CHAPTER 4

Irish Traveller English

Maria Rieder

1 Introduction

Ireland is often considered to be a homogeneous bilingual country, and before the influx of foreigners in the boom years of the Celtic Tiger the Irish themselves may have regarded their country as a monocultural society. However, even though still widely disregarded in their cultural distinctiveness, the Irish Travellers have stood out as a separate community in Irish society for several centuries. The Irish Travellers are a native Irish community with a nomadic background, who naturally share a lot of history with settled Irish people, but culturally, religiously and linguistically they have preserved their own identity. According to researchers and the Irish Travellers themselves, there is no or very little genetic connection with other European nomadic or Gypsy groups, even though they may share with them many traditions and values, such as the preference of self-employment, birth, marriage and burial customs, and values concerning morality, taboos and purity (Freese 1980: 53–63).

The Irish Travellers are recognized as an ethnic group in Northern Ireland and in the UK. In the Republic of Ireland their legal status has been widely discussed but remains insecure.¹ According to the Census of 2011, there are 29,573 Irish Travellers living and travelling in the Republic of Ireland, which accounts for 0.6 per cent of the overall population in Ireland.² There are also Irish Travellers living in Britain, Australia and the USA.

Linguistically, Irish Travellers differ from the settled community in a twofold way. Firstly, their in-group code ‘Shelta’ (also known as ‘Gammon’ or ‘Cant’), a distinctive communicative tool used in specific, Traveller-related contexts, provides the possibility to have private conversations in situations where settled people are present, such as trade and business

Irish Traveller English

situations, contexts where warnings need to be exchanged or when talking about taboo topics. Morphosyntactically, Shelta is a mixture of Irish English grammar and the Travellers’ own lexicon, a majority of which is derived from Irish Gaelic and disguised in various ways by means of transposition (deliberate switching around of consonants, insertion and deletion of syllables, etc.; see Hickey 2007b: 382 for an overview, Ó hAodha 2002 for a detailed description of Shelta lexicon), while a smaller amount is of unknown, though possibly very old origin. The combination of Shelta lexicon with Irish English grammar allows Travellers to speak privately without raising suspicion (for more information on Shelta: Binchy 1994, 1995, 2002; Browne 2002; Cauley 2006; Grant 1994; Hancock 1973, 1984, 1986; Macalister 1937; Ní Shuinéar 2002; Ó hAodha 2002).

Besides Shelta, also the Irish Travellers’ variety of English distinguishes Travellers from settled speakers and general Irish English (Irish English). However, Traveller English has not yet been researched as a variety of its own and therefore the term ‘Traveller English’ is not yet commonly established. The linguistic analysis of the variety in this contribution will be based on a modest corpus of 40,000 words (Rieder, unpublished data). The corpus stems from a two-year ethnographic project carried out among the Irish Traveller community in the West of Ireland and consists of seven audio-recorded, semi-structured group interviews of about 40 minutes each. Both men and women were interviewed; the age group ranged from 18 to 65 and the participants came from varied socioeconomic backgrounds.

In what follows, the phonological, morphosyntactic and lexical characteristics of Traveller English will be analysed in depth, after a brief account of the Travellers’ sociolinguistic history.

2 Sociolinguistic history and current status of the variety

2.1 Outline of demographic and cultural history

In exactly what period of Irish history the Travellers emerged as a distinct cultural group is difficult to determine due to a lack of historical records typical of nomadic and oral cultures. A DNA study carried out in 2011 with samples taken from 40 Travellers confirmed that Travellers ‘have a shared heritage with settled people but that they separated at some point between 1000 and 2000 years ago’ (Irish Examiner, 31 May 2011).3

This very vague time frame gives room for a lot of debate and speculation. For instance, MacNeill (1937: 82) and Gmelch and Gmelch (1976: 227) suggested that the Travellers may be the descendants of a Celtic tribe dating back to pre-Christian times, which stayed nomadic and was, in the course of several centuries, joined by peasants, beggars, farmers, seasonal workers and monastic scholars, all of whom lost their permanent accommodation due to eviction, unemployment or other misfortunes. Underscoring that suggestion, Gmelch and Gmelch (1976: 227) reproduce a historical record from the fifth century AD, which testifies the existence of itinerant groups in Ireland at that time. Many centuries later, in 1175, the word ‘tinkler’ and ‘tynker’ appeared for the first time in written records as a surname and occupational name. As Irish Travellers are still often referred to as ‘tinkers’ (a term coming from the sound of a hammer hitting metal, which points to occupations as tinsmiths and jewellers), this led some researchers to believe in a historical connection of today’s Travellers with the ‘tinklers’ in the twelfth-century records.

However, several historical facts need to be clarified in order to establish such connection. The above-mentioned early records do not reveal whether the featured itinerants or ‘tinklers’ were a clearly distinct social group different from the rest of the Irish population. The Irish society was generally highly nomadic until well into modern times, and clearly distinguishable categories, such as ‘nomadism’ vs ‘sedentariness’, ‘Traveller’ vs ‘settled’, did not exist with the same connotations in the twelfth century as today (see Bhreathnach 2007: 32). Still today, the Irish Traveller community are very heterogeneous in terms of occupations, nomadic traditions etc., and cannot be reduced to any one occupation. Also, we cannot be sure of any cultural continuity of features attributed to Irish Travellers, such as family and marriage patterns, gender roles, religious beliefs, occupations and value system. Therefore, we do not know whether today’s Travellers with all their cultural characteristics have a connection with one or several different itinerant groups of the past, and that the ‘tinklers’ mentioned in these first records are the ancestors of present-day Irish Travellers, even though the above-mentioned DNA study may suggest that.

The first direct hints of ‘tinkers’ as culturally comparable to our present-day Travellers can be found in the records of The Commission on the Condition of the Poorer Classes of the year 1834 (see Gmelch, Langan and Gmelch 1975: 10). Also, Shelta as a common code must have been well established before the time of the Great Famine of 1845 to 1848, because Travellers who emigrated to America during that time have held on to Shelta as an in-group marker until today. Therefore, there are also linguistic
Irish Traveller English

reasons that support the hypothesis of dating the Travellers as a firmly established cultural group to the first half of the nineteenth century. We generally get a clearer picture of the Irish society in nineteenth-century records, as property ownership started to become important for the rural middle class and a polarity between nomadism and sedentariness was emerging (see Bhreathnach 2007: 34). Even though the many famines and other cases of personal disadvantage forced many people onto the roads, the Travellers could now be distinguished from those for whom travelling was only a temporary necessity and who otherwise adhered to a sedentary lifestyle (see Helleiner 2000: 35).

In the twentieth century an increasing number of written records and memories of older members of the community give us a better idea of their culture and lifestyle. Traditional occupations were manifold: until the 1970s many made a living as tinsmiths or repairers of metal items and china, helped out in farms and horse stables, worked as fortune tellers, and sold handmade goods, cattle and horses in markets, fairs or from house to house.

Changes in the Irish economy in the second half of the twentieth century resulted in a change in occupational orientation and in general lifestyle. The introduction of plastic led to a gradual replacement of handmade tin ware. Technological and industrial progress meant that work on farms became scarce. The Travellers therefore began to move into towns and cities, where large temporary settlements at town entrances began to be seen as a public problem by the settled community (Helleiner 2000: 135ff.). Several actions by the Irish government and local authorities, such as the placement of boulders at roadsides, poorly serviced campsites and laws concerning illegal camping were aimed at settling Travellers in standard accommodation. Today, the majority of Travellers live in permanent social housing estates or Traveller halting sites outside bigger towns.

Nomadism was and still is a substantial pillar of Traveller culture and ideology and the endeavour to settle them is slowly affecting the other cultural characteristics. The lack of flexibility of accommodation makes leading a self-sufficient life extremely difficult. Today, some Travellers still deal in horses or collect and sell scrap, car parts and other metals. Few have gone into standard employment, and 74.5 per cent of Travellers are currently unemployed.4

Also, nomadism used to be deeply connected to the importance of family life, another core value of Traveller culture. Family weddings, funerals,

4 CSO 2006.
Christenings and other celebrations kept the contact with the extended family alive, and were also the setting where partners were found and new families planned (McDonagh 1994: 89). Travelling therefore contributed to the reinforcement of family ties. Families are traditionally quite large and the age profile is very young with 41 per cent of the community under 14 years of age. Life expectancy, in turn, is considerably lower than in the settled community.\(^5\)

Connected to social aspects, nomadism also had a cultural function. By regularly meeting friends or family, traditions, folk wisdoms, language, values and beliefs could be shared and kept alive (McDonagh 1994: 89). Most values and the moral code centre around the Roman Catholic faith, in which a number of the Travellers’ own religious practices have been integrated. Some of these are older Catholic practices, for example novenas, praying for special intentions such as illnesses and relatives, faith in and visiting spiritual healers, old Irish superstitions and omens of good and bad luck. Traveller women’s faith is very strong and openly expressed by wearing religious jewellery and carrying religious items, such as prayer books, prayer cards, saints’ images, holy water, oils and ointments. Most Traveller men usually display their faith less strongly than women. They participate in the sequence of sacraments but usually attend mass only on special occasions. Family meetings at events such as funerals, christenings and weddings usually draw a large number of Travellers from all over the country and keep these values and beliefs alive.

In conclusion, impeding the freedom of movement of Travellers is slowly wiping out traditional core values. Nevertheless, the Traveller community is trying to keep their cultural identity alive while at the same time expanding their networks towards the settled community.

2.2 Linguistic history and current status of the variety

Traveller English is a local variety in the sense that it is spoken in Ireland, and by Travellers who have emigrated from Ireland. In Ireland Traveller English is an overarching social or cultural variety that, in contrast to settled Irish English which has much dialectal variation, is a more cohesive entity regardless of geographical location of the speakers (Ní Shuinéar 1994: 58). A reason for this may be that Travellers who in the past never stayed in one place for longer than a few months did not pick up any one variable from a

\(^5\) CSO 2006.
Irish Traveller English
certain region, but are instead reproducing a peculiar dialect that exhibits mixed dialectal characteristics.

Phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical and pragmatic features of Traveller English differ slightly from ‘mainstream’ general Irish English of today in two respects. Firstly, Traveller English has retained Irish English features that would have been widespread decades ago among settled Irish people and can be called archaic Irish English features, which are becoming recessive in general Irish English. These features will be referred to as ‘Archaic Irish English’ in the following sections (for a detailed list of Irish English feature see Bliss 1979; Kallen 1994; Wells 1982), in contrast to the ‘General Irish English’ spoken by settled people today, as collected in the ICE-Ireland Project (Kallen and Kirk, 2008), which takes into consideration the many different regional dialects of settled Irish English in the Republic of Ireland. Irish English features have been described as resulting from the influence of an Irish substrate, as well as from historical and dialectal features of English settlers, that were retained due to a long period of language shift from Irish to English, and lastly from ‘other, primarily internal, principles of historical change and variation’ (Kallen 1997: 3ff.). Looking at the historical and modern situation of Irish Travellers, a secluded life, limited contact with the wider Irish society and learning English mainly from speakers based in rural areas may have preserved and reinforced Archaic Irish English features.

Secondly, Traveller English is experienced as being different beyond these Archaic Irish English features. To out-group speakers, Travellers are instantly recognizable by their language and often difficult to understand even for native Irish people for reasons that will be pointed out below. This led to suggestions of another substratum that could underlie Traveller English. Ní Shuinéar, for example, suggested a ‘Gammon underlay’ (1994: 58), i.e. a possible but lost Cant grammar, which still influences Traveller English besides Archaic Irish English features (Ó Baoill 1994: 157). The distinctive elements lie primarily in the phonology and prosody, particularly the intonation of Traveller English, but are also found on all the other levels of language. The theory of a Gammon substratum, however, has not yet been proved historically.

Travellers themselves are well aware of their distinctive variety of English and have described it as a ‘flat accent’ in contrast to settled Irish English (Rieder, unpublished data), which again refers to phonology primarily. In terms of attitudes, Travellers usually defend their variety strongly against outsiders who might feel General Irish English to be superior to Traveller English, and claim that they would always refuse to adapt their speech
in situations of contact with settled Irish people. In real-life situations, however, one can perceive a degree of convergence towards General Irish English, with a gradual appropriation of standard features also in in-group situations (O’Sullivan 2008: 55).

3.1 Phonology

The influence of strong Archaic Irish English features, as well as other, unknown developments, is most strongly felt in Traveller English phonology. Particularly the greater tendency to mid-centralize kit, trap, strut and unstressed vowels towards /ə/, the close mid or mid-central onsets of many diphthongs, and rhoticity, pre-R breaking and pre-Schwa laxing processes surrounding near, square, cure centring diphthongs distinguish Traveller English from settled Irish English. Apart from these observations, however, single vowel realizations do not differ much from the Irish English still heard in rural areas, and it may rather be for prosodic reasons, i.e. intonation, rhythm etc. that Traveller English is perceived to be different. In what follows, peculiarities of Traveller English will be described in detail, especially in comparison to features of the General Irish English of the settled community (as described in Kallen 1994; Wells 1982; Hickey 2007a).

3.1.1 Short vowels

KIT /ɪ/

A first, slight difference between Traveller English and General Irish English can be found in kit words, which often have a more rounded and central /ɪ/ in Traveller English than in RP or General Irish English, and can approximate [ə] also in many stressed syllables. In contrast, other words such as his, big or bit are lengthened to [i].

A peculiarity of Traveller English that may not be found in General Irish English is the approximation of certain kit words towards strut in an [i]/[u] realization: wrist [wrust], mirror [ˈmɪrər].

DRESS /ɛ/

While kit words often become centralized in a [ə] or at least a [ɛ] sound, words that would be in the dress category in RP, especially vowels followed by a nasal such as den, Ben, then, but also in get, settled etc., often have a raised [ɛ] or kit [i]. This is also a very common feature of General Irish English.
Irish Traveller English

TRAP /æ/
The trap group displays a great deal of variation in Traveller English. trap vowels are often more raised to [æ] and can approximate the open-mid vowel [ɛ] in syllable-final position. Also the words many, any, which most settled Irish realize as [æ] instead of the RP [ɛ] and which is seen as a ‘striking Irishism’ (Wells 1982: 423), are mostly pronounced with a more raised [æ] by Irish Travellers.

LOT /ɒ/
As in General Irish English, LOT words frequently have the unrounded variant [ʊ] in Traveller English, especially before nasal consonants (e.g. long). Some words in this group are raised as far as to [ʌ], e.g. clock. In all other instances it is usually [ɒ]: got.

STRUT /ɔ̈/
Realizations of the strut vowels can be similar to the General Irish English ‘mid centralized back somewhat rounded vowel’ [ɔ̈] (Wells 1982: 422), an intermediate between [ɔ] and [ʊ], as in but [bʊs], summer [ˈsʌma]. The realization of [ɔ̈] can be found in some lexemes in Traveller English, but is less pronounced than in General Irish English. Most realizations of strut would either have [ɔ], which for some words may be influenced by the spelling, e.g. come, done, other, but also pub, but etc. are pronounced with an [ɔ]. Some words have [ɔ̈] or [ʊ], e.g. in husband, run, and many others are pronounced with a foot [ʊ], e.g. spuds.

As in General Irish English, some words that would have an onset strut vowel in General English can be realized with a kit [ɪ] in Traveller English, e.g. onion [ˈɪɲən].

FOOT /ʊ/ Some words in the strut group have not even been lowered to /ɔ/ or /ɔ̈/, but have a foot /ʊ/ vowel. This indicates that the foot–strut split has not entirely taken place and words such as spuds, cut, bucket have an /ʊ/, resulting in some homophones with foot words, e.g. look and luck, which can still be found in vernacular forms of General Irish English.

Many foot words have retained the historical /uː/, which is also still present in General Irish English, a retention of the Middle English /uː/ which underwent the raising but not the shortening. Therefore many words of the foot group can be included in the mood group, such as book, cook,
crook (see also Wells 1982: 423). This feature is also present in General Irish English, though it is becoming recessive.

A peculiarity of Traveller English absent in General Irish English is that words with an onset <u> are often aspirated, e.g. us [hʊs], under [hɔndə].

Weak vowels
Similar to General Irish English, Traveller English uses schwa extensively, especially in unstressed word-final syllables, where /i/ and /a/ are often merged, e.g. happy ['hæpə]. Words ending in -er either have an r-coloured mid-central vowel: e.g. letter ['lɛtə] or, more commonly, the schwa absorbed, e.g. better ['bɛtə]. These features are also found in General Irish English, though especially the absorbed schwa would be more common in Traveller English.

Words ending in -ow also commonly have a [ə], and can even be raised to an [i]: follow [ˈfəli], which can be lengthened: window [ˈwɪndə]. The raising to [i] or [iː] is peculiar to Traveller English and may not be found in General Irish English.

The -ing suffix is mostly reduced to /-ɪŋ/ or /-ən/ in Traveller English, while schwa absorption (Wells 1982: 434) is common for words ending in dentals: putting [ˈpʊtn], sitting [ˈsɪtn]. Likewise the endings of morning and evening are usually reduced to /-ən/. O’Sullivan (2008: 34ff.) studied the reduction of the -ing suffix by the example of doing and going in a comparison of the Limerick Corpus of Irish English and her own corpora of Traveller English and found that this feature occurred in almost 100 per cent of all -ing forms used by Irish Travellers, in contrast to about 7 per cent by General Irish English speakers.

To in all meanings is usually weak in Traveller English and has either a schwa, [ə], or an unstressed front close vowel [æ]. Other, normally stressed words such as I, what, when, and occasionally verbs like went followed by a stressed preposition, are often used in their weak forms with a schwa. Also the weak form of my [mi] is very commonly used. Traveller English is very similar here to General Irish English, but again there may be quantitative differences in regard to the articulation of weak vowels and further quantitative research would be required for more precise distinctions.

Unstressed prefixes of multisyllabic verbs are often not audible: remember [ˈrɛmə], I decided [aɪ ˈsɪdəd]. This may occasionally occur in General Irish English in connected speech, but is used very noticeably and consistently in Traveller English.
Irish Traveller English

3.1.2 Diphthongs

CHOICE /ai/

The realization of choice diphthongs is typically shifted to price /ai/ as in boy [bai], noise [naɪs], annoyed [aˈnɒd] and is more advanced/fronted than the General Irish English /bæi/.

PRICE /ai/

This diphthong is unremarkable in Traveller English. While General Irish English tends to neutralize the opposition /ai/ and /ɔɪ/ by a low central onset: Irish [ˈɔɪrɪʃ] ~ [ˈɔɪrɪʃ] ~ [ˈɔɪrɪʃ] ~ [ˈɔɪrɪʃ], Traveller English usually shifts both diphthongs into the price direction with a slightly more advanced/fronted onset: Traveller English Irish [ˈɑtɪʃ], boy [bæi].

MOUTH /ou/.

MOUTH diphthongs have close/mid-back onsets: /ou/ ~ /ɔʊ/ as in Traveller English bouncer [ˈbɑʊnsə] ~ [ˈbʊnsə], in contrast to a low central onset in General Irish English.

3.1.3 Centring diphthongs

NEAR/SQUARE/CURE

The RP vowels /iə/, /ɛə/ and /ʊə/ are absent in Traveller English as they are in General Irish English, but in contrast to traditional or rural General Irish English, Traveller English has only light rhoticity [ɛə˞], and often inserts a schwa sound between the vowel and the following /r/: beer: General Irish English [bɪːr] → Traveller English [bɪːr] (pre-R breaking, Wells 1982: 213f.). At the same time, the subsequent process of pre-schwa laxing is carried through, by which formerly long vowels [iː, eː, oː, uː] are shortened to [i, e, ə, o]: beer: [bɪː]. Words in the near, square and cure groups are pronounced in this way, with an unrounded front starting point moving towards a mid-central position: [iə˞], [ɛə˞] and [ʊə˞] respectively.

START /aː/

Start words tend to be realized as /æ/ plus pre-R schwa: mark [maːk] ~ [maːk] and may have a somewhat shorter vowel than General Irish English for some members of the community. Travellers therefore seem not to have appropriated the pre-fricative lengthening that was completed around the end of the seventeenth century for RP (Wells 1982: 203ff.) and which General Irish English seems to perform to a greater degree than Traveller English.
The nurse merger is not completely carried through for Traveller English and therefore displays a great variation. Nurse words that were pronounced as /ɜː/ or /ɔː/ before the merger was completed by the seventeenth century (Wells 1982: 196), usually have an /ɛ/ realization, e.g. heard [hɜː-d], bird [bɜː-d], in Traveller English, and may have a lengthened vowel as in Germany [dʒɜːrmən]. Words that have an <i> are pronounced as [ɛ]: girl [ɡɛːl]. Words spelled with <o> tend towards an /ɔ/ sound: word [wɔː-d], and those spelled with a <u> usually have a centralised /ʌ/ or /ɜː/ vowel, e.g. curb [kɜː-b], turnip [tɜː-nəp].

Like many other dialects north is merged with force in Traveller English. Both vowel groups have a shorter vowel than General Irish English: north [nɔːθ].

3.1.4 Long monophthongs

fleece /iː/ vs /eː/

Pairs such as meet and meat, which were merged in the so-called fleece merger by 1700, can still be distinct in General Irish English and consistently so in Traveller English. Therefore meet and meat are not homophonous in Traveller English: meet [miːt] ~ [meːt], and likewise eat [eːt], seat [sɛːt], tea [teː]. Wells (1982: 195) explains in regard to this phenomenon that rival pronunciations of the <ea> group were current until well into the eighteenth century. One can argue that the Irish Travellers as a very isolated and rural group would have preserved this feature more than settled speakers, for whom it is becoming recessive and restricted to rural areas (Wells 1982: 196).

face /eː/.

General Irish English face has not or only variably undergone the long-mid diphthonging completed around 1800 (Wells 1982: 211), hence also Travellers use mostly an /eː/ vowel for the face group, though more consistently than settled Irish people would, e.g. today [tədeː], name [nɛːm]. Words ending in the /eː/ diphthong typically approximate fleece /iː/, as in they [dɪː], or /eː/ in say [seː].

bath /æː/

The vowels /aː/, /æː/, /æ/ may not be distinct in Traveller English, and generally the bath/palm vowel can be slightly more raised in Traveller English
Irish Traveller English

than in General Irish English and RP depending on the environment. Therefore, words such as calm, balm would have a vowel approximating the RP vowel /aː/, whereas man, Ann, tend towards /æː/. Father, which in General Irish English is often pronounced as [fɔːðə], usually has a slightly raised short [æ]. Likewise, the vowels in dance, advance and similar words are shortened and would therefore fall into the TRAP category.

THOUGHT /ɔː/
The thought vowel is unremarkable in Traveller English, though it may be a slightly shorter [ɔ] than in RP.

GOAT/oː/
Travellers have preserved the traditional use of the monophthong /oː/ for /au/, which is, similar to the FACE group, a sign of the absence of long-mid diphthonging. This is also a feature of General Irish English, though it would be more consistent in Traveller English. A similarly recessive feature in General Irish English, but widespread in Traveller English, is that some of the GOAT words have a second variant with a MOUTH [au]: old [oːld] / [aʊld], bold [bəʊld] / [baʊld], which has a jocular and non-literal meaning (Wells 1982: 427). [aʊld] has a sentimental connotation when talking about times long gone by or affectionately about other people. Other words have as their only realization an approximation towards an /au/ diphthong, e.g. cold [kaʊld], told [taʊld], shoulder [ˈʃəʊldə]. This feature is recessive in General Irish English of today (O’Sullivan 2008: 48) but very present in Traveller English.

MOOD /uː/
The mood vowel is a very close, back long vowel in Traveller English. As mentioned above, some RP FOOT words have a long /uː/ in Traveller English: cook [kuːk], book [buːk]. This feature is becoming recessive in General Irish English.

3.1.5 Consonants

As for vowel realizations, many consonantal features of General Irish English vernacular that are already or are becoming recessive can still be found extensively in Traveller English. A detailed comparative research and analysis will be required for a clear picture as to the quantitative difference of usage between General Irish English and Traveller English of the features summarized below. Those characteristics that may distinguish Traveller English from General Irish English and may have different origins
are clearly marked and listed at the end of each subsection (examples from Rieder, unpublished data):

3.1.5.1 Alveolar and dental stops

Features common in both General Irish English and Traveller English (see also e.g. Kallen 2005; Wells 1982), though more noticeable in Traveller English:

- Fortition of dental fricatives /θ, δ/ to slightly aspirated dental plosives: *think* [θ̪ɪŋk], *that* [dæt], therefore almost complete neutralization of oppositions between [θ]/[t] and [δ]/[d]. The contrast may be maintained depending on factors such as word position, position of the segment, and phonetics of the following segment by slight degrees of aspiration and a more dental vs more alveolar articulation in order to distinguish between minimal pairs such as thank [tæŋk] and tank [tæŋk];
- Sometimes further dentalization of plosives to aspirated alveolar plosives or tapping: *water* [ˈwɒtər] ~ [ˈwɒər];
- Lenition to a ‘slit fricative’ (Wells 1982: 429) in word-final, postvocalic position: *hit* [hɪt];
- Further lenition of /t/ to /h/ in some intervocalic positions: *what it was* [ˈwɒθɪʃ ˈwɒz], *later* [ˈleːhə], I bought one [aɪˈbɔːhwon];

Peculiar to Traveller English:

- A peculiarity of Traveller English that may not be found in General Irish English is the dentalization of plosives between two vowels: *city* [ˈsɪti].

3.1.5.2 Alveolar fricatives

- Alveolar fricatives /s, z/ tend to become palato-alveolar in word-final position especially before approximants: *it is yeah* [ɪθˈjɪfn], *god bless you* [ˈɡɒd blɛʃja]. This feature is also common in General Irish English;
- Traveller English extends this rule to the dental fricative /θ/, which tends to become palato-alveolar in word-final position before approximants: *with you* [wɪθjə]. This feature is less frequent in General Irish English, but can occur in connected speech.

3.1.5.3 The liquids

- Rhoticity or the presence of postvocalic and word-final /ɹ/;
- Palatal rather than velar /l/.
Irish Traveller English

Both of these features are characteristic for General Irish English as well as Traveller English.

3.1.5.4 Other consonants

Common in both General Irish English and Traveller English, though more noticeable in Traveller English:

- Historical retention of the aspirated glide cluster /hw/ or /ʍ/ for words spelled <wh>;
- Schwa epanthesis in clusters consisting of a liquid and a nasal: film [ˈfilm], barn [ˈbArn];
- Strong aspiration of word final /p, k/.

Peculiar to Traveller English:

- The nasal /m/ in word-final positions is often moved from its bilabial to an alveolar position: from [frɒn]. This feature also occurs in General Irish English, but usually only in connected speech. Traveller English uses it consistently in sentence-final position as well.

3.1.6 Phonological processes

Common in both General Irish English and Traveller English, though more frequent in Traveller English:

- Yod coalescence in stressed syllables: did you [dɪdʒəʊ], tune [tʃu:n];
- Yod dropping in unstressed syllables: education [ˌɛdɪˈke.ʃən];
- Articulation of -ing forms as [ən] or merely [n];
- /h/ dropping in her [ˈɛr], him [ˈɪm], humour [ˈjuːmə];
- Depenthesis between an /r/ and a following /n/: different [ˈdifrɒnd], burn [bɜːrdn].
- /kl/ dropping in /kt/ clusters: picture [ˈpɪktʃə];

Features peculiar to Traveller English:

- Metathesis of /sk/ clusters: ask [æks], which has disappeared in General Irish English, but is still very common in Traveller English;
- Reduction of syllables in multisyllabic words: automatically [ɔːtəˈmæklɪ]. This feature may not be found in General Irish English;
- Epenthetic /h/ in certain clusters: conversation [kənˈvɜːsəˈʃən]. This feature is absent in General Irish English.
Most accountable for perceived differences between Traveller English and General Irish English are probably Traveller English prosodic aspects such as stress and intonation. Very limited study has been carried out in this field, however, and therefore the following points are only tentative descriptions.

A combination of the above named features, especially the tendency of kit, trap and strut vowels and some diphthongs towards a more mid-central realisation and the elimination of some unstressed syllables create a singular rhythm, which can sometimes impede comprehension between General Irish English and Traveller English speakers.

In terms of word stress, Traveller English varies a lot, but the main stress in polysyllabic words often falls on the second-last syllable: *washing* `machine, she recog nised me*. Difference between stressed and unstressed syllables may also be less marked than in General English, with secondary stresses in many polysyllabic words, which give Traveller English a very strong rhythm: *she *recog*NISED me*.

The most recognizable feature of Traveller English is, however, intonation and pitch on the sentence level, which usually starts out with a very high starting point falling to a lower level. Towards the end of a phrase pitch rises again. The last stressed syllable in any phrase is lengthened and marked by a slight fall of intonation:

(H) If I GET a qualifiCAT\ion now ( = )
(L) that I get a GOOD STEAdy HOU\se;
(L) THEN I’d have a qualifiCATion for /ME\.

Questions follow the same pattern but go up again slightly in cases where there is a fall on an unstressed syllable.

For a more concise picture of Traveller English prosody further quantitative and qualitative research is required, particularly the exact measuring and computing of Traveller English speech rate, lexical tone and rhythm, detailed intonation transcription and analysis of voice quality in comparison with General Irish English are highly desirable, as prosody is such an important point of contrast between Traveller English and General Irish English.

3.1.8 Some conclusions about Traveller English phonology

The picture that emerges from the phonological analysis of Traveller English reveals two main patterns. Firstly, Traveller English displays Irish English characteristics that are recessive in General Irish English and would be called Archaic Irish English. In terms of vowel realizations, Traveller
Irish Traveller English

English only partially seems to have adopted processes such as the Great Vowel Shift processes, mergers and splits that would be associated with modern English. The monophthongal quality of vowels in *face* and *goat*, the low starting point of the diphthong in *choice* and the central starting point of the diphthong in *mouth* are, though not unique in the English-speaking world, the most distinguishing features used consistently in Traveller English, while mostly abandoned by General Irish English speakers. Also the consonants are marked by Archaic Irish English characteristics. The segregated lifestyle of Travellers as well as learning English mostly from rural people might be the reasons why Travellers have been slower in adapting to the new standard and retained many Middle English features.

Besides aspects related to General Irish English, Traveller English also features characteristics that are not found in settled General Irish English, such as cases of epenthesis, metathesis, reduction of syllables and the extending of General Irish English dentalization or alveolarization constraints. However, the main aspects differentiating Traveller English from General Irish English are found in prosody. The many weak vowels, reduced words, and unpronounced unstressed syllables, as well as a singular intonation pattern give Traveller English a distinctive and unique rhythm and sound quality.

3.2 Morphosyntax

Also in terms of morphosyntax, Traveller English displays strong vernacular and Archaic Irish English features, which, according to Forde’s (2005) corpus-linguistic, lexico-grammatical analysis of modern Irish English speakers, are slowly being abandoned by the settled Irish population. Irish Travellers in turn, have held on to most features outlined in Forde and this section will therefore align itself to his taxonomy, while also pointing out some distinguishing characteristics of Traveller English.

3.2.1 The noun phrase

3.2.1.1 Plural formation

Traveller English speakers usually avoid redundant plural marking of quantity nouns following a numeral:

(1) might be two or three time a year they go

(2) it’s about 25 mile back
While this redundancy rule is also still present in General Irish English vernacular, Traveller English speakers often extend this constraint to non-redundant cases:

(3) if you asked anythin’ else in *year* now gone by

The nonstandard use of quantifiers is also a feature that is distinctive in Traveller English: *lots of* is often used with an indefinite article:

(4) twas a *lots o’* things there

Also absent in General Irish English is that *many* and *much* are frequently used interchangeably and can be followed by a plural noun:

(5) that’ll tell ya how *much crowds* that was there

### 3.2.1.2 Definite article

The nonstandard use of the definite article is still a distinguishing feature in General Irish English (Forde 2005: 26) as well as in Traveller English. In four of all categories of nonstandard definite article Traveller English deviates mostly from General Irish English, for which these features are becoming recessive. Differences between General Irish English and Traveller English are therefore of a quantitative nature:

(a) Non-count concrete nouns are often found with a definite article:

(6) they’d sit you at the table and give you the *tea* and the *dinner*

Forde, in his analysis of General Irish English regarding this feature found that 5 out of 15 instances of non-count concrete nouns included a definite article (Forde 2005: 27). Traveller English has this feature slightly more frequently: 9 out of 15 cases of *tea* and *dinner* are preceded by the definite article.

(b) ‘*Same*’ and ‘*both*’ are usually expressed by the numerals ‘*one*’ and ‘*two*’:

(7) the *two* of them.

(8) Cant and Gammon is all the *one*.

The word *same* is exclusively used in the sense of ‘equal’:

(9) every woman is the *same*.

(c) The definite article is often used in a possessive sense:

(10) I just wonderin’ never see you an’ the husband
(d) Very typical of Traveller English as well as of General Irish English vernacular is the occasional use of a definite article with county names:

(11) he loved the Clare
(12) that is the County Galway

3.2.1.3 Pronouns

The pronoun systems are fairly standard. Subject pronouns follow general patterns of most standard varieties: I, you, he/she/it for singular, we for the first-person plural, the second-person plural pronoun is distinguished from the singular by ye, and they is the third-person plural pronoun. Object pronouns are unremarkable.

Reflexive pronouns can differ slightly from standard varieties as even the plural pronouns are usually composed of a possessive adjective plus the singular of self: meself, yourself, hisself, herself, ourself, yerself, theirself.

(13) the Travellers used that among theirself

The bold forms are absent in General Irish English and cannot be said to be Archaic Irish English either. The first-person reflexive pronoun meself could be seen as the weak form of the possessive adjective my, which is commonly used on its own as well:

(14) I remember me poor father and mother now

3.2.1.4 Adjective comparison

A feature that gives the impression of hypercorrection is the comparative form of adjectives: Several instances in the data show a tendency towards -er suffixation of adjectives that are already in their irregular comparative form, e.g. lesser, worser. Sometimes already inflected forms are preceded by a periphrastic more in a ‘double’ comparative, which functions as an intensifier:

(15) it’s supposed to be more deeper
(16) so ’twas a simple life, and twas .. more happier
(17) it’s getting lesser as it goes

Both of these observations do occur in other dialects of English as well. In comparison with settled Irish English speakers they occur much more frequently in Traveller English than in General Irish English.
3.2.1.5 Prepositions

Prepositions in Traveller English can often go unnoticed by the listener or are indeed missing. Very similar prepositions, such as *in* and *on* can sound identical due to centralisation of the weak vowels in both of these prepositions. In other cases conjoined syllables result in a missing preposition:

(18) I was goin up to my niece, she was *livin* the other side Oranmore.

(19) But then you could *go other parts* in the country.

Two other nonstandard usages of prepositions that are now very rare in General Irish English can be found in the preposition *on*, which is commonly replaced with *of* when referring to days of the week:

(20) we brought her *of* a Tuesday

(21) I don’t eat meat *of* a Friday

and in the frequent intensification of *in* with *inside*:

(22) *inside in* the place

3.2.2 The verb group

3.2.2.1 Irregular verb forms

Some Traveller English verb forms were found to display the same characteristics as irregular comparatives, where a regular suffix is added to an existing irregular form. Examples are *hurted*, *seened*, *gnrowned* and *borned*, all of which are regularly used preterite forms. This phenomenon does not occur in General Irish English.

Other verb features of Traveller English can also be observed in General Irish English, even though less frequently (Forde 2005: 35). For example, the reduced number of irregular forms: *seed* or *seen*, and *done* are commonly used as a preterite:

(23) her daughters never *seed* her mother

(24) I *seen* the photos

(25) it’s a person that *done* somethin’ for the poor and the sick

The forms *broke*, *lighten*, *wrote* and *went* are used for preterite and as past participles alike:

(26) it got *broke*

(27) all the candles *lighten*
Irish Traveller English

(28) we’ve already wrote our names on them now

Regular verbs have often lost the preterite or past participle suffix:

(29) later years then it start comin to ‘feen’, didn’t it?

A further form of deletion is evident in some cases of existential sentences, where the copular verb can be deleted:

(30) I’m not able to go up to Winnie’s, that my niece

3.2.2.2 Subject–verb agreement

Nonstandard subject–verb concord is one of the most striking and typical features of Traveller English. As with many other features, some of the types of nonstandard concord listed below can, though becoming recessive, still be found in General Irish English and are also present in other dialects of English. However, again Traveller English speakers perform them to a greater quantitative degree than settled Irish English speakers would.

Most instances of nonstandard subject–verb agreement in Traveller English fall under the Northern Subject Rule, a system of verbal concord widespread in northern English varieties, which states that the use of the present-tense verb -s suffix can be extended to the first and second persons singular and plural, except when the subject is a personal pronoun that immediately precedes the verb. The Northern Subject Rule of verbal concord therefore relies not only on features of person and number, but also on the syntactic position and morphological features of the subject. Examples of instances according to this rule in Traveller English are:

(31) different countries has different languages (Subject ≠ Pronoun)

(32) they just thinks that they are just like everybody else (Subject = Pronoun, but not adjacent)

When searching the corpus for present-tense verbs immediately following the subjects my brothers, the people and Travellers, in 12 out of 27 cases the verb had an -s suffix.

Apart from the Northern Subject Rule Traveller English deviates from standard subject–verb concord by developments common in many other English dialects, such as:

(a) the extensive use of the -s suffix as a marker of historic present when introducing reported speech:

(33) I says ‘some poor mouth’s waitn for it’
(b) the equally widely used -s suffix as a marker of habitual and generic present tense:

(34) that’s where they do the Irish
(35) because they know it

(c) the levelling of the contrast between was and were on was, as found in many other varieties of English:

(36) my brothers was born in Offaly
(37) we was talkin’ in front of him

(d) the frequent deletion of the verbal -s suffix after third-person subjects, which is also found in English dialects worldwide:

(38) he don’t always use that language
(39) coffee don’t make any difference to me

3.2.2.3 Habitual aspect

From the three different traditional General Irish English ways of marking habitual aspect (inflected do, inflected be, inflected do plus non-finite be; Kallen 1994: 180) the corpus revealed one instance of the third one:

(40) I walk three mile every morning and I swear I do be dead after it

The do be habitual form can also be negated, which is very rare in General Irish English but quite frequent in Traveller English:

(41) we don’t be travelling now anymore

3.2.2.4 Perfect aspect

The area of tense and aspect in General Irish English has been described as being one of the most influenced by Gaelic (Forde 2005: 40). Irish does not have a perfect tense, the expression of which is therefore substituted by other means e.g. by loan-translations from Irish (Trudgill and Hannah 2002: 103). Structures such as the after perfect for recently completed events, as in what I was after tellin’ ya, the extended-now perfect, as in he is dead for many years now, the resultative/accomplishment perfect with a split perfect, as in she has a good bit picked up now from him, and the indefinite-anterior perfect, as in we never went there in years, are all features of Traveller English that are still present in General Irish English, with a possibly higher frequency in Traveller English.
Irish Traveller English

3.2.3 Complex sentences
Several more features that are associated with General Irish English vernacular are equally present in Traveller English:

- topicalization for reasons of contrast and reassertion: It’s Travellers that you’re hearing;
- the construction for to + infinitive to express purpose: if they were doin’ churnin’ the butter, you had to put your hands to the churn, for to put luck on it;
- multiple negation: you cannot say nothn in Cant to the guards;
- retention of question-inversion and frequent lack of subordinator in indirect questions: we can go to the library and see do they have any books on that.

Two other features became evident in the Traveller English corpus which are not found in General Irish English or Archaic Irish English:

- nonstandard negation: that mornin’ the pain not allowed me; everything is not fitted well;
- the corpus also revealed three examples of questions without the standard subject–verb inversion: why she didn’t come back?

3.2.4 Some conclusions
Morphosyntactic features of Traveller English draw a picture similar to Traveller English phonology: on the one hand many General Irish English features that have been abandoned by settled speakers have been retained by Travellers. On the other hand, Traveller English exhibits characteristics that are not found in General Irish English and could be seen as extensions of existing General Irish English constraints. Among these are cases of plural formation, reflexive pronouns, subject-verb concord, variable word order, nonstandard negation and most of all a phenomenon that Bliss (1979: 284) described as regularity resulting from analogical reformation of irregular forms, apparent in the formation of some irregular verb forms and adjective comparatives.

3.3 Lexical and pragmatic features
Many Traveller English lexical features are found in nonstandard English around the world, and are common features of General Irish English vernacular, though they are becoming rarer for settled speakers. Examples are the use of childer for ‘children’ and the substitution of teach with learn,
as in she wants to learn as that. The corpus revealed 5 cases of standard use of teach, but in 7 cases learn was used in the sense of teach.

Traveller English also makes wide use of nonstandard vocabulary and General Irish English slang. Frequent terms would be baba ‘child, baby’, yoke ‘thing, object’, spuds ‘potatoes’, young one ‘child/person younger than the speaker’, often used in a superior way; my fellow ‘my husband’, my small/young fellow ‘my child’, holy show ‘a scene, spectacle’, muppet ‘fool’.

Settled people are usually called buffers among Travellers, and the Cant word pavee is used to refer to themselves. Other Cant words, such as lush ‘drink’, lurk ‘see’, stall ‘stop’, beoir ‘woman’ and feen ‘man’ have been adopted into General Irish English slang and are frequently used by both communities.

Some features can be considered exclusive to Traveller English or rarely occurring in General Irish English. For example, mispronunciations of relatively modern words are frequent: ulcer is normally a homophone of ulster; kilos is frequently pronounced as [ˈkɪləs] and traditional as [ˈtrədɪʃənəl], which could be seen as a metathetic variant. Another commonly used metathetic feature is found in the word ask, which is pronounced as [aks].

Also, several words are used with a slightly different meaning in Traveller English. Little, for example, is often used as a term of endearment, meaning ‘sweet, nice, cute’. Especially when talking about people who have had to experience misfortune or hardship, little is used to express compassion.

In the same way, the lexeme old-fashioned (pronounced as [əʊldˈfæʃənd]) can have two semantic connotations in Traveller English: in a negative sense it can describe badly educated, spoiled and rough children; used in a positive way old-fashioned describes a clever, assertive and self-confident person.

The phrase god bless you (6 hits in the corpus) is frequently used to express one’s approval of someone’s (new-born) child:

(42) ANN: lovely girl, oh god bless her
MARY: bless her, in’t she?

Religious expressions in general are very frequent in Traveller English. While in General Irish English god and oh my god are the most commonly used religious expressions (O’Sullivan 2008: 44), Traveller English speakers prefer oh Lord or God bless you for the above-mentioned meaning. Other expressions frequently heard are the Lord have mercy on him/her (21 hits); I swear to God (8 hits); with the help of God and our Blessed Mother (2 hits), God forgive me (thit). Traveller English is also rich in religion-related
Irish Traveller English

metaphors and colourful expressions such as _he/she is a soul of a person_ or _he/she has a heart of gold_.

Similar to Clancy’s (2011) findings in a comparative study of settled speakers’ vs Travellers’ hedging, the corpus showed very little use of hedges, such as _like_, _actually_, _I think_, etc. Clancy ascribes this to macro-social factors linked to socioeconomic and educational differences between the two communities: the strength and primacy of their family network provides Travellers with an ‘assuredness of their position’, which ‘reduces the need for Traveller family members to use hedges’ (Clancy 2011: 383). In contrast, the settled community are characterised by a more individualistic ideology and higher social mobility, which results in frequent family-external communicative situations where a higher amount of hedges is natural (Clancy 2011: 384f.).

A closer look at the type of hedges used by Travellers reveals an overwhelming use of _you know_ in contrast to very few instances of _I think_. Similar to _you know_ hedges, other reassuring strategies such as directly addressing their interlocutor or frequent expressions of solidarity point to a preference of hedges that address the positive rather than negative face of the interlocutor. Clancy (2011: 385) argues that this tendency is rooted in a strong sense of community and serves to reinforce group bonds. However, the absence of hedges that have a more assertive connotation in circles of higher socioeconomic status ‘may have a direct influence on [the Travellers’] continuing marginalisation in modern-day Ireland’ (Clancy 2011: 385).

4 Conclusion

Phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical and pragmatic features of Traveller English have been shown to combine to create a variety of English that is rich in unique cultural characteristics, while at the same time it displays a great many Archaic Irish English features that are slowly being left behind by the settled Irish population. In its distinctiveness from and similarities to General Irish English, Traveller English reflects the positioning of Irish Travellers with regard to the settled Irish population. Despite their indigenously Irish origin, a secluded way of life separate from mainstream society as well as strong family ties and distinctive cultural aspects have characterized Irish Travellers for centuries, and perpetuated their variety of English.

It needs to be mentioned though that Traveller English is not a homogeneous variety, and the degree to which the vernacular is spoken depends very
much on the level of education, accommodation and nature of networks of the individual speaker. Until recently, the women in the community used to be confined to their homes looking after a big family. This is now slowly changing with women starting to look beyond the community boundaries for work or free-time activities, which therefore opens up and loosens their network ties. This development may have an impact on the use of vernacular norms and may bring about language change. O’Sullivan’s (2008: 55) study of communicative shifts in Travellers’ casual speech revealed a certain degree of accommodation towards General Irish English with regard to several pragmatic and morphosyntactic features, such as subject–verb concord, nonstandard negation, use of learn and teach, etc. However, Traveller English phonological characteristics seem to be among the most resistant to change. Pronunciation and intonation may also serve as a way to differentiate themselves favorably from the out-group in order to maintain a positive social identity (O’Sullivan 2008: 14). After all, the Irish Travellers are and perceive themselves as a separate cultural group. Years of denigration have led to a lot of opposition as well as the acquisition of a certain pride, which may be symbolically expressed by linguistic separation and the strong identification with their own variety of English.

References


Irish Traveller English


McCann, May, Séamas Ó Siocháin and Joseph Ruane, eds. 1994. *Irish Travellers: Culture and Ethnicity*. Queen’s University of Belfast.

