

### Foreword to Celtic Englishes III

Is mór an chúis áthais dom gur iarr an tOllamh Hildegard L.C. Tristram orm réamhrá a scríobh do leabhar na comhdhála “The Celtic Englishes III”, a raibh sé de phribhléid agam bheith i láthair ann i nGolm i mí Mheán Fómhair 2001. Is liosta le háireamh a bhfuil déanta thar na blianta ag an Ollamh Tristram chun léann na gCeilteach, na hÉireann agus na Gaeilge a chur chun cinn ar fud na Gearmáine. Ábhar thar a bheith spéisiúil ba théama don chomhdháil seo, arbh í an tríú comhdháil i dtionscnamh faoin ábhar seo í: tionchar na dteangacha Ceilteacha ar an mBéarla a labhtar go forleathan i ngach tír Cheilteach, seachas an Bhriotáin, a iniúchadh. Is fada staidéar ar siúl ar thionchar na Gaeilge ar Bhéarla na hÉireann, ach is é seo an chéad uair, go bhfios domsa, gur tugadh faoina bhfuil i bpáirt ag na teangacha Ceilteacha ina dtionchair ar Bhearlaí a dtíortha éagsúla a rianú go heolaíochtúil. Don Ollamh Tristram a bhuíochas sin, agus is mór atáimid faoina comaoin. Gura fada buan í!

It is a pleasure to be invited by Professor Hildegard L.C. Tristram to write a few words by way of introduction to the proceedings of the “Celtic Englishes III” colloquium, which I was privileged to attend at Golm in September 2001. Professor Tristram’s noteworthy contribution to studies relating to the languages of Ireland and the other Celtic countries is widely known and recognised, and is highly valued by Ambassador Fahey and by all at the Embassy. She it was, I understand, who popularised the term “the Celtic Englishes” to describe the varieties of English which are now widely spoken in all Celtic countries except Brittany, and to examine how these may have been influenced by Celtic languages. The influence of Irish on Hiberno-English has been widely studied. What is novel in the Celtic Englishes project is the search for influence on English by linguistic elements common to the Celtic languages.

This is, to my mind, a very laudable and relevant research direction. Whatever may have been the situation in the distant past, the central characteristic of present-day Celticity for many scholars is not blood or race, or even geography, but language. A passable definition is that Celts are those who speak, or whose ancestors spoke, a Celtic language. An advantage of this definition is that anybody who is not a Celt, but would like to be, can become one by the simple expedient of learning a Celtic language, and he or she has six Celtic languages to choose from! A first step in this direction may be an English language course in Ireland, which is rightly proud of its literary contribution in its two official languages.

The common characteristics of the Celtic languages are clear and verifiable: a by no means exhaustive list would include features such as initial mutation; the VSO (Verb-Subject-Object) word order, in contrast to the more usual SVO order in European languages; a very flexible word order which moves to the beginning of sentences the elements to be stressed; the infamous “prepositional pronouns”, the bane of the life of so many schoolchildren; the fondness for noun-phrases rather than verbal phrases; progressive constructions with the substantive verb (which Celtic languages have in common with English); the presence of a separate tense to express the habitual present of the verb “to be”; the absence of a verb meaning “to have”. Indeed some have been known to comment that the latter feature shows the traditional Celtic conviction that what one is, is far more important than what one has.

It is entirely legitimate that the Celtic Englishes should be the subject of scientific study, to determine how, and to what extent, they are influenced by their respective Celtic languages. As somebody who grew up in a rural part of Co. Tipperary this particular influence was of more than academic relevance to me as a child. I remember being regularly punished in primary school because, in common with a lot of local children, I used the Hiberno-English contrast “I am now/I do be every day” to translate the Irish “táim anois/bím gach lá”. As standard English does not have this verbal contrast, I was told that “English children do not speak like that!” when I asked why it was wrong. The unfairness was apparent to my five-year-old inner voice, which silently insisted “But I am not an English child!” This childhood experience left me with a heightened awareness of language, of the injustice of the strong imposing their language on the weak, and of the political need for linguistic equal opportunity as a basic human right. The latter has clear implications for the process of European integration.

The academic study of the Celtic Englishes plays a further important role by granting increased legitimacy to non-RP varieties of the language. In this it is in tune with a general trend: contrast the variety of regional accents that can now be heard on the BBC to the almost exclusive RP era of a generation ago. The reflection of this change in the learning of English by Continental students is of vital importance. It will put students in contact with the living, vibrant Englishes of the Celtic countries, and will make them more conscious of the multiplicity of modern English. If I may be permitted a slight promotion of Ireland, I have heard from many Spanish students that they find the Irish pronunciation of the words “cap, cup, carp” far more distinct and easily learned than their RP equivalents, where the three words sound identical to the Spanish ear.

To end on a light note, which highlights the inherent ambiguity of human language: a Texan visiting Ireland fell into conversation with a Kerry farmer, who asked him how he liked Ireland. The Texan said that he was enjoying his stay enormously. “Ireland is beautiful, the people are very friendly, but back in Texas everything is much bigger. For instance, when I get into my automobile, it takes me two days just to drive round my ranch.” To which the Kerryman replied: “We had a car like that too, but we got rid of it.”

I wish the Celtic Englishes project continued success in its invaluable work.

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