



IRISH

Language & Culture

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 **An Gaeltacht** (Irish-speaking areas)



 0 50 km
0 25 miles

Off wit' ye now



A SHORT HISTORY OF IRISH



Look out for these...

CLASSIC PHRASE:

OLD COUNTRY

A term used with nostalgia by Irish immigrants to refer to their homeland

TRY THIS ONE:

BLARNEY

A person talking blarney may be speaking nonsense to deceive or flatter, or they may be helping placate a situation with charming talk

USE WITH CAUTION:

PADDY

Offensive slang term for an Irish man and often the butt of jokes

MISUNDERSTANDINGS:

ST PATRICK

The patron saint of Ireland is not Irish at all, but a Welshman born with the name Succat



A SHORT HISTORY OF IRISH

A way with words

‘Ah, Ireland...that damnable, delightful country, where everything that is right is the opposite of what it ought to be.’

Benjamin Disraeli

Of all their national traits, characteristics and cultural expressions, it's perhaps the way the Irish speak and write that best distinguishes them. Indeed, scattered all over the globe by hardship, oppression and these days just for kicks, the Irish have had to ingratiate themselves in many foreign lands. You have to wonder if they'd have done so well if it wasn't for the lilting eloquence of their speech and their easy, mischievous charm – a direct result of how they speak.

For all their funny accents, the Irish are masters of the English language, or at least their version of it. They're generally confident orators, have excellent elocution and like nothing more than a good debate (preferably over a pint). It's for this reason that thousands of foreign students flock to Irish shores every summer to study English. Well, come on, it certainly wouldn't be the weather that attracts them, would it?

“BLARNEY

— FRIVOLOUS NONSENSE ”



How English is spoken in Ireland (a language known by scholars as Hiberno-English and in this book as Irish English) is the result of almost a millennium of struggle between the native Irish and the marauding English tongue. It's a linguistic record of the clash between Irish and English cultures that's taken place ever since the Anglo-Normans came to Ireland for their holidays in the 12th century (and ended up staying on) and particularly since the Plantations (of Irish lands by English lords) from the late 16th century.

“CHANCER

— A DODGY CHARACTER ”

When cultures clash, the oppressed inevitably learn the language of their oppressors and so it's gone in Ireland for centuries. Despite being pushed to the margins and preserved as a first language in only a few remote parts of Ireland, which are known as the **Gaeltacht** (pronounced *gayl-takht*), the Irish language grafted itself onto the local version of English by imposing its rhythms, pronunciation patterns and grammatical peculiarities.

This hybrid quality is what makes Irish English unique. Touching the tip of the iceberg, have you ever noticed how the Irish rarely give straight 'yes' or 'no' answers? It goes against their instincts because there are no direct translations of either word in Irish. This avoidance of monosyllabic answers just might be part of the reason it's so easy to strike up a conversation with an Irish person.

Another example of Irish influence on Irish English is in the area of pronunciation. The sound system of Irish doesn't allow for an *s* sound before a *t*, an *n* or an *l*, opting instead for a *sh* sound. The influence of this pronunciation rule is still felt in the Irish English spoken in the west of Ireland where,



for example, the word ‘strike’ is pronounced ‘shtrike’. So it’s not that they’ve no discipline when it comes to pronunciation, it’s just that, thanks to Irish, they play by a different set of rules. The influence of Irish is also why you’ll often hear characteristic forms such as **he’s after going to the shops** (meaning ‘he’s just gone’), which have been incorporated into Irish English based on Irish grammatical models.

The linguistic impact of the contact between Irish and English is most clearly preserved in the prose and dialogue of Irish writers and playwrights from the early 20th century, particularly Sean O’Casey and JM Synge. These writers eloquently captured the language and vernacular of the working-class Irish people at a time when the battle between the English and Irish languages was still, perhaps literally, ringing in their ears. The impact can also be gauged in those areas where Irish is still spoken as a mother tongue or where it has survived until recently. Dialects of Irish English in **Gaeltacht** regions diverge most markedly from Standard English.

The second-biggest influence on modern Irish English came, not so much from the conflict between English and Irish but from the historical links between Scotland and Ulster (see the section on Ulster English, page 13).

You’ll be a richer person for experiencing Irish English and this humble little book (that’s Irish modesty) will be your trusty companion as you begin your voyage of discovery (that’s Irish **blarney**).

Iron Age warriors

The Iron Age warriors known as the Celts, who arrived on Irish shores from Eastern Europe around 500 BC, could not have imagined the far-reaching impact they’d have on their little island home. The Celtic language they brought with them (known as **Goidelic**) formed the basis of what’s known as **Primitive Irish**. The first record of this language comes from inscriptions in the **Ogham** alphabet on stone monuments up to