Markus Böttner

Varieties as the Starting Point of Second Language Acquisition: Focus on Irish English in Teaching and Learning German

Introduction

The subject matter of the present paper is Irish English as the starting point of teaching and learning German as a second language. This symbiosis of the study of the varieties of English and the study of second language acquisition (SLA) adds an aspect to the latter which has been widely neglected. Second language teaching usually starts with a look at the unfamiliar features in the target language (L2) and then focuses on their dissimilarities with familiar features in the mother tongue (L1). Moulton (1968) states:

When a Student sets out to learn a new language, he is willing – intellectually – to accept the fact that it is different and that he must learn some new and unfamiliar sounds to speak it properly. At the same time, he is so imprisoned within the world of his native English that learning these new sounds can be a very formidable task indeed (Moulton 1968: 2).

With this statement Moulton complies with the common view at the time which originated in the contrastive analysis hypothesis (Lado 1957). Foreign sounds were claimed to be difficult to acquire due to their dissimilarity with L1 sounds. However, as will be discussed in the course of the present paper, this view changed over time. Flege (1995) postulates that L2 sounds are fitted into L1 categories through equivalence classifications and that L2 sounds which are similar but not identical with L1 sounds actually pose more difficulties to learners than totally different ones (Flege 1995: 239; Siegel 2010: 141). Irish English and Irish as the starting point of the acquisition of German will serve as an example to put these approaches into a real-life perspective.

Why is Irish English highlighted here? Usually, the subject matter of the process of SLA are the mother tongue (L1) and the target language (L2), which would be English and German in this case. Nonetheless, if we take into account that there

are over 350 million native speakers of English in over 40 countries in the world, we arrive at a wide range of national and even regional dialects with their individual L1 sound categories. In other words, native speakers from Australia or England will find the German vocalic realisation of /r/ after vowels rather unproblematic as this feature exists in their own varieties. Learners from Ireland or the USA, by contrast, have to overcome their muscular habit of pronouncing a retroflex sound instead. Another example are the allophones of /l/. People from Ireland sound a nuance more German by nature as Irish English knows the German-like alveolar /l/ in all positions, whereas English English shows strong velarisation after long vowels in Scottish and American English show it in all positions.

With these examples the present author aimed to introduce the concept of native varieties as the starting point of SLA. The coming section will accommodate a contrastive description of selected phonemes in Irish[1], Irish English[2] and German. This will be followed in section 2 by an overview of relevant theoretical approaches in SLA taking into account the previously listed sound features. The paper will come full circle in section 3, as these approaches will help us to position the linguistic framework of Ireland in teaching German as an L2.

1. 740 Years of Language Contact. The Linguistic Framework of Ireland

The main scope of the present discussion is on Irish English. Why, however, is Irish included? On the one hand side, there is the pivotal, integrative role of the language in Irish society: Irish is the first L2 for the vast majority of people and spoken as L1 in the Gaeltacht areas in the West, North-West and South-West of the island.

Apart from this there is an increasing number of language enthusiasts who speak Irish as a second language and attempt to keep the language alive by using it

---

1 Irish (Gaelic) is included here as a pivotal and integrative part of society, as L1 of the vast majority of the population and because of the probable transfer on German as L2.
2 Within the brief of this paper the presentation of Irish English features has to be limited to those which are in any way relevant to German as an L2. For a comprehensive overview cf. Hickey (2007, 2004) and Kallen (1997).

as much as they can, frequently in an urban environment which is completely English-speaking (Hickey 2004: 70).

Furthermore, Irish can be found in bilingual place names and street signs, the names of political institutions and in print media as well as TV and radio. In short, an Irish person can without hesitation be considered to be familiar with the sound of Irish. On the other hand side, even when we are not looking at Irish we are looking at Irish. Without 740 years of language contact, the English language in Ireland would not sound the way it does.

1.1 Irish and English Language Contact

The first Anglo-Normans settled on the Irish east and south-east coast from 1169 onwards bringing west-Midlands and south-western English with them. From there the language spread over the rest of the country (Trudgill/Hannah 1985: 88). Nonetheless, the colonialisation of Ireland and the substitution of the Irish language by English was by no means as straight forward an undertaking. The Anglo-Norman lords put their own political power and authority in a place out of the reach of the monarchy above their loyalty to the Crown and, in fact, quickly associated with the native Irish population. This circumstance was further enhanced when King Henry VIII adopted Protestantism, which drove the Old English, as the first settlers are often called, even closer to the Catholic Irish by which they had been fully absorbed by the fifteenth century (Hickey 2007: 31f; Hickey 2004: 69). Kirk and Kallen add with a quote from Stanyhurst from the early sixteenth century that English-Irish assimilation took place to an extent that speakers spoke neither language properly (Kirk/Kallen 2006: 89). The prevailing dominance of Irish and even gaelicisation of the original settlers lead to numerous attempts by the British Crown to reinforce English rule. In the seventeenth century, specifically after the Cromwellian campaigns, new forms of English were introduced to Ireland, namely Scottish in the north of the country and west- and north-west Midlands varieties in the south. Despite these new varieties, present vernacular forms, for example in Dublin, can still be traced back to the varieties which the original settlers had brought with them (Hickey 2004: 69). Since the English plantations in the seventeenth century and laws and punishment to prevent the population from the use of Irish, educated native Irish gradually adopted the view that the English language

might be a more beneficial medium to use after all. Specifically after the great famine in the mid nineteenth century, there was a definite shift from Irish to English as the Irish language was claimed to bring bad luck over the population (Hickey 2007: 21; Kallen 1997: 2). This shift all across the country yielded a wide range of dialects of Irish English which share their distinct differences from standard British English. The more British a speaker sounds to an Irish ear, the closer the person is associated with the English establishment (Hickey 2007: 21ff; Hickey 1986: 1). On the one hand side the Irish themselves think of their dialect as a bemusing, sub-standard form of English which not even they themselves take seriously; however, on the other hand side this variety builds for them the bridge to their Irish language and culture which they feel they have neglected with the adoption of English.

1.2 Similarities between Irish, Irish English and German

Now that the role of the Irish language in Ireland has been established we will have a look at a selection of phoneme features of Irish and Irish English which are potential origins of transfer with regard to German as an L2[3].

1.2.1 Vowels

The transfer from Irish on to Irish English itself is subject to speculations. Hickey (1986) postulates that it is near to impossible to trace Irish English sounds back to Irish sounds for certain, whereas Ó Baoill (1997) expresses a contrasting opinion on this matter. Either way, the discussion which of the vowel features in Irish English have their origins in Irish and which were brought to Ireland by the English

---

3   The percentages presented here are based on two quantitative studies which have been conducted by the present author. The first study (2006) was an apparent-time study investigating the German pronunciation of 65 Irish L2 speakers of German, aged between 12 and 54. The second study, which started in 2010 and is not yet completed at the time this paper is written, is a real-time study to accompany 61 secondary school students over 2.5 years and analysing their progress in German. The sought German pronunciation is based on Moulton (1968), Russ (2010) and the German DUDEN pronunciation dictionary (Mangold 2005).

would go well beyond the scope of this paper[4]. We can assume that Irish English shows a number of features which also exist in German thus moving it closer to German than other varieties of English. In Irish English the phoneme /a/ is realised much more neutral than in other varieties (Bliss 1984: 135; Hickey 2007: 22)[5]. The sound which corresponds with the German letter <ä> also exists in Irish English (Bliss 1984: 135), for example in the pronunciation of the word *"bed"*. Both features are the result of the lowering of front vowels in Irish English whereby front vowels are articulated more open than in RP[6]. One of the most prominent vowel features of Irish English is the monophthongisation of the diphthongs in the so called face and goat lexical sett[7], hence the articulation [fe:s] and [go:t] (Hickey 2007: 22; Hickey 1986: 2; Ó Baoill 1997: 75). The resulting long /e:/ and /o:/ sounds, which are basically cardinal vowels (Wells 1996: 423), find equivalents in German.

Another feature which is prominent in northern Irish varieties but also reaches into the Midlands area is the fronted /u/ (Hickey 1986: 74). The resulting sound [y] closely resembles the German realisation of the grapheme <ü>.

1.2.2 Consonants

Starting with Irish transfer on German pronunciation we find similarities in the realisation of <ch>. According to http://nualeargais.ie/gnag/phonol.htm, a website which provides a good overview of Irish sounds, Irish knows a slender and a broad variant, whereby the slender one resembles the German palatal fricative [ç] as in *„ich"* and the broad corresponds with the velar [x] as in German *„ach"*. A reference to the similarities between the German and the Irish sounds can also be found in Russ (2010: 76f). Nonetheless, these classifications are only close resemblances. The actual pronunciation depends on the regional dialect of Irish. For example, the pronunciation of *"fiche"* [fixɐ] = En: *"twenty"* (Foclóir Póca 2001: 364) ranges from

---

4 Cf. Hickey (1986), Ó Baoill (1997) or Kirk/Kallen (2006) for a discussion on Irish-Irish English transfer

5 In the author's 2006 study, 92.8% out of 195 scrutinised tokens met the sought German /a/.

6 Hickey reduces this phenomenon to short vowels (Hickey, 1986: 80), however, there are occurrences of lowered long front vowels, for example *"eating"* being pronounced [e:tn] and *"bad"* being pronounced [ba:d].

7 Other examples are *"train, plain, boat, home"*, etc.

the German-like palatal [ç] via a post-palatal and a pre-velar slender [x][8] to the glottal [h]; whilst the articulation of *"fiuch"* [fʲux] = En: *"to boil"* (Foclóir Póca 2001: 365) resembles a slender, pre-velar or the German-like velar place of articulation [x][9]. A unique feature of Irish English is the alveolar, also known as 'clear' /l/. Standard British received pronunciation (RP) shows a velarised, 'dark' /l/ in coda position and alveolar /l/ in the offset position, whilst Scottish and American English show /l/ velarisation in all positions. In Irish English /l/ is traditionally articulated without velarisation (Ó Baoill 1997: 83; Wells 1996: 417). Nonetheless, there is a tendency among young female speakers towards velarisation[10], which is probably due to influences from other varieties through the media (Hickey 2004: 84). In German /l/ is articulated without velarisation (Moulton 1968: 16), which makes L2 speakers from Ireland sound a nuance more naturally German.

We shall now look at final devoicing. The term 'final devoicing' describes a linguistic situation in which voiced final plosives, such as /d/ in German „Hand" or /g/ in „Burg" are articulated as the voiceless [t] and [k][11]. Final devoicing is a characteristic feature of German (Russ 2010: 179). Whilst other varieties of English distinguish between voiced and voiceless plosives in the coda position (Eckman 1977: 317f), Irish English shares with German the feature of final devoicing (Hickey 2007: 57, 70, 72).

The aforementioned examples portray the similarities between Irish and German and Irish English and German, respectively. One feature of Irish English, however, must be discussed as the source of some difficulties with regard to German as an L2: it is the post-vocalic /r/. The letter <r> after vowels in German, especially after long vowels, is realised in a vocalic manner as a schwa-sound

---

8　The place of articulation of the former being just behind [ç] and the latter just behind [k, g].

9　In a section of the author's present study, 246 tokens of <ich> yielded the German [ç] in 19.9% of all cases, whilst the Irish pre-velar slender [x] was articulated in 22.3% of all cases. Regarding <ach> 23.3% of the 244 tokens were articulated as the German [x] and an additional 23.7% represented the Irish slender [x+].

10　Hickey's observation has been confirmed by the author's present study: Out of 328 occurrences of /l/ after vowels in the German reading material, a total of 55.5% did not show velarisation (male speakers: 66.7%, female speakers: 39%). This shows that /l/ velarisation occurred in 61% of female vocal utterances and 33.3% among the male 15 to 16-year-old participants.

11　Although the terms 'voiced' and 'voiceless' are being used here it should be clarified that we are also looking at those sounds at a fortis-lenis level, i.e. a sound might be articulated without voicing but still shows variation in the muscular effort involved.

(Moulton 1968: 35; Russ 2010: 35, 54). As opposed to RP, Irish English as a rhotic variety shows strong retroflexion of the tongue when pronouncing /r/ after vowels (Hickey 2007: 16, 27, 279)[12].

Before the abovementioned features can find their place in teaching German as an L2, it is indispensable to give an overview of relevant SLA approaches, which will be the subject matter of the following section.

2. SLA Theories – Transfer and Perception

The underlying concept and starting point of almost all research on second language acquisition is the concept of transfer. It explains the effect of the native language L1 as well as other previously learned languages on the target language L2. These effects can be of a positive or negative nature. Positive transfer occurs in the case of an overlap of the L1 and L2 phoneme inventories; L2 phonemes are automatically articulated correctly by language learners due to their similarity with familiar L1 sound features. By implication, dissimilarities confront language learners with difficulties and require appropriate intervention by the teacher.

The contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) utilizes the concept of transfer in order to predict and explain pronunciation errors based on the similarities and dissimilarities between L1 and L2 sound features (Lado 1957; Siegel 2010: 140). This approach could explain the strong retroflexion which the Irish participants showed when articulating the German post-vocalic /r/ (footnote 12). "However, it soon became apparent that not all learner errors are the result of transfer, and that linguistic differences between the L1 and the L2 do not necessarily lead to errors" (Siegel 2010: 140). A moderate version of the CAH in the 1970s shortened the distance between L1 and L2 sounds to find the origin of difficulties in SLA. In fact, L2 sounds which are not dramatically different from L1 sounds moved into the focus of research. Eckman (1977) touches on this with regard to marked and unmarked final plosives in English which pose difficulties to German native speakers and lead to final devoicing when they speak English (Eckman 1977: 317f). Flege condenses these approaches in his speech learning model (SLM). According to

---

12 These observations have been echoed by the author's present study: In one quantitative section 41 participants, aged 15- 17, articulated 246 tokens of /r/ after vowels in German and showed retroflexion in 81.3% of all cases.

Flege, the acquisition of L2 sounds takes place with the help of phonetic categories. If a sound is different enough from the L1, the learner establishes a separate phonetic category for that particular sound. The creation of L2 categories depends much on the learner's perception, i.e. the perceived similarity or dissimilarity of two languages. In other words: transfer is more likely to happen the closer the perceived similarity between an L1 and an L2 sound is. The more different two sounds are perceived to be, the more likely a learner will not rely on the L1 category to produce the L2 sound (Flege 1995: 239; Siegel 2010: 141). Flege's model can be applied, for example, to the alveolar, non-velarised /l/ in German (Moulton 1968: 16). Especially US-American learners of German who pronounce velarised /l/ in all positions, find it difficult to articulate it the German way. The nuance between the American English dark /l/ and the German clear /l/ is simply too small for a separate category to be created. A relevant example from the author's present study is the realisation of the German *ich* and *ach*. The 43 and 47% of participants, respectively, whose articulation at least closely resembled the two sought German fricatives, both divide roughly half and half into learners who pronounced the sounds correctly and those who showed effects of transfer from Irish. Flege's approach cannot be applied to solve the abovementioned retroflexion of the post-vocalic /r/ among Irish learners of German. From one point of view, the realisation as the vowel schwa in German should be different enough to create a separate L2 category; from another point of view, the more or less constant exposure to RP through the media and certain dialects of Irish English which show signs of vocalic or at least velarised realisation (Hickey 2007: 16) should create a category with which the German sound can be merged. As Siegel (2010) proposes, different varieties of the same language are perceived to be closer than two languages. Therefore transfer is more likely between two varieties than it is between two languages (Siegel 2010: 140 f). This implies that, in theory, the German vocalic realisation of the post-vocalic /r/ should be manageable for Irish learners of the language, be it as a separate L2 category or through the transfer from RP or less rhotic regional varieties of Irish English.

3. Implementation

In section 1 a number of phoneme features were addressed according to their potential transfer on German as an L2. For the Theoretical understanding the contrastive analysis hypothesis and Flege's speech learning model were applied to the aforementioned sound phenomena. Within the framework of the two aforementioned studies as well as through workshops given at teacher training days the author has met a large number of teachers of German. When interviewed, almost all of them identified *ich* and *ach* as the one similarity between Irish and German, which demonstrates a certain degree of awareness. Nonetheless, teachers' awareness of the above does not automatically lead to success in the students' articulation. Schatz (2001) and Dieling/Hirschfeld (2001) state that lacking pronunciation is one of the most frustrating factors for both, L2 learners and the native speakers they talk to, when repetitions have to be made by the former to be understood (Dieling/Hirschfeld 2001: 14; Schatz 2001: 51). However, how are teachers supposed to build up knowledge on the base of their awareness? Since the audio-lingual method, the methodological leg of the CAH, and the establishment of audio tapes and listen-and-repeat exercises in the classroom, actual training in phonetics and phonology has been warranted little attention in text books and teacher education. Only in the past two decades phonology has slowly made its way back into the classroom (Dieling/Hirschfeld 2001: 14). However, as most text books saw their first edition a while before that the situation remains unchanged. For example, text books for German which are printed in a German-speaking country generally lack a contrastive description of the L1 and the L2 sound systems (Schatz 2001: 51). The author's personal experience and the findings of the two aforementioned studies make clear that proper training in phonetics and phonology is an indispensable element in L2 teaching. Coming back to the abovementioned similarities between Irish and German and Flege's SLM, it would likely be more beneficial if teachers do not base the German pronunciation of *ich* on the familiar Irish fricative but, for example, instruct their students to exaggerate the initial /h/ in *huge* [hjuːdʃ]. The familiar *ach* sound has deemed helpful with regard to the German uvular /r/ sound which poses difficulties to most English native speakers. By pointing out pairs of voiced and voiceless fricatives, namely [f, v] and [s, z] the students can be made aware that the German uvular /r/ is, in fact, the voiced equivalent of [x]; through

training sessions with the participants of the present study the hitrate of the correct German sound could be raised from 0% to 14.4%. The German non-velarised /l/ and final devoicing do not require intensive training as the sounds in Irish English equal the German realisation. With regard to similar vowels in German and Irish English the only difficulty in pronouncing the German „ä" sound is caused by the unfamiliar letter; it is the teachers' responsibility to make students aware of the phonetic similarity. The long /e:/ and /o:/ sounds in *"face"* and *"goat"* contribute to the pronunciation of the German „ö" sound. Using /e:/ as the starting point, holding the tone and then pursing the lips promises to be a successful way to teach this sound[13]. Although teachers might be aware of a number of features, they find it difficult to put them into practice without sufficient training in phonetics and phonology and supplementary exercises in text books.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to emphasise two much overlooked factors and their contributory role in L2 teaching. From a linguistic point of view, teachers' and students' awareness of their own native variety, as opposed to just the native language, could improve pronunciation skills significantly. Coming back to Irish English as the subject matter of the present paper, literally every Irish person is well able to exaggerate a variety of Irish accents. The phonological awareness obviously exists and could therefore be utilised in teaching and learning German as an L2. From an SLA point of view, on the other hand, utilising the teachers' awareness requires significant changes in teacher education as well as in the development of textbooks. Just like a speech therapist, anL2 teacher should be provided with the ability to judge students' articulation and intervene if necessary. This intervention, to make the approach come full circle, would be facilitated if the teacher was aware of the native variety and its individual sound categories.

---

13 The same applies to /i:/ as the starting point in the pronunciation of the German „ü" sound [y].

Bibliography

Bliss, A. (1984): "English in the south of Ireland", in: P. Trudgill (ed.), *Language in the British Isles*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 135-151.

Dieling H./Hirschfeld, U. (2001): *Phonetik lehren und lernen. Fernstudienangebot Deutsch als Fremdsprache u. Germanistik*, Berlin: Langenscheidt.

Eckman, F. R. (1977): "Markedness and the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis", *Language Learning* 27, 315–330.

Flege, J. (1995): "Second language speech learning: Theory, findings and problems", in: W. Strange (ed.), *Speech perception and linguistic experience: Theoretical and methodological issues*, Baltimore: York Press, 233–277.

Foclóir Póca (2001): *Irish Dictionary*, Athchló.

Hickey, R. (2007): *Irish English: History and Present-Day Forms*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Hickey, R. (2004): "The Phonology of Irish English", in: B. Kortmann et al. (eds.), *Handbook of varieties of English*, Vol. 1: Phonology, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 68-97.

Hickey, R. (1986): "Possible Phonological Parallels", *English World-Wide* 7 (1), 1-21.
<http://nualeargais.ie/gnag/phonol.htm> [13/09/2012]

Kallen, J. (1997), "Irish English: Context and Contacts", in: J. Kallen (ed.), *Focus on Ireland*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1-34.

Kirk, J. M./Kallen, J. L. (2006): "Irish Standard English: How Celticised? How Standardised?", in: Tristram, H. L.C. (ed.), *The Celtic Englishes IV*, Potsdam: Potsdam Univ. Press, 88-113.

Lado, R. (1957), *Linguistics across cultures: Applied linguistics for language teachers*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Mangold, M. (2005): *Duden. Das Aussprachwörterbuch*, Mannheim/Leipzig/Wien/Zürich: Dudenverlag.

Moulton, W. G. (1968): *The Sounds of English and German*, Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

Ó Baoill, D. P. (1997): "The Emerging Irish Phonological Substratum in Irish English", in: J. Kallen (ed.), *Focus on Ireland*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 73-88.

Russ, C. V. J. (2010): *The Sounds of German*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Schatz, H. (2001): *Fertigkeit Sprechen. Fernstudienangebot Deutsch als Fremdsprache u. Germanistik*, Berlin: Langenscheidt.

Siegel, J. (2010): *Second dialect Acquisition*, New York: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Trudgill, P./Hannah, J. (1985): *International English. A Guide to Varieties of Standard English*, London.

Wells, J. C. (1996): *Accents of English*, Vol. 2: The British Isles, New York: Cambridge Univ. Press.