Brogues and Blarney

The representation of Irish speech in American comics

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From the earliest days, Irish characters have played a prominent role in American comics. The hero of *Hogan's Alley*, the first American comic strip to feature a speech balloon, was an Irish child named Mickey Dugan, a.k.a. "The Yellow Kid". Likewise, the star of *Happy Hooligan*, the first US comic strip to employ speech balloons on a regular basis, was Irish. Thus, not only are Irish characters important in the early history of American comics, their speech is too. The way that this was represented resembled existing portrayals in pop culture, involving respellings, non-standard grammar and lexical items deemed typical of the variety. While some of these continued to index Irishness in comics, others also emerged. Building on previous research, this study examines a corpus of American comics from numerous genres and publishing houses to offer the most comprehensive overview yet of Irish speech in the medium.

Keywords: comic books, Irish speech, indexicality, linguistic stereotypes, literary dialect

1. Introduction

In his 2018 study on the origins of American popular culture, Dowd notes the seismic cultural shift that took place in American society between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: "In less than 50 years, the United States went from having no significant popular culture to being a country substantially defined by popular culture" (Dowd 2018: 3). There were two reasons for this: The first was that increased industrialization enabled the widespread production and dissemination of pop culture materials throughout the country, creating a thriving market for comic strips, joke books, song sheets, humorous postcards and other

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ephemera.[1] The second was that a surge in nationalism led to a desire for a shared national culture, to which pop culture contributed greatly. It served as “a dynamic, discursive space in which communal identity constructions (including ethnic identity constructions)” could occur and in which identities could be “proposed, tested, rehearsed, revised, and (sometimes) rejected” (Dowd 2018: 4). Therefore, even if pop culture has traditionally been ignored, trivialized or even disdained as a subject of academic study (cf. Werner 2022: 2), it would be a mistake to dismiss the impact that early caricatures, comic strips, joke books and other disposable pop culture products had on American society. After all, as Dowd rightly observes, “[c]ommercial publications and entertainments affected the daily lives of Americans more frequently and consistently, and perhaps more substantively, than many more highly regarded works of cultural note” (Dowd 2018: 1). This notion is borne out by the fact that surveys from the 1920s and 1930s showed that more Americans read the comics in their daily newspaper than read the front page story (Gordon 1998: 85–86). What is more, given that these comics and other forms of pop culture frequently resorted to stereotypical depictions of the many ethnic groups who were still finding their place in American society, the way in which these groups were portrayed in word and image would prove to be of great, and lasting, importance (see Cutler 2023). This is because pop culture served as “an echo chamber for stereotypes, repeating them, amplifying them, and occasionally distorting them” (Dowd 2018: 4). While this applied to stereotypes of all minorities, it was particularly true of the Irish.

Although other minorities were also lampooned in US pop culture, the Irish proved to be ideal figures of fun. After all, “centuries of English stereotyping had constructed the Irish as mirthful, musical clowns”, meaning that their character “came prefigured as an object of amusement in a way that no other ethnic or racial group in America did” (Dowd 2018: 16). Indeed, the Irish had to do little more than open their mouths to be subjected to ridicule. Commenting on the depiction of the Irish accent in popular song sheets, Williams notes that “the brogue itself, the very manner of native Irish speech in English, was, by definition, humorous. Originally an English conceit, this assumption slid easily into American popu-

1. With its dual focus on mass production and wide reception, Dowd’s description of *popular* culture is very much in keeping with the definition of *pop* culture recently set out by Werner & Schubert (2023: 1), who define pop culture “as a cover term for objects and practices in various modes that (i) are designed to appeal to a mass audience, (ii) have a recreational/entertainment function, (iii) are regularly pre-planned, (semi-) scripted, and fictional, and (iv) are globally distributed through mass media channels, chiefly by means of the English language”. Thus, while distinctions are often made between the terms *pop* culture and *popular* culture (Werner 2018: 5), for the purpose of this study they are interchangeable.

lar culture" (1996: 61).[2] However, the Irish were not portrayed solely as objects of amusement, but also as objects of scorn. Images of the Irish as wild and violent had long been perpetuated via the English stage and press and proved to be particularly difficult to leave behind, with Mooney noting that "Irish emigrants arriving in the United States in the nineteenth century found that the stereotype of the savage, drunken Paddy had crossed the Atlantic before them" (2015: 2). This stereotype was manifested in a particularly brutal fashion in the caricatures of satirical publications such as *Puck* and *Harper's Weekly*, which imagined the Irish as "rough and primitive, uncivilized and uncivilizable," and characterized them as "a subhuman species" (Kimmel 2006: 58). It was only when Irish immigrants began to gain a foothold in American society that their portrayals in pop culture began to change. According to Appel and Appel, "traits once regarded as objectionable or ludicrous – for example, the Irish propensity to fight and quarrel, and their love of strong drink and blarney – were, within a generation or two, transmuted into amusing foibles or quaint, endearing traits" (Appel & Appel 1990: 14). Even Frederick Burr Opper, an artist who had been responsible for some of the most objectionable images of Irishness in *Puck*, began to soften and created the long-running comic strip *Happy Hooligan*, with an Irish tramp as its loveable hero (Soper 2005). This shift to more positive portrayals of the Irish in comic strips can be attributed not only to protests by Irish groups, such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians, but also to advertisers' desire to appeal to the widest possible audience, thereby forcing publishers "to increasingly tone down ethnic jests and offer something more open and culturally inclusive" (Dowd 2018: 166). Thus, by the time comic strips became comic books in the 1930s, portrayals of the Irish in both image and word had been greatly rehabilitated. Not only did they look different, but they sounded different, too.

It is these new representations of Irish speech in comic books that are the focus of this study. By examining the speech of Irish characters in two-hundred American comic books published between 1943 and 2021, this research aims to discover what features are used to signify Irishness in the medium and whether they resemble those found in previous studies. The paper begins by outlining previous research into stylized representations of Irish speech in comics, before moving on to describe the newly compiled *US Comics Corpus* and outlining the

2. Humorous connotations of the Irish accent were already articulated by Jonathan Swift in the early 18th century: "What we call the Irish *brogue* is no sooner discovered, than it makes the deliverer, in the last degree, ridiculous and despised; and from such a mouth, an Englishman expects nothing but bulls, blunders and follies" (1728: 346). The bulls referred to here are paradoxical statements that at first appear to make sense, such as "If it weren't so crowded here all the time, they'd do a lot more business" (Wilde 1983: 135).

methodology used to classify and quantify the features therein. This is followed by a breakdown of the findings and a discussion of how these features fit into the broader picture of Irish speech in pop culture.

2. Previous research

To date, there has been comparatively little research into the portrayal of the Irish in comic books, with most works focusing on their representation in political cartoons and comic strips from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Examples include studies on the depiction of the Irish in satirical magazines, such as *Punch* (Perry Curtis Jr. 1971; Weimer 1993) and *Puck* (Appel 1971), and on the evolution of the image of the Irish in caricatures more generally (Appel & Appel 1973, 1990; Dowd 2018; Pearl 2009; Soper 2005). Much of the attention in these works has been on the visual portrayal of the Irish, on the unflattering, ape-like appearance of these dumb and often violent Irish characters, an image that persisted to some degree well into the late twentieth century (Burke 2019; Drennig 2010). Such images became the norm because artists simply "repeated the visual rhetoric of the simianized Celt until it became so pervasive and consistent as to form a broadly understood visual language" (Dowd 2018: 164). However, it was not just the visual language that was repeated to the point that it became synonymous with Irishness. The supposed speech of Irish characters underwent a similar process, with the repetition of the same few stock features conjuring up the voice of the Irish in the minds of American readers. These recurring features had their origin in the Stage Irish tradition (Bartley 1954; Mooney 2015), but were also perpetuated by Finley Peter Dunne in his successful syndicated "Mr. Dooley" newspaper columns (Morath 2004) and by other writers via the lyrics of popular songs (Williams 1996). Indeed, as Tysell notes in her examination of early comics, "in his attempts to represent dialect peculiarities, the comic-strip author largely follows established literary conventions. Rightly or wrongly the various brogues and dialects have acquired certain conventional earmarks, and these earmarks the artist invariably employs" (1935: 48–49). Many of the typical earmarks for Irish accents are evident in the dialogue shown as (1), taken from a cartoon published in *Caricature* in 1911.

(1) **MIKE:** "Oi hear they do be sindin' missages now widout woires er poles. Faith, it's wondherful toimes we're livin' in, Dinnis!"

DENNIS: "It is, Moike. Shure, th' way things is goin' we'll be able t thravel widout lavin' home, wan av thim days."

Although there has been no in-depth linguistic study into the features employed in early cartoons and caricatures, the examples above and those noted by Weimer (1993) correspond to those identified by Hickey (2007) elsewhere as being common in representations of Irish pronunciation in writing. These include TH-fortition (<tank> for <thank>), T/D-dentalisation (<dhrop> for <drop>, <thravels> for <travels>), S-palatalisation (<wesht> for <west>), post-sonorant devoicing (<kilt> for <killed>), post-sonorant stop deletion (<poun'> for <pound>), short E-raising (<gintleman> for <gentleman>), OL-diphthongisation (<ould> for <old>), unraised long E (<mate> for <meat>), long I-retention (<me> for <my>), WH/W-approximation (<phaat> for <what>), and final-O-fronting or reduction to schwa (<folly> for <follow> and <fella> for <fellow>) (Hickey 2007: 304–306). Another prominent one is the spelling <oi> to suggest [əɪ], as in <foine> for <fine>. Together, these respellings comprise "a repertoire of stock features which were generally assumed to be representative of Irish English" (Hickey 2007: 301).

In addition to conveying Irishness via such respellings, caricaturists employed a selection of lexical and grammatical features that were associated with the Irish. As before, the lack of quantitative linguistic studies of this early material means that one has to rely on scholars' impressionistic comments regarding the features used. Weimer (1993: 466–467), for instance, notes that some of the most common lexical items or expressions include religious oaths such as *The blessed saints preserve us!* (1993: 471) or euphemistic exclamations such as *bejabers*, *begorra*, and *bedad*, all of which are supposed to emphasize the 'emotionality' and 'wildness' of the Irish. When it comes to grammatical features that suggest Irishness, he further singles out the use of *them* as a demonstrative pronoun, the use of *what* as a relative pronoun, the use of *will* rather than *shall* with the first person singular in questions, the lack of subject-verb concord, and the use of the tag *is it?* to create questions (Weimer 1993: 466). A comprehensive quantitative analysis of early caricatures and comic strips on both sides of the Atlantic would offer much clearer insights into the ways in which Irish speech was typically conveyed at that time.

The studies that are most relevant to the current one were conducted by Walshe (2012, 2013), and focus on the representation of Irish English (IrE) in superhero comics published by Marvel and DC, respectively. These are relevant, not only because they move away from individual caricatures and comic strips and look at comic books, but also because they are the first studies to offer in-depth quantitative analyses of the way Irish speech is conveyed in the medium. For each analysis, Walshe compiled corpora of 150 comics to examine the speech of some of the most prominent Irish characters in the superhero genre, including Banshee and Jack O'Lantern. In each corpus, the comics were taken from dozens of different series by dozens of different writers or writing teams over several decades,

thereby ensuring a representative picture of the portrayal of Irish speech in the genre. Interestingly, the findings proved to be very similar for both studies, not only in terms of the features used, but also in terms of their relative frequency to one another, suggesting that there may be an established hierarchy among the catalogue of features that signify Irishness. It was also noteworthy that those features were not necessarily the ones that had been associated with Irish speech in earlier representations. In fact, both comics corpora showed a move away from the heavily accented representations that had been all the rage in comic portrayals from the late nineteenth-century when "America was crazy about dialect literature" and "every predominant ethnic group was linguistically lampooned in popular poetry and prose" (Jones 1999: 1). Instead, Irishness in these comics was marked less by traditional respellings to suggest phonological features than by allegro speech features (Preston 1985: 328), such as elision and the use of weak forms, as indicated here in italics: "C'mon, *ye* black-hearted sons *o'* toads, if it's me skin *ye* want – *ye*'ll have to work *fer* it!" (Walshe 2013: 18).

Grammatical features were also used sparingly to create a sense of Irishness, with the most common ones in both corpora being the use of the progressive with stative verbs, as in "*I'll be knowin*' how t' do me own job, thank ye very much" (Walshe 2012: 278), *it*-clefting, as in "*it's wrong I hope they are*" (Walshe 2013: 115) and the lack of negator contraction, as in "*I'll not*" rather than "*I won't*", for example (Walshe 2013: 115). A much more common way of evoking Irishness was to pepper the texts with lexical items associated with the variety, such as *lad*, *lass*, *bucko* and *boyo*. These were particularly prevalent when used in the vocative form. Likewise, religious exclamations and oaths occurred frequently and in a wide variety of ways. Given the similarities regarding the features used to portray Irishness in superhero comics from the Marvel and DC universes, it will be interesting to see whether the same applies in the current study and whether the features that have come to be associated with Irish speech in twentieth-century comics have become enregistered.

3. Data and method

The aim of this study is to conduct the most comprehensive analysis of Irish speech in US comics to date. To that end, unlike previous studies by Walshe (2012, 2013), which were limited to the speech of a few prominent Irish characters in superhero comics published by America's two most successful comic book publishers, this corpus includes a much wider array of Irish figures. These are taken from a broader range of genres and include publications from over two dozen different companies, such as Amalgalm Comics, American Comics Group

(ACG), Archie Comics, Aspen Comics, Bongo Comics, Charlton Comics, Crestwood Publications, Dell Comics, Dynamic Publications, Dynamite Comics, EC Comics, Fantagraphics, Fox Feature Syndicate, Gemstone Comics, Gold Key, ID Comics, IDW Publishing, Image Comics, Standard Comics, Top Cow Productions, Valiant Comics, Walt Disney Comics, and Warren Publishing. While this new corpus also includes publications by DC and Marvel, these go beyond the superhero genre and do not feature any of the characters previously explored by Walshe (2012, 2013), thus ensuring a completely new dataset. The result is the *US Comics Corpus*, consisting of 200 American comic books published between 1943 and 2021.

The texts that comprise the corpus were found by searching online forums, wikis and catalogues, such as fandom.com and mycomicbookshop.com, for mentions of American comics set in Ireland or for storylines featuring Irish characters abroad. In the case of the latter, it was not unusual, for example, to find members of the Irish Republican Army on the run in the US or offering their services as munitions experts. Likewise, although mythological figures such as the banshee and the leprechaun would be expected to appear in comics set in Ireland, they also appear in horror and humorous comics set on the other side of the Atlantic and thus were included.

The 200 comics in the corpus comprise a total of 78,026 words and can be roughly subdivided by genre: 80 superhero (24,052 words), 60 horror (31,889 words), 40 humorous (16,409 words) and 20 miscellaneous (5,676 words). The superhero subcorpus includes high-profile titles such as *Green Arrow*, *Iron Fist* and *Daredevil*, in which the masked heroes typically cross paths with Irish terrorists. The horror subcorpus, in contrast, comprises anthology collections, such as *Secrets of Haunted House*, *Ghosts*, *The Unexpected* and *House of Secrets*, which usually involve tales of haunted houses, ancient curses or evil spirits. The humorous subcorpus, meanwhile, features family favorites, such as *Scooby Doo*, *Daffy Duck*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and *Mickey Mouse Adventures*, and, again, often includes encounters with mischievous leprechauns or other magical creatures. Finally, the miscellaneous subcorpus consists of a selection of comics that belong to the jungle, adventure and romance genres, including *Sheena the She-Devil*, *The Further Adventures of Indiana Jones*, *Lara Croft Tomb Raider* and *Young Romance*.

Although the subcorpora differ in size, it was never the intention to have equal samples from the different genres. The aim was to simply gather as many comics as possible featuring Irish speech in order to create the most comprehensive collection yet assembled. Nonetheless, grouping the comics into the different subcorpora enables one to observe whether there are any genre-specific trends in the findings. In the event of that being the case, and there being particular features that occur more prominently in, say, humorous or horror comics, these will be

Table 1. Breakdown of the US Comics Corpus

Genre	No. of comics	Word count	Sample titles
Superhero	80	24,052	*Aquaman, Black Knight, Bloodshot, Metamorpho, Web of Spider-Man, Wonder Woman*
Horror	60	31,889	*Adventures into Darkness, Grimm's Ghost Stories, Haunt of Fear, House of Mystery, The Twilight Zone*
Humorous	40	16,409	*Bugs Bunny's Christmas Funnies, Donald Duck and Friends, Pinky and the Brain, Stanley and his Monster, Tom and Jerry Comics*
Miscellaneous	20	5,676	*Dynamic Comics, Executive Assistant Violet, GI Joe Origins, Savage Tales, Vampirella*

pointed out during the analysis. If not, then the findings of the individual subcorpora can be understood to be representative of the corpus as a whole.

Every utterance[3] by every Irish character was transcribed manually from the comics, taking special care to preserve orthography and punctuation due to their importance as indicators of accent in literary dialect (Ives 1971). As each book was added to the corpus, an inventory of the features that were used to signify Irishness was compiled in order to facilitate a more in-depth subsequent search. The inventory included not only canonical features of IrE as identified in the literature (e.g. respellings of <th> as <d> or <t>, the use of the *after*-perfect, etc.), but also non-standard features more generally. The aim was to create a list of features that the authors of the comics believed, rightly or wrongly, to signify Irishness. Indeed, in this regard, this study is similar to Dowd's (2018) research into the portrayal of the Irish in US pop culture – a "study not of what Irishness was, but rather what people thought it was" (2018: 6).[4] In the end, the list comprised over 280 features, many of which occurred only once, such as the lexical items *galore*, *amadan*, *eejit*, and *arrah*. While these one-off features certainly contribute to lending an Irish flavor to individual comics, they occur too infrequently to warrant further discussion here, or to be regarded as quintessential markers of Irish speech in the *US Comics Corpus*.

3. Utterance is used here in a broad sense and includes text within speech bubbles and thought balloons. The latter are included as they also contain literary dialect, as in the following example from *The Fox and the Crow #105*: "Bejabers–Oi've been undone!"

4. Since this study is interested in American perceptions of what Irish speech is, comics written for American publishers by Irish writers, such as Garth Ennis, have been omitted.

Once the inventory had been finalized, the corpus was searched for the individual features. Since the aim was to discover which signifiers of Irish speech one was most likely to encounter if one opened any comic at random, the features were counted only once per publication to avoid numerous repetitions in one book from skewing the overall frequency for the corpus.[5] Thus, rather than count all six instances of *it*-clefting in *All-American Comics #70* (see Examples (2) to (7)), the feature was simply counted as appearing in that comic.[6] This methodology ensured that, even though *it*-clefting proved to be a very prominent feature in the corpus, its high frequency was not due to its conspicuous repetition in a few individual publications, but rather due to its repeated occurrence across the whole corpus.

(2) Glory be! *It's kidnapped I am*. Abducted!

(3) Whew! It took hours, but *it's free I am at last*.

(4) Glory be! *'Tis the spittin' image of me father he is*.

(5) Uncle Doiby! *'Tis full o' family love I am for ye!*

(6) Wurra! Wurra! *'Tis torn I am* between love and duty!

(7) *It's lookin' fer me Uncle Doiby I am*.

In the interest of conserving space, and, above all, to offer the reader a better flavor of the type of language found in the *US Comics Corpus*, examples have been chosen which often include several features that will be addressed over the course of the study.

4. Findings and discussion

Despite the fact that the *US Comics Corpus* is comprised of more comics from different writers, different genres and different publishers than previous studies, the overall findings are very similar to those from Walshe's (2012, 2013) analyses of Irish speech in Marvel and DC comics. This suggests that particular ways of conveying Irish speech have become engrained in American comic book culture over

5. In this regard, it is worth bearing in mind that when those from outside a speech community "try to imitate the speech they associate with the area or social group in question, they will often mis-use or over-use the features in question" (Hodson 2014: 75).

6. This was also in keeping with the methodology used by Walshe (2012, 2013), thereby enabling a better comparison with previous findings.

time. The most common features are presented in Table 2 and are broken down into accent, lexis and grammar below.

Table 2. Top twenty most frequent features in the *US Comics Corpus*

		Number of comics in which feature appears	% of comics in which feature appears
1	<-in'> for <-ing>	122	61%
2	<ye>, <y'>, etc. for *you*	98	49%
3	Religious expressions	95	47.5%
4	<me>, <m'> for *my*	94	47%
5	<'Tis>, <'Twas>, etc. for *it is, it was, etc.*	77	38.5%
6	<an'>, <'n'>, etc. for *and*	75	37.5%
7	*Sure*	73	36.5%
8	Non-standard progressive	71	35.5%
9	*Aye*	70	35%
10	*Lad(s)*	68	34%
11	*It*-cleft	62	31%
12	<yer>, <y'r>, etc. for *your*	58	29%
13	<o'> for *of*	51	25.5%
14	Topicalization	40	20%
15	*Begorra(h)*	38	19%
16	<fer>, <f'r> for *for*	37	18.5%
17	*wee*	32	16%
18	*Ah*	29	14.5%
19	Lack of negator contraction	29	14.5%
20	*Boyo*	28	14%

4.1 Accent

While nineteenth-century political cartoons and joke books made extensive use of a series of conventional respellings, such as <foine>, <dat> and <shtart>, to indicate Irish accent, this strategy is more the exception than the rule when it comes to

twentieth-century and twenty-first-century American comics.[7] Instead, the most frequent accent features in the *US Comics Corpus* all belong to the aforementioned group of allegro speech features, namely elision and weak forms. Although these forms are by no means unique to Irish speech, they appear much more frequently in the speech of Irish characters in the comics than in that of their international counterparts and, thus, seem to be strongly associated with the former. This reflects the findings of earlier studies on comics, in which allegro speech features were also the most prominent signifier of Irish accent (see, e.g., Walshe 2012, 2013). A reason for these particular features being so prevalent may be related to common perceptions about the pace and clarity of Irish speech. Hickey (2007: 11), for example, notes that "there is a degree of indistinctiveness about southern Irish English, probably due to the amount of elision and assimilation found in the variety". Likewise, a perceptual dialectology study conducted by Walshe (2010) showed that, when asked to describe features they typically associate with Irish speech, native speakers of English from different Anglophone countries tended to mention Irish people's quick speech and lack of clarity as being defining traits of the variety. These observations about the pace of Irish speech prove to be well founded, as an acoustic analysis conducted by Lee & Doherty (2017: 210) found that IrE speakers did indeed have a higher speaking rate than that of their counterparts from New Zealand, Australia, the USA and Britain. Thus, the frequent use of allegro speech features in the depiction of Irish speech would appear to have a basis in reality.

Of the various forms of allegro speech that appear in the corpus, the most frequent one, and indeed the most prominent feature of any kind, is the respelling of words ending in <-ing> with <-in'> to reflect the realization of the velar nasal /ŋ/ as the alveolar /n/. This realization, which appears in 61% of the publications, has long been regarded as typical of Irish speech (Wells 1982: 427), with Bliss (1984: 145) confirming that "the present participle ending *-ing* is generally pronounced /ən/" in the variety. Its high frequency in the *US Comics Corpus* can also, in part, be attributed to the fact that comic book writers create more contexts in which it can occur due to their conspicuous use of non-standard forms of the progressive for their Irish characters (see Section 4.3.1). This ensures more cases

7. At first glance, there appears to be a noticeable difference in the frequency of occurrence depending on genre, with the vast majority of traditional respellings appearing in humorous comics. However, closer inspection of that subcorpus reveals that these mostly appear in a few comics from the same series, *Stanley and his Monster/The Fox and the Crow*, in which the rivalry between the Irish character Shaughnessy and his German counterpart Schnitzel is a throwback to tensions between German and Irish immigrants that were played for laughs during the vaudeville era (Mooney 2015: 42) and in which dialect played a significant role (Mooney 2015: 18).

of verbs ending in <-ing>, which, in turn, means more opportunities to elide these to <-in'>. Likewise, the recurrence of the term of endearment *darlin'* (19 comics)[8] and of the supposed Irish greeting *Top o' the mornin' to ye!* (6 comics) creates additional contexts for such elision. Indeed, *Top o' the mornin' to ye!* is a perfect example of what American writers believe Irish accents to sound like as it combines several of the other most common allegro speech features in the *US Comics Corpus*, namely the weak forms <o'> for <of> and <ye>, <y'>, <yuh> ,<ya> for <you>. Together with other weak forms, such as the respellings <yer>, <y'r> for <your>, <fer>, <f'r> for <for> and <an'>, <'n'> for <and>, these allegro features are the most common indicators used in American comic books to suggest Irish accent, as can be seen from Examples (8) to (11).

(8) '*Tis* late I am, Katie *darlin'*! Where are you *goin'* and where's Michael?
(*Darby O'Gill and the Little People*)

(9) "Well, Shanna, *me darlin'*! Is it some excitement you've been *havin'*?"
(*Shanna the She-Devil #1*)

(10) For *yer* quickness of foot, *yer* cleverness *an' yer* bravery…such as it is…I present *ye* with new pots *o'* gold! (*Pinky and the Brain #4*)

(11) *Me* blarney trick will get *ye* in trouble galore, Ralph Wiggum. Then *ye'll* know what misery is! (*Ralph Wiggum Comics #1*)

In addition to allegro speech features, the respelling of <my> as <me> is a common strategy in indicating Irishness in literary dialect (Hickey 2007: 304). Not only was it among the most common features identified in studies of US comics (Walshe 2012: 280; 2013: 102), but it was also the predominant feature used to convey Irish speech in a study of American joke books (Walshe 2020: 185). While this pronunciation can also occur in British dialects, Wells (1982: 428) notes that it extends much further up the social scale in Ireland than in England, thereby further contributing to its salience as a marker of Irishness. Binelli (2010: 52) even goes so far as to claim that this pronunciation has become lexicalized in the variety. Given its pervasiveness in IrE itself, it is no surprise that it has become one of the defining characteristics of Irish speech in pop culture.

The contraction of *it is, it was, it will* and *it would* to <'tis> <'twas> <'twill> and <t'would> is another unsurprising feature in the portrayal of Irish characters in the corpus, as it, too, was among the most prominent ones in previous studies of both comic books and joke books (Walshe 2013: 103–104; 2020: 184). Indeed, its salience in depictions of Irishness is commented on by Hughes, who remarks that

8. *Darlin'* was also associated with Irish characters in Walshe's (2012: 285) study of Marvel comics, where it was the fifth most common feature overall.

it is one of the features, like *sure* and *faith*, "which tend to be much overworked by imitators of Irishmen" (Hughes 1966: 266–276). Although this type of contraction was common in Standard English until the seventeenth century, it is now deemed archaic, except in Irish varieties, where it is retained (Bliss 1979: 20). Just as the high rate of respellings of <-ing> as <-in'> can be partly attributed to the writers' creation of more contexts for it to occur via non-standard use of the progressive, the high number of occurrences of <'tis> etc. can be linked to the high frequency of *it*-clefting that the Irish characters use (see Section 4.3.2).

4.2 Lexis

4.2.1 *Religious exclamations and euphemisms*

Religious exclamations, or euphemisms thereof, appeared in almost half of all comics (47.5%) in the *US Comics Corpus*. This high frequency was to be expected, as religious exclamations also occurred prominently in previous studies on comics (Walshe 2012: 275–276; 2013: 110–111) and were among the top five most frequent features in the representation of Irish speech in US joke books (Walshe 2020: 184). Associations of the Irish with a propensity for using religious oaths go back to the early seventeenth century, with Camden famously describing the Irish as follows: "At every third word it is ordinary with them to lash out with an oth [sic], namely by the Trinity, by God, by S. Patrick, by S. Brigid, by their Baptisme [sic], by Faith, by the Church, by my God-fathers [sic] hand, and by thy hand" (Camden, quoted in Bartley 1954: 34). This practice of employing religious oaths endures to this day, with speakers of IrE employing a larger array and more varied use of religious expressions than those of other varieties (Amador-Moreno 2010: 69–70; Farr & Murphy 2009; Walshe 2009: 129–137). These can take a variety of forms, express a wide range of emotions, and are often used to request divine intervention. Expressions referring to saints are particularly plentiful in the *US Comics Corpus*, just as they were in Weimer's (1993: 471) study of cartoons in *Punch*, and include: *Saints preserve me/us*, *Saints alive*, *Saints help me*, *Saints above*, *the saints be merciful*, *Saints defend us*, *Saints and devils*, *by all the blessed saints in heaven*, *by the saints*, *Sweet saints of old Eire*, *Saints o' the Blarney*, *Sweet Bridget*, and *what in the name of Holy Saint Patrick?*. Other religious examples include *Mother of Mercy*, *Holy Mother of Mercy*, *Sweet Mother in Heaven*, *Holy Mother* and *Holy Mary*. As in previous studies, euphemistic forms are also present. These include *Wurra*, *Wurra*, an exclamation of grief that comes from the Irish vocative *a Mhuire*, meaning 'Mary', the virgin mother, and *Begorra(h)*, *Bedad*, *Begad*, *Beja(b)bers*, and *Japers*, which are less blasphemous forms of *by God* and *(by) Jesus* (Walshe 2009: 135–137). One reason for the many euphemistic variants is the fact that more explicit religious

oaths were initially forbidden in comics (Tysell 1935: 51) and thus writers had to come up with creative solutions. Such creativity is also evident in the use of oaths that have no religious connotations, but seem to be used to convey the aforementioned Irish propensity to lash out with an oath at any opportunity. This was also evident in Walshe's (2012) study, where writers often just created oaths by combining random references to Irish culture, such as *By the Red Branch!* and *Boru's Harp!*, which refer to a mythological Irish army and the harp of Brian Boru, the last High King of Ireland, respectively. The *US Comics Corpus* sometimes resorts to the same strategy, as is evident in the following exclamations: *Holy sweet shamrock! By Paddy's pig! By all the goats in Kerry!* and *Blessed hills of old Eire!*

4.2.2 *Vocatives and response forms*[9]

The use of vocatives and response forms associated with a particular language or dialect is a convenient and simple way of indicating the speaker's origin in literary dialect. For example, in research into the portrayal of multilingualism in US superhero comics, Walshe (2018) noted that writers tended to evoke the identity of international characters via their use of vocatives, affirmatives and negations associated with their native tongues. Thus, even when speaking English, German characters are likely to address their interlocutor as *mein Herr* or *Fräulein*, while French speakers may say *Monsieur*, *Madame* or *Mademoiselle*. Likewise, in conversations that are ostensibly in English, these international characters tend to say *ja*, *nein*, *oui* and *non* to express assent or dissent. The findings for the *US Comics Corpus* reveals a similar strategy for the characterization of Irish characters, whose use of vocatives such as *lad*, *laddie*, *lass*, *lassie*, *boyo*, *bucko* and *spalpeen* at any opportunity serves as shorthand for their Irishness. Like their international counterparts, they are also likely to express assent or dissent with terms other than *yes* or *no*. Accordingly, *aye*, a common feature in Northern IrE in particular, appears in 70 comics (35%), while *nay, a much less frequent feature*, appears in 3 (1.5%). This is exemplified in (12) to (14).

(12) *Aye*, *laddie* – *aye*! 'Tis ol' MacCool himself! (*The Adventures of the Fly #2*)

(13) *Nay*, *lad*! Timothy Shannon fears nothing…not even the devil himself! (*The Unexpected #185*)

(14) *Aye*, *lass*. I can still count myself among the living. (*Lara Croft Tomb Raider #44*)

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9. Response forms are defined by Biber et al. (2021: 1084) as "inserts used as brief and routinized responses to a previous remark by a different speaker" and include *yes*, *no* and their variant forms.

4.2.3 Sure *as a discourse marker*

The discourse marker *sure*, sometimes spelled <*shure*>, is among the most common features used to signify Irishness in the *US Comics Corpus*, appearing in over a third (36.5%) of all the comics. This is to be expected as it has been associated with the Irish since the seventeenth century. Indeed, in his overview of the giveaway features for different varieties of English as represented in literature, Blake (1981: 15) observes that *sure* is the one that immediately reveals a speaker to be Irish. This notion is confirmed by Amador-Moreno and McCafferty, who note that *sure* "is one of the Irish-sounding speech features available to non-Irish speakers and particularly employed by writers, scriptwriters, cartoonists, film-makers, actors, comedians, etc. when re-creating or performing 'Irish'" (Amador-Moreno & McCafferty 2015: 179). As a discourse marker, *sure* is typically used as an appeal for consensus based on the speaker's assumption that the content of the proposition "is somehow self-evident, expressing shared knowledge or attitudes which there is no doubt that both speaker and hearer are agreed on" (Amador-Moreno & McCafferty 2015: 181). One of the reasons for its aforementioned salience is its very versatile nature, as it can occur in all sorts of positions, namely utterance initial, phrasal, internal to the utterance, utterance final and at the head of utterance tags (Kallen 2013: 197–198). Corpus studies have shown it to be most common in initial position (Amador-Moreno & McCafferty 2015; Kallen 2013), which is also where it is most likely to be found in the *US Comics Corpus*.[10] However, what makes the examples in the comics stand out from those of most previous studies is the fact that in 53 of the 73 comic books (73%) in which it appears *sure* takes the form *sure and* ..., as in Examples (15) to (17).[11]

(15) *Sure an'* I'm sorry t'be upsettin' a lovely flower like yerself, Missy, but this here's me job. (*Iron Man #156*)

(16) *Sure, an'* she's a pretty colleen, she is! (*Dynamic Comics #1*)

(17) *Sure 'n'* you're a man after me own heart, Mr. Maverick! *(Dell Four Color Comics #935)*

What is striking about this *sure and…* form is that it is so rarely attested in works on IrE. Although studies by Hickey (2020); Kallen (2013) and Amador-Moreno and McCafferty (2015) list hundreds of examples of *sure* between them, the form

10. Despite its frequent occurrence in initial position, *sure* should not be confused with a response token as, in the comics, it is often used as a turn opener even before the interlocutor has said anything to respond to.

11. Even though *sure and…* differs in form from the regular discourse marker *sure*, its function is the same.

sure and is mentioned only in the last of these, where it is noted as appearing in the works of the Donegal writer Patrick MacGill and in entries in Traynor's *The English Dialect of Donegal* and in Macafee's *Concise Ulster Dictionary*, suggesting that this is "possibly a regional, Northern IrE usage" (Amador-Moreno & McCafferty 2015: 191–192). How such a local feature could have become one of the defining features of Irish speech in American pop culture is a fascinating question, but one which will require further diachronic investigation to answer.

4.3 Grammar

As with previous studies on the language of American comic books (Walshe 2012, 2013), grammatical features do not occur in the *US Comics Corpus* with the same frequency as phonological or lexical items do. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the most popular features recur in more or less the same order as in those studies, suggesting their status as key features for conveying Irishness.

4.3.1 *Non-standard use of the progressive*

The non-standard use of the progressive is the most conspicuous grammatical feature in the speech of Irish characters in the *US Comics Corpus*, appearing in 35.5% of comics. It was also the main grammatical feature in the studies of Marvel and DC comics (Walshe 2013: 115) and in an analysis of US jokebooks (Walshe 2020: 184). A reason for this high frequency may be the salience of the feature for outsiders, as IrE permits the use of the progressive in contexts that are not possible in other varieties. This is particularly true of the use of stative verbs in the progressive (Kallen 2013: 87) and of the use of progressive infinitives with modal auxiliaries (McCafferty & Amador-Moreno 2012). The corpus offers numerous examples of the progressive being used with stative verbs related to perception, cognition and emotion, with the majority of occurrences employing the same few verbs, namely *want*, *need*, *know*, *think, see*, *hear* and *like*. Although IrE permits the use of the progressive with *be* and *have*, the examples involving those two verbs in (25) push the boundaries of acceptability, even by Irish standards.

(18) Aye! 'Tis grateful we are, and we're *wanting* to repay you the favor!
(*Uncanny Tales #31*)

(19) And 'tis the light of a full moon we're *needin'* to find the crock! So be off with ye! (*Four Color Comics #325 Mickey Mouse and the Haunted Castle*)

(20) I'll show you what I've learned from twenty years o' freedom fightin'...and you'll be *knowin'* once and for all who's in charge of this expedition!
(*The Further Adventures of Indiana Jones #30*)

(21) I'm *thinkin'* they'll not be pleased to see me after so long a time…
(*The Unexpected #185*)

(22) Oh, wurra, wurra! Will I ever be *seein'* the ould sod again?
(*Adventures into the Unknown #88*)

(23) Listen, lad! 'Tis the wail of the banshee I'm *hearing*!
(*Darby O'Gill and the Little People*)

(24) Bedad, I…I wouldn't *be likin'* that! (*Adventures into the Unknown #88*)

(25) It's the lad's da I'm *being*. Would you be *having* problems with that?
(*Peter Parker The Spectacular Spider-Man #122*)

4.3.2 *It*-clefting

As will already have become clear from Examples (2) to (9) and Examples (18), (19), (23) and (25) of the progressive above, Irish speech in the comics is also characterized by numerous instances of *it*-clefting, a grammatical feature that was also among the most prominent in Walshe's (2012, 2013, 2020) studies into literary dialect representations of the Irish. Indeed, the use of *it*-clefting is often singled out as a defining feature of IrE in that it occurs more frequently and in more contexts in that variety than in other varieties of English (Filppula 1999: 248–256). Taniguchi (1972: 146–177) notes the extent of its versatility, offering examples of the structure in combination with nouns, pronouns, adjectives, past participles, -*ing* forms, bare infinitives, *to* infinitives, prepositional phrases, and adverbs. The prominence of *it*-clefting in IrE can possibly be attributed to the substratal influence of the Irish language, which allows clefting in many more contexts than Standard English does (Filppula 1999: 256). In the examples of *it*-clefting in the *US Comics Corpus*, the first subclause of the sentence is introduced by *it* together with a present or past tense form of the copula, often in the aforementioned form of *'tis* or *'twas*, followed by the element to be fronted. The second subclause comes thereafter and resembles a *that* relative clause, although the relative pronoun is omitted in the vast majority of examples from the comics. This omission of the relative pronoun is to be expected, as, according to Siemund and Beal, *it*-clefts with zero subordinators "are one of the most imitated features of dialectal Irish English and have been used as a marker of Irish nationality in literature since the eighteenth century at least" (Siemund & Beal 2011: 255). (26) and (27) are a couple of additional examples, the latter of which is one of the rare cases that contain a relative pronoun.

(26) *If it's being out of here you want*, then try the green door.
(*Disney Comic Hits #8)*

(27) *Tis meself that's been workin' harder* just to please you, Patrick! Wouldn't ye think I'd be after deservin' a spring outfit for me labors? (*Adventures into the Unknown #132*)

4.3.3 *Topicalization*

It-clefting is not the only structure that is frequently used as a focusing device in the comics. Topicalization (Filppula 1999: 260–270), also known as "left dislocation" or "fronting", is a recurrent feature. This involves moving those elements of the sentence that require prominence to initial position. Like *it*-clefting, which it resembles in structure, topicalization permits all types of elements to be fronted, such as objects, subject complements, object complements, adverbials, and the predicate verb. As in Filppula's (1999: 263) study of the phenomenon, topicalization occurred less frequently than *it*-clefting in the *US Comics Corpus*, and can be seen in Examples (28) to (32).

(28) *Four you murdered*…four will be your curse! (*Ripley's Believe it or not #82*)

(29) *A just ruler he was*…just an' good! (*The Brave and the Bold #93*)

(30) *The hanging judge, they called him* – a man hated and feared, who meted out justice with neither mercy nor compassion. (*Ghosts #94*)

(31) *Into this dungeon he threw me*, and there's no way out! (*Supermouse #20*)

(32) He saved your life, bucko! *Worked hard he did*! (*Black Magic #18*)

4.3.4 *Lack of negator contraction*

The last of the grammatical structures to appear among the top twenty features in the *US Comics Corpus* is the lack of negator contraction, which occurs in 14.5% of the comics. In Standard English, negation with auxiliaries involves contracting the auxiliary and the following negator *not*, meaning that *will* and *not* become *won't*, while *have* and *not* become *haven't*. In IrE, and some other vernacular varieties, however, it is the pronoun and the auxiliary which are cliticized, with *not* remaining uncontracted, resulting in *I'll not* rather than *I won't* and *I've not* rather than *I haven't* (Hickey 2007: 178). Examples from the *US Comics Corpus* include the ones shown as (33) to (35).

(33) Be still, lass! *We'll not* be hurtin' ye! (*Daredevil #205*)

(34) *I'll not*! And *you'll not* make me! (*House of Secrets #118*)

(35) I don't know! *I've not* seen him since that day…at your home! (*Secrets of Haunted House #32*)

As with some of the other prominent features that are associated with Irish speech in the comics, such as *aye* and *wee*, auxiliary contraction is more commonly associated with varieties from the North of Ireland (Bonness 2018: 120; Kirk & Kallen 2010: 188; Tagliamonte & Smith 2002: 253). Given that the first wave of Irish emigrants to the US were from the North of the country, this may explain the frequency of these features in American pop culture representations of Irishness. Alternatively, seeing that these features are also common in Scottish English, they may simply be evidence of writers confusing the two varieties, as was previously noted by Walshe (2012: 285–287).

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the *US Comics Corpus*, with its 200 publications from different genres spanning almost eight decades, offers a clear picture of the representation of Irish speech in American comic books. The findings are remarkably similar to those of previous studies into Irish speech in American pop culture – be it in the form of comic books, joke books or animated TV series (Walshe 2012, 2013, 2020, 2023) – suggesting that the main ways of conveying Irishness have become enregistered in American minds. In this study, once again, it is noticeable that in the twentieth and early twenty-first century Irish pronunciation is conveyed primarily via allegro speech forms, rather than by the more extensive consonant and vowel substitutions that were typical of nineteenth-century caricatures and cartoons. As in previous studies, the lexical features used to convey Irishness fall into the category of religious oaths and euphemisms, the discourse marker *sure*, and affirmatives and vocatives, such as *aye*, *lad(die)*, *lass(ie)*, *boyo*, *bucko*, *spalpeen*, etc. Meanwhile, the grammatical features used to index Irishness are the non-standard use of the progressive, *it*-clefting, topicalization and auxiliary contraction in the negative, all of which were prominent in the aforementioned studies of Irish speech in US pop culture.

Based on these findings, and in keeping with the language of pop culture more generally, it is clear that comic writers rely on "a restricted inventory of salient and pervasive linguistic features that are considered indexical" (Werner 2022: 9) to create the impression of Irish speech for their readers. What is unclear is how that impression is received by comic book audiences. Presumably, given the long-standing associations of so many of the features with IrE, the speech in the comics succeeds in achieving first-order indexicality and is, indeed, recognized as Irish, even without the aid of setting, plot, names or other Irish-related

details in the individual stories.[12] Whether this speech achieves (or even aspires to) second-order indexicality, however, is much more difficult to answer, as this very much depends on whether Irishness carries the same connotations for modern readers as it did for earlier ones. For example, if Weimer (1993: 466–467) is correct and the frequent use of religious exclamations and oaths in *Punch* cartoons served as evidence of the 'emotionality' and 'wildness' of the Irish, then could it be possible that the many oaths and exclamations in the *US Comics Corpus* suggest something similar to modern readers? Likewise, could the use of syntactic structures such as *it*-clefting and topicalization, with their conspicuously inverted word order, perhaps be interpreted by contemporary audiences as evidence of Irish confusion or backwardness? The answers to these questions are likely to depend on individual readers' reactions to individual texts. After all, even if the bulk of the quantitative data point towards a shift away from earlier portrayals, all it takes is a few individual examples to change a reader's impression of a text. Even Dowd, who acknowledges the evolution of the Irish figure in pop culture representations, concedes that some portrayals still "cling tightly to old stereotypes and spout anachronistic gibberish-like brogue without any intended comic purpose" (Dowd 2018: 199). It would seem that, when it comes to representations of the "Oirish," old habits really do die hard.

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12. Nonetheless, since many of the features are not exclusive to Irish varieties and may be regarded as floating signifiers, there is a possibility that the speech will be misunderstood by readers to be Scottish English or some other British varieties.

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