

A NOTE ABOUT DIALECT

One of the more interesting aspects of my job as a production dialect designer is researching the language of the play I'm working on. (Well, actually, I think all aspects are fascinating; but then, I should!) While the languages of the play and the company are (usually) both English, varieties of English can be very different indeed.

I've done several Irish plays, including three at the Mint. But *Temporal Powers* poses the most linguistic challenges for American speakers and listeners. Why is Irish English so different from American English? And why is it "denser" in this play than in Teresa Deevy's *Wife to James Whelan*, which we did here last season? To find out, I had to hit the books.

Historians agree that Ireland's first exposure to English occurred in the 12th century, but its progress was slow until the mid-16th century, when the English Tudors launched a series of invasions and colonizing resettlements that lasted through the Stuarts and finally Oliver Cromwell. The last mass migration from England to Ireland took place in the 17th century—thereafter the traffic all ran the other way. That's why Irish English can sound like Shakespeare, or the King James Version of the Bible, with word order and usage that seems archaic to us.

The other main influence on the development of English in Ireland was Irish Gaelic. While some aspects of Irish English can be traced to Shakespeare's day or earlier, a great proportion of its syntax (everything from word order to verb tenses and beyond) and some vocabulary are directly traceable to Gaelic—which enriched the English language even as Ireland's native language (and its speakers) were systematically impoverished and suppressed.

Gaelic influence tended (and tends still) to be heard more strongly in rural areas, where there was less direct contact with British English. This effect was somewhat lessened during the 20th century, as "talkies" and radio, then television, carried more urban, Anglo-influenced language to the wider population. This may partly explain why *Wife to James Whelan* (written only a few years later than *Temporal Powers*, but set in a different era) was more accessible to the Americans in our company; but so perhaps does the nature of the community and its characters.

So, how is Irish English different from British and American Englishes? For starters, there are English terms that have both standard English and special Irish English meanings. This can be very confusing until you sort out which meaning applies! You could write a book about every difference, including grammar and syntax (and people have), but I won't. I'll just list a few words and idioms that we've encountered in our play.

Whisper can mean *listen* • **Till** can mean *so, in order that* • **And** can mean *as, while, with, even who* • **After** can mean *has just done, just happened* • **Over** can mean *eastwards, in the east* • **True for you** [*him, her*] means *You're right [he's, she's right]* • **Have a right to** means *should*

And did you know that *so long*, meaning goodbye, comes from the Gaelic *slán*? I'd had no idea. That's why I love doing this part of the work; I always learn something!

Slán for now ...

Amy Stoller