

BOOK REVIEW

Ó Siadhail, Micheál. *Modern Irish, Grammatical Structure and Dialectal Variation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Cloth \$70.00

by Andrew Carnie

The debate between Prescriptive and Descriptive Grammarians has raged since the middle of the last century. Grammarians such as Dreyden exemplified the tradition of prescribing how people *should* speak, as opposed to describing how language *is* spoken. The most widely cited example of this is the famed "Pied Piping" of Prepositions. According to our High School Grammar teachers, when an English question word such as "who(m)" is the object of a preposition, that preposition must "pied pipe" and accompany the question word to the beginning of the sentence:

(1) *To* who(m) did you give the book?

However, few native speakers of English actually do this; they tend to leave the preposition in the main clause of the sentence:

(2) Who(m) did you give the book *to*?

The modern theoretical linguist is generally of the opinion that telling people how to speak or write has little value in a study which aims towards a better understanding of how language works. They thus feel that the most valuable form of language study is that which describes the actual speech of native speakers. This descriptive tradition has finally found its voice in the study of the Celtic Languages. Micheál Ó Siadhail's *Modern Irish, Grammatical Structure and Dialectal*

Variation is the Irish language's first complete language-wide descriptive grammar. Previous grammars have been either prescriptive (like the Christian Brothers' *New Irish Grammar*), thus of little use to the serious language learner or theoretical linguist, or have described only one particular regional dialect (for example, de Bhaldraithe's (1945) famous description of the phonology of the Cois Fairrge dialect). For this reason, Ó Siadhail's work represents one of the most important landmarks in the study of the Irish language. By describing the constructions found in the sound systems, inflexional system, and syntax of Irish, as well as describing how these constructions vary from dialect to dialect, it provides a good source of data for the theoretical linguist. It also provides an accurate reference for the teacher, translator and learner of Irish.

According to Ó Siadhail, Irish has approximately thirty living dialects. These are grouped into three main regions: the western (Connacht), the southern (Munster) and the northern (Ulster) Dialects. As anyone who has ever tried to read an Irish text written in a dialect other than the one they speak will know, a reference to dialectal variation is an invaluable resource. Many verb forms in Gaelic vary so much from region to region they are practically indistinguishable. For example, in the western Munster dialects of Kerry the past tense of the verb "to close" (Dillon & Ó Cróinín 1961) in the first person ("I closed") is

(3) *Do dhúinas*

However, just to the north in Galway, the same concept is expressed by

(4) *Dhúin mé.*

A reference to dialectical variation is thus an essential tool for reading the literature written in the vernacular of a particular region. Ó Siadhail takes the common sense view that dialectical boundaries are not firm and fast, but rather they blend gradually into each other, with each word's isogloss¹ finding its own location on the map. However, for expository clarity, he adopts the traditional terminology to describe distinct dialectical areas. Where these names are not appropriate, he explicitly describes locations of the isoglosses. Ó Siadhail's history of the origin of these dialects (along with a history of the whole language) is comprehensive but very short. This in itself is excusable, as there are already many books which provide a descriptive historical treatment of the language (Thurneyson 1961 and Corkery 1968) and this book is intended as a synchronic² text of the modern language.

With regard to theoretical issues, Ó Siadhail's treatment is disappointing. Admirably, he tries not to take any theoretical stands on the phenomenon unearthed in the book, in order to make it widely accessible. In many places, however, he assumes that the reader will have a knowledge of Generativist Theory.³ Unfortunately, the work might also be not theoretical enough. By not taking a strong theoretical stand (the work's only "weakly" generativist), Ó Siadhail sometimes fails to capture generalizations about the factors (such as sonority constraints) causing such complexities as epenthesis processes.⁴ The true generalizations can only be captured with a strong system of theoretical formalisms and assumptions. The

Non-theoretician will find the discussion technical and somewhat theory bound, whereas the Generativist will find it unsatisfying and lacking in explanation. Given his goal of making his book accessible to a wide audience, he has made an admirable compromise. However, by doing so, he is bound to leave both ends of the linguistic spectrum unsatisfied.

Ó Siadhail's treatment of the Irish Sound system (or Phonology) is by far the most comprehensive section of the book. It is, unfortunately, marred by his adherence to a strangely modified version of the International Phonetic Alphabet. Ó Siadhail has attempted to come half-way between the traditional system of transcribing Irish sounds and the standard system used throughout the linguistic world. His discussion of the morphology is well done, covering such important topics as consonant mutations and attenuation in great detail. However, paradigmatic charts of Noun and Verb forms would have made the section much clearer. His discussion of the syntax is, by far, the most disappointing section of the book. In good Neo-bloomfieldian⁵ tradition, his discussion of syntax is extremely lacking. He pays little attention to the structure of, for example, the Irish infinitive. Despite these problems, Ó Siadhail's is one of the most readable and descriptive grammars of the Irish language. It provides a valuable source of data and dialectal information for the formal linguist, and a valuable reference grammar for the teacher and student. In my opinion, it is one of the most important books to be found on the shelves of the serious student or scholar of the Celtic Languages.

1. Isogloss: a line dividing two regions which use a *particular* grammatical form differently.
2. "Synchronic": the analysis of a language at a particular point in time, to be contrasted with "Diachronic" which analyzes a language across time.
3. The reader is expected to have an understanding of the concepts of underlying "Phonemic" levels and surfacing "Phonetic" levels (cf. Chomsky and Halle 1968 for further details).
4. Epenthesis processes: the insertion of a "helping vowel" in words such as *gorm* (GUH-rum) or *airgead* (AH-ruh-gid) occurring under very strict relations of syllabic hierarchy and sonority relationships.
5. Neo-bloomfieldian: A School of Linguistics founded by Leonard Bloomfield: the first rigorous Descriptivists school that tended to ignore syntax.



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