intent and derive expectations about what is likely to ensue" (1982: 130). In the context of cross-cultural communication,

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stereotyping refers to the process whereby conversational partners extend negative impressions of their interlocutor to the social group and/or speech community their interlocutor is ostensibly a member of, usually as a result of repeated experiences of miscommunication (cf. Tannen 2006b: 362).

In the following I am going to explore some of the most basic stereotypes about IrE communicative style—'implicitness', 'indirectness' and 'conventional pessimism' (cf. Kallen: 2005)—at the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic level. It is important to note that when considering functional variants such as the use of pragmatic markers and pragmatic strategies of performing a variety of speech acts the distinction between stereotype in the Labovian sense and stereotype in the social psychological sense is blurred, since evaluative judgments are implicit in the attribution of pragmalinguistic features or sociopragmatic norms to a particular group of speakers, such as speakers of IrE.

## 3. Pragmalinguistic features as sources of stereotypes

### 3.1. The use of pragmatic markers

Non-linguists, including language mavens (cf. e.g. Cameron 1995: 50), often associate pragmatic markers (henceforth PMs) with spoken discourse and oral style, at best, and with the language of women, adolescents, and the illiterate, uneducated, underprivileged, etc., at worst. A variety of PMs have also been stereotyped as markers of superficiality as well as lack of intelligence.[1] In Britain, certain PMs such as *like* and *you know* have become stereotypes of the (supposedly inferior) dialect of American English, as is exemplified by the following email joke, in which the writer gives advice to speakers of AmE:

> Generally, you should raise your vocabulary to acceptable levels. Look up 'vocabulary'. Using the same twenty-seven words interspersed with filler noises such as 'like' and 'you know' is an unacceptable and inefficient form of communication. Look up 'interspersed'. (example taken from Fuller 2003: 370)

It is well known that people's attitudes to features of any variety of language reflect their attitudes to the speakers of that variety (cf. Honey 2007: 70), thus, negative stereotyping of PM uses of *like, I mean* and *you know* reflect negative attitudes to social groups and social situations such items are (often wrongly) associated with. What is more, as is clear from the email joke above, the stereotypical function assigned to PMs is strategic rather than interpersonal or discourse organizational, in other words, most naïve speakers perceive PMs'

1 Cf. e.g. *like* as a marker of "Valley Girl speech" (Blythe et al. 1990: 224).

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role as limited to stalling and marking lexical search. However, it is a well documented fact in the sociolinguistic literature that laypeople's intuitions (and stereotypes) about their own language use are not reliable, what is more, they frequently get annoyed when confronted with their own speech output in the form of the recordings or transcripts of sociolinguistic interviews (cf. e.g. Romaine & Lange 1991: 261).

If we take a closer look at the functional spectrum of PMs, we find that native speakers use them consistently and with great precision in order to fulfil a wide range of communicative needs. *Like*, for example, rather than being a meaningless social noise is a pragmatic marker of "high frequency and versatility" (Andersen 2001: 221). Its functional spectrum ranges from (a) marking explanation, (b) emphasis/new information, to (c) quotative, (d) approximative and (e) softening functions:[2]

(a) My roommate never cleans when I ask him to. ***Like***, I asked him yesterday to clean, and he never did it.
(b) This guy is so cool. I mean, he's ***like*** the coolest person you could meet.
(c) I went to the clerk to ask him where the beer was, and he's ***like***, 'I don't know, I'm new here', so I'm ***like***, yeah, sure, like, you should know this, man!
(d) I missed ***like*** 40 questions on the exam.
(e) Could you, ***like***, loan me $100?

Utterance-initial and utterance-medial instances of non-propositional *like*—such as the ones in the examples above—occur in similar contexts, with similar distribution and frequency in IrE, AmE and BrE (cf. Kallen: 2006). Despite this fact, the stereotypical use of *like* in IrE is in utterance-final position, moreover, it is typically associated with Irish tentativeness/uncertainty. We can observe this stereotype in a variety of cinematographic representations of IrE, in both *Intermission* and *The Guard*, for example, non-propositional uses of *like* occur invariably in utterance-final position if the speaker is Irish, as in the following examples:

A (speaker of AmE) [he is] deliberately disrupting my lecture.
B (speaker of IrE) Ah, I'm only having a bit of fun, ***like***. (*The Guard*)
You know, I've been reading...where they're smuggling the cocaine out of Colombia in little submarines... Submarines they've built themselves, ***like***. (*The Guard*)
Bobbie Gentry said she didn't know what it was. Supposed to be mysterious, ***like***. (*The Guard*)

2 The list of functions is based on Lee (2001), and is far from exhaustive, for a more detailed functional spectrum of *like* cf. e.g. Schourup (1985) or Andersen (2001).

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A: Have I got a ronnie?
B: A what?
A: A ronnie, mustache, ***like***. (*Intermission*)

Another PM that displays a unique functional spectrum in IrE is *sure*. In AmE and BrE the PM *sure* is primarily used as a feedback signal, marker of an affirmative answer/compliance with a request, as well as an attitudinal disjunct with an interpersonal/persuasive function of inviting agreement from the person or persons addressed (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 446). In IrE, in addition to its standard functions, *sure* marks emphasis, reinforcement, epistemic stance, mockery, and a whole range of interpersonal and discourse-organizational functions (cf. Moreno 2005). In Irish films—unlike the PM *like*—*sure* displays a wide range of functions that are also present in AmE and BrE usage, nevertheless, the utterance-final position of *sure* appears to be, once again, stereotyped, as it occurs more frequently in cinematographic representations of IrE than in naturally-occurring or even literary data (cf. Moreno 2005):

(1) I'm Irish, ***sure***. Racism's part of my culture. (*The Guard*)
(2) A: Are we to assume you're satisfied with the service?
B: I'm totally drained, ***sure***. (*The Guard*)
(3) You're after blowing your cover, ***sure***. (*Intermission*)
(4) It's the new f...ing business, ***sure***. Everyone's doing it. (*Intermission*)

### 3.2. Request strategies

Barron (2008) observes that while there is a great degree of difference between stereotypical IrE request strategies and the actual pragmalinguistic forms used in naturally-occurring data, the underlying general stereotype of increased indirectness/decreased affirmativeness is confirmed by Irish sociopragmatic norms. Accordingly, a stereotypical IrE request is "you couldn't confirm this in writing, could you?" as opposed to the stereotypically British "could you confirm this in writing, please?" (Scharf & Mac Mathúna 1998: 161, quoted in Barron 2008: 38). However, contrary to the common stereotype, Barron's (2008) corpus-based analysis shows that IrE speakers decrease the force of the request by means of a whole range of strategies other than negative formulations and tag questions: there are significant differences in lexical upgrading as well as external downgrading. Speakers of IrE use more upgraders even in non-standard/high solidarity contexts, moreover, they use more pre- and post-grounders, in other words, invest more effort into the external modification (explanation, justification, pretext, etc.) of requests. In cinematographic representations of IrE we find elaborate requests, ample strategies of indirectness and the use of a

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great deal of internal and external modification, which is especially salient in informal/high-solidarity contexts:

(1) Reporter to interviewee: Sorry, Sally. Could you step out of the shot for a minute? Just for a minute. (*Intermission*)
(2) Policeman to criminal: Why d'you kill McCormick, if you don't mind me asking? (*The Guard*)
(3) Boyfriend to girlfriend: Listen, do you mind if we stay in tonight? I'm knackered, do you mind? (*Intermission*)
(4) Mother to daughter: And listen, I wasn't going to say it to you, but since we're having this discussion...would you not...Would you not get yourself a bit of Immac or something?[3] (*Intermission*)

### 3.3. Compliment responses (CRs)

Speakers face a dilemma when responding to compliments because of conflicting sociocultural norms: if a compliment is accepted, the complimentee might appear immodest or vain, conversely, if a compliment is not accepted, the complimentee's opinion is in contrast to that of the complimenter. In terms of Leech's (1983) theory of the Politeness Principle, there is a clash between the maxim of agreement and the maxim of modesty. Consequently, as Herbert (1998) concludes, the ideal response to a compliment is to accept it, if possible, in a way that does not imply self-praise and/or expresses modesty.

Once again, we find interesting differences between the types of CRs we find in IrE and in other varieties of English. Schneider (1999) found that realization types are more varied in IrE than in either AmE or EE; IrE speakers prefer non-agreement micro CRs to agreement micro CRs, at the same time macro and micro CRs are more evenly distributed. While the Irish informants employed 15 different CR strategies, the American informants used only ten; moreover, the American informants clearly preferred a strategy of acceptance[4] over all other strategies whereas the Irish informants' first preference was for a non-acceptance strategy,[5] followed closely by CRs that fulfilled the macro function of acceptance. As a result, the modesty and agreement maxims are given more equal weight in IrE than, for example, in AmE, where the agreement maxim is more highly valued in CRs than the maxim of modesty.

In the cinematographic representations of IrE under scrutiny the macro strategy of non-acceptance appears to be stereotyped, as—unlike in naturally-occurring

3 In this example additional contextual parameters (e.g. size of the imposition) may also warrant the formulation of the request in such indirect/elaborate terms.
4 E.g. "Yeah, it's nice, isn't it?", "I'm glad you enjoyed it." in response to "Nice shirt!"
5 E.g. "Do you really like it?", or "I wasn't very happy with it."

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data, where modesty and agreement are given close to equal weight—there is not a single instance of a CR that implies acceptance:

A: Nice mug of tea.
B: Now... So your husband is missing. (*The Guard*)
A: That's nice. Is that real leather?
B: Why, what am I, f...ing cheap? (*The Guard*)
A: "until you ride into town on an ass." Nietzsche.
B: Yeah, that's a good one. Good quote, nice one.
A: Oh, f... it. (*The Guard*)
A: Good shot, man.
B: Nice one, John.
C: Get off my groceries, will you, you knacker? (*Intermission*)

### 3.4. Responses to thanks (RTs)

When responding to thanks, the speaker is faced with a different type of dilemma than in the case of CRs: whether to accept the expression of gratitude and express pleasure at performing the (verbal or non-verbal) action the thanker is grateful for (cf. e.g. *great pleasure, anytime*), or to minimize / play down the favour or effort invested into performing the action (cf. e.g. *no problem, don't mention it*). In general terms, when the thankee chooses the former strategy s/he addresses the thanker's (or his/her own) positive face, thus foregrounding solidarity and/or common ground, while playing down the favour incurs a negative politeness (i.e. distance-oriented) attitude. In certain contexts it is also appropriate to reciprocate with another token of *thanks* or *thank* you.

As far as the differences between IrE and other varieties of English are concerned, the following observations can be made (cf. Schneider 2005): speakers of IrE use more varied realization types of RTs, they frequently combine conventionalized RTs and they use internal modification (modification of the head act) more frequently than AmE or EE speakers. Moreover, IrE speakers use supportive moves (external modification) more extensively than speakers of other varieties. Just as in the case of CRs, the findings suggest that IrE speakers invest more effort and creativity into minimizing thanks, moreover, formulaic/conventionalized expressions are almost invariably accompanied by non-formulaic supporting moves.

In cinematographic representations of IrE, instead of elaborate RTs, supporting moves and RT combinations, we find strategies of RT avoidance, topic shift and credit shift:

A (speaker of AmE) I wanna thank you for all your help. Really. It's much appreciated.

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B (speaker of IrE) Well... (*The Guard*)
A (IrE) Thanks for taking me out, Gerry. You're a good boy. Always a good boy.
B (IrE) Oh, stop it. (*The Guard*)
A: Thank you.
B: You've earned it, my young friend. (*The Guard*)

## 4. Pragmalinguistic features in time: synchronic and diachronic perspectives on Irish sociocultural norms

On the basis of the pragmalinguistic features discussed so far (as well as a whole range of other features not discussed for space considerations) we can draw a variety of conclusions about the sources and development of Irish sociocultural norms.

We can, for example, claim with Farr and O'Keeffe that the omnipresence of hedging and downtoning in IrE discourse indicates that "Irish society does not place a high value on powerful or direct speech" (2002: 42), moreover, "'forwardness', which ranges from being direct to being self-promoting is not valued within Irish society" (ibid.).

Kallen links conversational understatements, hedges, minimalizations, conventional pessimism, reciprocity, reference to common ground, and ingroup identity markers to 'hospitality', 'reciprocity' and 'indirectness' as "salient and distinctive elements" of Irish sociocultural norms (Kallen 2005: 142–143). Ajtony (2010) also observes that forms of indirectness such as irony, banter and teasing pervade Irish verbal behaviour and are indicative of a high-solidarity culture. Moreover, as Ajtony implies, Irish solidarity has two faces: solidarity with in-group members and "solidarity against any out-group member" (Ajtony 2010: 251).

Finally, Martin (2005) takes a historical perspective and suggests that the pragmatic strategies used by IrE speakers show a tendency towards concealment and non-commitment as well as a general lack of assertiveness and confrontational attitudes, all of which are symptomatic of a "collectivistic, high-context" culture as well as a "postcolonial personality" (2005: 260).

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper I have examined Irish English stereotypes at the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic level. In general terms, we can observe that basic stereotypes about IrE pragmalinguistic norms and communicative style—for example, implicitness, evasiveness, downtoning and conventional pessimism—correspond to "salient and distinctive elements" of Irish sociocultural norms

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(Kallen 2005: 142–143). However, with respect to the specific pragmalinguistic realizations of Irish sociocultural norms we can observe a stark contrast between pragmalinguistic stereotypes, i.e. the features that are perceived to characterize Irish conversational style and the actual linguistic realizations of a variety of speech acts as well as the functional spectrum and distribution of even the most salient pragmatic markers.

The comparison I have made between IrE stereotypes and the actual findings of variational pragmatics also highlights the difference between the nature of formal and functional variation as distinct areas of investigation within the variationist paradigm. Since functional features are seldom in complementary distribution, it is usually the frequency of a particular functional variant which provides a clue to its distribution across different dialects, pragmalinguistic stereotypes about a particular dialect are, therefore, misjudgements about the frequency, salience, and/or—in the case of pragmatic markers—position of a particular feature. Another difference between formal and functional stereotypes is that while the former tend to recede or even disappear once people become aware that a form is socially stigmatized (cf. Johnstone 2010: 399), functional stereotypes are more resistant to conscious control and, therefore, disappearance.

One final note about the use of films, i.e. dramatised language data is also in order. Implicit in the above comparison of stereotypes and actual language data was the assumption that when analysing films, the absence of particular (CR, RT and request) macro-strategies as well of PMs in particular positions implies a mismatch between naturally-occurring language use and conversations based on sociopragmatic stereotypes. One could argue that the absence of certain features is simply due to the fact that the data is not representative. On the contrary, my assumption is based on the fact that scriptwriters, when representing IrE conversational style and pragmalinguistic norms, draw on processes of styling and stylization, in other words, "the production and reproduction of sociolinguistic stereotypes" (Androutsopoulos 2010: 188).

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