
Varieties of Irish

Irish is sometimes referred to as ‘a lesser-used language’, a description that understates the wide range of situations in which people use it. In addition to being the everyday language of the Gaeltacht areas, it is equally a language of family, friends and acquaintances, it is a language of broadcasting, of social media and of religious life. It is a medium of instruction in schools and third level colleges. National and European Union legislation is translated into Irish. The language has a long literary tradition as well as a diverse contemporary literature. It follows that there cannot be just one kind of Irish, but varieties of the language which are favoured by different users, for different purposes. This short article describes the styles and registers used by Irish speakers and how the New English-Irish Dictionary (NEID), from which the *Concise English-Irish Dictionary* is derived, addresses the diversity of forms present in the living language.

Written and spoken language

With all languages, a fundamental distinction has existed historically between the written word and the spoken language. Today, divisions between the two have become blurred to the extent that linguists refer to any unit of language as a ‘text’, whether it be an employment contract or commentary on a hurling match.

One unfortunate remnant of the old ‘written vs spoken’ dichotomy is the notion that the written word is superior to the spoken in all contexts. The spoken language was held to be unstructured, ephemeral and prone to error. Dictionaries and grammars were based almost exclusively on examples from literature and other published materials and, for that reason, could not be fully representative of contemporary use in the language community. NEID seeks to strike a balance between formal and informal registers and to reflect more accurately the varieties of English and Irish in use today. To that end, those engaged in translating the English entries into Irish were instructed to produce translations true to their own natural use of the language. Instead of relying on older dictionaries, the translators asked themselves ‘How would I say that in Irish?’, so while additional translations were introduced during the editorial process, NEID is as representative as possible of contemporary Irish.

Formal and informal language

Some issues arise when generalising about what constitutes formal or informal language. Even so, all of us recognise varying degrees of familiarity and distance in the phrases below.

Formal	Informal
<i>Dia daoibh, a dhaoine uaisle.</i> Hello, ladies and gentlemen.	<i>Haigh, a chairde.</i> Hi, guys.
<i>An sínfeá chugam an salann, más é do thoil é?</i> Could you please pass the salt?	<i>Cuir chugam an salann, maith an fear.</i> Pass the salt, good man yourself.

Formal	Informal
<i>Is oth linn a rá nár éirigh leat an post a bhaint amach.</i> We regret to inform you that you have not been given the position.	<i>Ní bhfuair tú an jab, ar an drochuair.</i> You didn't get the job, unfortunately.
<i>Tar anseo, le do thoil.</i> Come here, please.	<i>Goitse!</i> C'mere!

As is the norm in modern bilingual lexicography, NEID embraces informal language in both English and Irish where appropriate. See, for example, the headwords 'shout', 'state' and 'ton'. Under each word, the basic meanings are given, followed by more informal, idiomatic uses.

it's my shout! mise a cheannóidh an ceann seo!, mise a gheobhaidh an deoch seo!, liomsa an deoch seo!

the house was in a right state bhí an teach bunoscionn, bhí an teach ina phraiseach

there are tons of things to do tá neart rudaí le déanamh, tá dalladh rudaí le déanamh, tá scata rudaí le déanamh

A conscious effort has been made to reflect the English language as spoken in Ireland, including slang words.

chipper (*fish and chip shop*) siopa sceallóg

gargle (*inf: alcoholic drink*) ól m1, deoch f; **he was very fond of the ~** bhí an-dúil san ól aige, bhí sé tugtha don deoch, d'ólfadh sé an chros den asal

savage (*outstanding*) iontach a1; **he's a ~ player** is imreoir den scoth é, imreoir nótaílte is ea é; **that was a ~ film** sárscannán a bhí ansin, bhí an scannán sin ar fheabhas, bhí an scannán sin thar cionn

The 'inf' (informal) label next to the word 'gargle' above indicates that using it to describe alcoholic drinks is considered colloquial. But labelling headwords as formal or informal is not an exact science; to some extent users will have to rely on their own knowledge of English as a guide. More important are the labels which describe the Irish translations, the appropriateness of which might not be apparent to users. It is useful for learners, for example, to know that *ospidéal meabhairghalair* is a formal word for 'mental hospital' and that names such as *teach na ngealt* and *an teach mór* are colloquial. Certainly, they have no place in public discussion about mental health.

Of course, there are Irish speakers and learners of Irish in many parts of the world, particularly in North America. With that in mind, and reflecting the growing influence of American English across the world, NEID contains many American idioms and colloquialisms, such as 'bum' (*fear déirce/bean déirce*) and 'to hang tough' (*cos a chur i dtaca*).

Awareness of register becomes more important still as we move along the continuum from informal and familiar to very informal and vulgar. In opening the doors to informal language, NEID could hardly refuse admittance to swear words and sexually explicit language. After all, lexicography is not censorship, and who knows, perhaps the Irish translations will finally put an end to the tiresome refrain that Irish has no words to describe sex!

Among the Irish translations in NEID are some words recently borrowed from English and phrases which are markedly influenced by English idioms. Many of these are common in speech but are making their appearance for the first time in a bilingual dictionary.

arrive **he was there when I ~d** bhí sé ann nuair a bhain mé an áit amach, bhí sé ann nuair a leaindeáil mé

towel **to throw in the ~** an tuáille a chaitheamh isteach, éirí as, géilleadh

trip (*drug experience*) triup *f2*; **he had a bad ~** bhí drochthruip aige

There are those who will decry *leaindeáil* and *drochthruip* as over-borrowing and *an tuáille a chaitheamh isteach* as an instance of *béarlachas*—Irish that bears the mark of English. Other speakers will make their choice from among the various translations while recognising all of them as representative of contemporary use. In fact, it is remarkable that a word as common as *leaindeáil* is only now appearing in a dictionary as it is recorded as having been in common use in the language for at least a hundred years.

Here is not the place to reprise old controversies about ‘borrowings’ or ‘English loanwords’. Nevertheless, it is worth giving an explanation of how some now long-established words like *leictreachas* or *abdóman* took precedence in usage over the ‘purer’ Irish of *aibhléis* and *bolg*. It is useful to point out that *leictreachas* and *abdóman* are not borrowings from English at all, but examples of transliteration—a recasting of mostly Greek and Latin elements in a manner respectful of the orthographic and morphological conventions of Irish. For many years, practitioners and researchers seeking to facilitate the use of Irish in specialist areas have advocated the systematic use of transliteration. They did so not simply for the sake of ease—*leictreachas* and *abdóman* are immediately recognisable and transparent—but also for reasons of accuracy. For a layperson to use *bolg* for ‘abdomen’ is perfectly acceptable, indeed the word is given in NEID in exactly that sense. But problems inevitably arise in more specialist use, as evidenced for example by the very definition of ‘abdomen’ at www.hopkinsmedicine.org:

The area between the chest and the hips *containing the stomach*, small intestine, large intestine, liver, gallbladder, pancreas, and spleen.

It makes no sense to say that the *bolg* is contained in the *bolg* and the transliterated *abdóman* is therefore useful and necessary.

Flexibility and ease of use also come into play. *Aibhléis* is used fairly commonly for ‘electricity’ and appears in NEID in that sense. But related terms such as ‘thermoelectricity’ or ‘electron’ are more easily accommodated by a term such as *leictreachas*. A concept as basic as ‘electrician’ is hard to express without transliteration. *Leictreoir* is immediately understood, where a form such as *aibhléiseoir* may not be. When Spanish has its *electricista* and German its *Elektriker*, there is a strong argument for the use of words like *leictreoir*.

There are, in fact, a small number of outright borrowings in NEID, but these are overwhelmingly from languages other than English. Cultural terms like ‘sushi’ and ‘karaoke’ are labelled ‘foreign’ and appear alongside the transliterated *siúisí* and *cáirióice*. Some users may not see the need for such transliterations, while others will be more relaxed about using them. Certainly, it is impossible to predict which transliterated words will be accepted by the language community and which will be passed over. It is for the users to decide, remembering that transliterations still obey the rules of Irish grammar. ‘She really likes karaoke’ will have to be *Tá dúil mhór aici i gcáirióice* and ‘an evening of karaoke’ will be *oíche cháirióice*. No such initial mutations or any other grammatical changes occur if the foreign form is used: *Tá dúil mhór aici in karaoke* and *oíche karaoke*. Note that the preposition *in* precedes the non-transliterated noun, just as happens with foreign, non-transliterated place names: *in Twickenham* compared to *i dTamhlacht*.

Technical language and familiar language

Another marker of formal language is a preference for technical terms rather than paraphrase or non-specialist words. In legal proceedings, a bankrupt person will be described as *féimheach*, whereas in news broadcasts and informal settings the word *bancbhriste* will most likely be used. In Irish legislation, ‘charge’ is translated as *muirear*. Ireland’s ‘household charge’ property tax is officially called *muirear teaghlaigh*—although the word *táille* is more familiar to Irish speakers.

In NEID, the labels ‘technical term’ (online) or ‘fml’ (in print) are used to describe words such as *féimheach* and *muirear*. The labels ‘familiar’ (online) or ‘fam’ (in print) are used occasionally in reference to their non-technical equivalents. Note that *bancbhriste* and *táille* are not low-register or slang words; they are simply the words in common use outside of specialist areas.

Guidance in this area of language is important if we wish to avoid mixing registers. Sometimes, for example, highly technical language appears in non-specialist contexts, such as in the following sentence from a travel feature describing the public bus system in another country:

De ghnáth, is mar gheall ar imthosca foircneacha a bheadh duine mífhortúnach ag taisteal i gceann acu.

Usually it’s because of extreme circumstances that an unfortunate person would travel on one.

Imthosca foircneacha is a highly technical legal term for ‘extreme circumstances’ and is completely out of place here. NEID suggests more appropriate translations:

- by force of circumstance/*de bharr riachtanais*
- under exceptional circumstances/*i gcúinsí eisceachtúla*

Registers may also be mixed in the other direction, as in an information leaflet describing guided tours in a Government building in Dublin: ‘If you have any suggestions for improving our service, we will be glad to hear them’ was translated as *Má tá moltaí agaibh chun an tseirbhís a fheabhsú, beimid ar mhuin na muice iad a chloisteáil*. Unfortunately, *ar mhuin na muice* (‘on the pig’s back’) is a bad match for ‘be glad’ in terms of both meaning and register.

There exists in Irish a certain tension between familiar words and others which, while not highly technical, are associated with more formal registers. See, for example, the phrase *tráth nach déanaí ná* from The Broadcasting Act (2009).

Déanfar gearán faoi fho-alt (1) leis an gcraoltóir tráth nach déanaí ná 30 lá ... tar éis dháta an chraolta.

A complaint under subsection (1) shall be made to the broadcaster not more than 30 days after ... the date of broadcast.

In less formal situations, one would most likely write *taobh istigh de 30 lá* (within 30 days). Certainly, it is hard to imagine *tráth nach déanaí ná* occurring in ordinary conversation between Irish speakers, any more than ‘at a date no later than’ in English.

At word level, users choose between pairings which sit together side by side in dictionaries and lists of terminology, one familiar and the other more formal. Examples include *polasaí* and *beartas* for ‘policy’, *comhlacht* and *cuideachta* for ‘company’ and *timpeallacht* and *comhshaol* for ‘environment’. NEID gives priority to the words in common use and labels others with descriptors such as ‘technical term’ or ‘formal.’

Standard Irish and dialect

Formal texts routinely produced in Irish include the following:

- Official documents, e.g. Irish and European legislation, court documents.
- Semi-official documents produced by State bodies, e.g. annual reports, websites, informational materials.
- Academic and research materials, e.g. dissertations, scholarly articles and monographs.
- Textbooks and educational materials.

Such materials are generally marked by the absence of dialect forms and adherence to standard written Irish.

When we talk about dialect in relation to the Irish language, we usually mean the three main regional dialects of the Gaeltacht areas in Munster, Ulster and Connacht. There are phonological differences between the dialects, but since there are no agreed conventions for the pronunciation of Irish, no way of saying a word can be said to be ‘more standard’ than another. For that reason, the sound recordings on www.focloir.ie are given in each of the three main dialects. There is, of course, much diversity even within the main dialects. In the case of Connacht, for example, the sounds of Conamara Irish are not identical to the sounds of County Mayo. Unfortunately, it is not possible for NEID to model how words are pronounced in each and every Gaeltacht area.

The first efforts to standardise modern Irish focused on grammar and spelling. In 1958, the Translation Section of the Houses of the Oireachtas published *Gramadach na Gaeilge agus Litriú na Gaeilge—An Caighdeán Oifigiúil*. The shortened form of the title, ‘an Caighdeán Oifigiúil’ (CO), became a byword for standard written Irish.

The introduction to the first edition of the CO stated that it was produced for official purposes but went on to describe a more general demand for standardisation. Teachers, dramatists, writers and broadcasters were named among those who would feel its benefit. In fact, few creative writers ever took the CO to their hearts, but its influence was felt far beyond the Houses of the Oireachtas. Notably, the use of the CO in official documents was followed by its almost universal use in semi-official documents produced by public bodies for a national readership. Most school textbooks followed the CO. In print and broadcast media, editors expected their contributors to avoid dialect forms. There was a widespread perception that the CO was the ‘correct’ way to write Irish in all situations, an ironic misconception given that its authors cautioned against such an interpretation in their introduction to the 1958 book:

Tugann an caighdeán seo aitheantas ar leith d’fhoirmeacha agus do rialacha áirithe ach ní chuireann sé ceartfhoirmeacha eile ó bhail ná teir ná toirmeasc ar a n-úsáid.

(This standard gives recognition to certain forms and rules but does not invalidate other correct forms or prohibit their use.)

The CO still holds sway in official and semi-official documents, but recent times have seen the emergence of styles which show its influence without complete adherence to it. Reporters and studio presenters for Nuacht TG4 and RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta routinely use their own regional dialects—the result, perhaps, of a blurring between written and spoken language. In education too, there is a move away from rigid application of CO forms. Among the learning outcomes contained in the Junior Cycle specification for Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools (2017), we read that students should ‘develop their personal writing style using accurate and rich language (using own dialect, as appropriate).’ Students are also expected to be able to distinguish between dialects and ‘understand rich, dialectal spoken language.’ Similarly in the North of Ireland, educational bodies allow Ulster variants to add a localised flavour to materials otherwise in keeping with the CO.

Over the years, a number of institutions have produced their own style guides for the production of Irish-language documents. In some cases, these guides diverge from the CO as revised in *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil: Caighdeán Athbhreithnithe* (2012) and *Gramadach na Gaeilge: an Caighdeán Oifigiúil* (2017).

The CO itself has in recent years gone through several changes to the original 1958 text, while the written language has seen the spread of conventions not included in the CO.

With a few exceptions, NEID adheres to the grammatical forms recommended in CO 2017. In some cases, NEID has drawn upon research into patterns of usage in contemporary Irish, consultation with experts, and careful consideration of forms included in authoritative sources such as *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (FGB) and *Graiméar Gaeilge na mBráithre Críostaí*. A description of the main points of divergence can be found in the article ‘Points of Grammar’ below.

Standard and variant word forms

Not until the publication of FGB in 1977 was there a systematic approach to variations in vocabulary from one dialect to another. That was no small challenge when so many high-frequency words had branched off from each other in different ways. The dialect variations can be presented in three main categories.

1. Words which mean one thing in one dialect and something else in another. In Ulster Irish *sciathán*, can mean ‘arm’ as well as ‘wing’, a connotation which is absent in other dialects. In Connacht Irish, *gasúr* means a child of any gender. In Ulster Irish, however, it has the specific meaning ‘boy’.
2. Words like *fóirsteanach*, *feiliúnach* and *oiriúnach*, which have the same meaning (‘suitable’) but which are words in their own right and not versions of each other. *Fóirsteanach* is associated with Ulster and *feiliúnach* with Connacht.
3. Words such as *mada*, *madadh* and *madra* which are indeed variants of the same word.

In the case of words in category 3, FGB proposed one version as the standard form (*madra*) and described the others as ‘variant forms’. With very few exceptions, NEID adheres to the spelling and morphology of the standard forms laid out in FGB.

As far as possible, the Irish translations of English headwords in NEID reflect the richness of contemporary Irish by including words in categories 1 and 2 above. Accordingly, *sciathán* is given as an option for translating the word ‘arm’ and *gasúr* for translating the word ‘child’. Likewise, *fóirsteanach* agus *feiliúnach* are included in the translations of ‘suitable’, regardless of their provenance.

Category 1	Category 2
arm N ① ANAT lámh <i>f2</i>, géag <i>f2</i>, <i>sciathán m1</i> child N ① (<i>young person</i>) páiste <i>m4</i>, leanbh <i>m1</i>, <i>gasúr m1</i>	suitable ADJ <i>oiriúnach a1</i>, <i>fóirsteanach a1</i>, <i>feiliúnach a1</i>

As regards words that may have different meanings in different dialects, a description of how their meaning shifts from one dialect to another is more properly a function of an Irish-English or monolingual Irish dictionary. Take, for example, the words *beatha* and *breac*, which are commonly understood in all dialects to mean ‘life’ and ‘trout’ respectively. Both words have secondary meanings: food or nourishment in the case of *beatha* and fish of any description in the case of *breac*. The secondary meanings are most common in Connacht Irish but are not completely unknown elsewhere. To label them as ‘Connacht words’, therefore, would be to oversimplify.