The Language of Irish Writing in English

Carolina P. Amador-Moreno

13.1 Introduction

The concept of ‘perceptual dialectology’ is defined by Preston (1999: xxv) as a sub-branch of folk linguistics that represents the interest in language use by dialectologists, sociolinguists and variationists. This area of investigation is particularly concerned with what non-specialists have to say about variation: ‘Where do they believe it comes from? Where do they believe it exists? What do they believe is its function?’ One of the principal techniques developed for perceptual dialectology in the 1980s included, for example, drawing boundaries on a blank map around areas where the respondents thought regional speech zones existed (Preston and Howe 1987), a method also employed by Hickey (2005: 99–105) in the context of Irish English, in order to test what conceptions of dialect areas non-specialist speakers had for Ireland. In Hickey’s survey, the majority of the Dublin respondents distinguished between two forms of Dublin English: a northern, more vernacular form, and a southern form, which they referred to in the map returns as Dublin 4 (or D4). Such a division was also recognised by 39 per cent of the non-Dublin respondents. This distinction, together with prescriptive comments such as ‘strong’ or ‘hard’ to describe the north Dublin accent, or ‘posh’, ‘snobbish’, ‘phony’ to refer to the Southside/Dublin 4 accent, is a good barometer with which to measure non-specialists’ beliefs and attitudes towards the English spoken in Dublin.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss how non-specialised perceptions of Dublin English can be employed in order to signal current language use, as well as class, and gender differences. Non-specialists in this context refers to speakers who have had no formal linguistic training, and it includes those who may show a certain degree of linguistic awareness.
in their perception of language use. Fiction writers who use dialogue as a tool to imbue their stories with realism also fall into that category.

Many authors, as is well known, employ linguistic features that characterise natural conversation, including those who write memoirs, biographies and even standard non-fiction, because these features help them illustrate rather than just describe what they want to say. The type of information that can be gleaned from the use of dialogue, as I have argued elsewhere (Amador-Moreno 2010b, 2012: 22; Amador-Moreno and McCafferty 2015), helps authors construct characters without having to resort to descriptions. However, much of what is selected by fiction writers as representative of a particular type/group of speaker(s) is inevitably influenced by subjective factors: it reflects the author’s own perception of how others speak. In such domains, representational practices can arise and become traditions (Hickey 2010: 14), both in the context of fiction and in the general public psyche, and stereotypes can become perpetuated. In the process of *enregisterment*, defined as that ‘through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms’ (Agha 2003: 231), literary works are among the most influential elements that contribute to the systematic and structured use of what could be considered a linguistic shibboleth. In the Irish context, for example, the creation of the stereotypical figure of the *Stage Irishman* has often been based on linguistic characterisation through time (see Hickey 2007: 297–301, Walshe 2009: 5–14, Amador-Moreno 2010a: 89–109, and McCafferty 2010 for Northern Irish English specifically). In this sense, when examining the way authors represent dialects, it seems pertinent to consider what sort of socio-historical (or other non-linguistic) factors influence perception. Does fiction writing contribute to the creation of certain linguistic trends that may end up being associated with specific speech communities? Does the fact that certain authors show an interest in replicating real spoken discourse in their work influence readers’ perception of how a particular speech community speaks? Or is the author’s own perception of language use just a convenient tool that allows him/her to connect with readers? Reader/spectator/viewer identification clearly plays an important role in the success of a novel, a play, a film or a television programme. And, as Quaglio (2009: 13) puts it, ‘it is through language that this identification is achieved and popular culture is expressed and reflected’.

This chapter discusses how the perception that fiction writers have of a particular dialect plays a key role in the process of enregisterment, a useful framework developed by Agha (2003) that combines various linguistic theories to describe how a set of linguistic features that start to