

The Language of Punch Cartoons

Raymond Hickey
University of Limerick

The English satirical magazine *Punch* was founded in 1841 and ran continuously until 1992 and was revised briefly from 1996 to 2002. Throughout the nineteenth century it provided comments on news and current affairs, famously containing cartoons offering satirical comments on issues of the day, both social, demographic and political. These often involved Ireland with black-and-white illustrations accompanying text commentary. In addition, captions for the illustrations were provided frequently in the form of direct speech of the figures shown in the drawings.

There is a close connection between satire and the use of dialect in *Punch*. This concerns not just Irish figures but Scottish and Welsh as well. However, most regional satire in the magazine involved the Irish, given the many political issues concerning the county in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, such as land reform. The stance adopted by *Punch* was in keeping with the widespread anti-Irish sentiment found in Victorian Britain (Swift 1990; De Nie 2004; Forker 2012) and part of the negative, stereotypical portrayal of the Irish was by means of dialect features which were clearly not English.

The language in the captions of the *Punch* cartoons about the Irish from 1841 to the end of WWI for the main focus. The features used in the words put in the mouths of the characters in the illustrations are examined to see if they correspond to what is known of Irish English in the nineteenth-century and earlier (Hickey 2007, 2007, 2010). Furthermore, the question of what traits (mostly phonetic, see the discussions and analyses in Hickey 2023, 2024) were *not* represented raises the question of the salience of dialect features for outsiders, in this case for English people writing about Irish affairs.

Both the illustrators and the writers of text for *Punch* throughout the nineteenth century are generally known, e.g. Sir John Tenniel for drawings and William Makepeace Thackeray for articles. However, it is difficult to pinpoint a particular writer given that the “author” of a satirical piece is often simply “Mr. Punch”. Nonetheless, there is clearly a symbiotic relationship between text and image in the magazine and the aspect of multimodality will also be investigated in the present paper.

Furthermore, the position of *Punch* among its predecessors (e.g. George Cruikshank’ *Comic Almanack* 1835-53) and in the landscape of journalistic satire and political cartoons (Baym and Jones 2017), from the nineteenth century and up to the present. This context of political satire, which rose to new heights in the eighteenth-century and represented the background to Victorian writings in this vein will form a central part of the study and the position of *Punch* in the history of satire in England (Palmeri 2004; O’Shaughnessy 2019) will be examined.

References

- Baym, Geoffrey and Jeffrey P. Jones (eds) 2017 *News Parody and Political Satire across the Globe*. London: Routledge.
- Cruikshank, George et al. 1835-53. *The Comic Almanack*. London: Charles Tilt and others.
- De Nie, Michael 2004. *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798-1882*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Forker, Martin 2012. The use of the 'Cartoonist's Armoury' in manipulating public opinion: Anti-Irish imagery in nineteenth-century British and American periodicals, *Journal of Irish Studies* 27: 58-71.
- Hickey, Raymond 2007. *Irish English. History and Present-day Forms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hickey, Raymond 2008. 'Feature loss in 19th century Irish English', in: Terttu Nevalainen, Irma Taavitsainen, Päivi Pahta and Minna Korhonen (eds) *The Dynamics of Linguistic Variation: Corpus Evidence on English Past and Present*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 229-243.
- Hickey, Raymond 2010. 'Irish English in early modern drama. The birth of a linguistic stereotype', in: Raymond Hickey (ed). *Varieties of English in Writing. The Written Word as Linguistic Evidence*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 121-138.
- Hickey, Raymond 2023. *Sounds of English Worldwide*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hickey, Raymond (ed.) 2024. *The Oxford Handbook of Irish English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Molesworth, Jesse 2019. Graphic satire: Hogarth and Gillray. In Paddy Bullard (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Eighteenth-Century Satire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 298-319.
- O'Shaughnessy, David 2019. National identity and satire. In Paddy Bullard (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Eighteenth-Century Satire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 91-107.
- Palmeri, Frank 2004. Cruikshank, Thackeray, and the Victorian eclipse of satire. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 44.4 (*The Nineteenth Century*): 753-777.
- Swift Roger 1990. *The Irish in Britain 1815-1914: Perspectives and Sources*. London: The Historical Association.