# Language Usage and Social Categorisation in Brendan Behan's Play The Quare Fellow

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Abstract: The language of Brendan Behan's The Quare Fellow (1954), a play set in an Irish prison, is examined stylistically. This is done under the headings of naming, usage of Hiberno-English, of prison jargon, and of Gaelic. These show evidence of categorisation under the conventional class structure of upper, middle, and lower. However, there are more complex divisions present through language. These are: prisoners' pecking-order according to crime, prisoners using more Hiberno-English and also prison jargon than the authority figures, one warder who uses language patterns similar to the prisoners, and the use of Gaelic by two characters, one a warder and the other a prisoner, who along with the warder above, represent the moral core of the play.

**Keywords:** Brendan Behan; The Quare Fellow; stylistics; class structure.

#### Introduction

More than fifty years after the first production of Brendan Behan's play *The Quare Fellow* at the Pike Theatre, Dublin, this article sets out to examine the use of language in the play according to specific categories. The study will follow the principles of stylistics, and the points made will be based on quantifiable evidence, that of frequencies of use of the terms in question. This will be seen to lead to some definite conclusions about the sometimes complex social roles and attitudes of the characters in the play. These conclusions will be interpreted in the light of the whole text.

The play was written by the archetypal Dubliner Behan, from the same background but a generation later than Sean O'Casey. O'Casey took a great deal of trouble to indicate the Irish, and specifically Dublin nature of the speech of his characters, mainly by respelling, thus using what Paul Kerswill calls "sociophonetics" (Maci 43). Behan does not do this to the same extent where phonology is concerned, apart from occasional words as in the title of the play: the "quare fellow" is the man due for execution in the prison; the word "quare" is phonologically marked, and the two words together form both Hiberno-English usage and a euphemism from prison jargon. However, he does

use many lexical and syntactical forms of HE. A study of prison jargon is the second category examined here. Of the other forms of language which could be chosen, just one more will be considered here: utterances in Gaelic, usually by the two characters who come from the Kerry Gaeltacht. These three categories are selected as they are related to social classification in the play.

## Class, categorisation and character

The play depicts a society of men only. Most of the prisoners are from Dublin, as seen below, and almost certainly of working class origins, to judge by their resentful attitude towards middle-class persons. We do not get to know their names, just "Prisoner A" etc. The juveniles, Young Prisoner 1, "Scholara", and Young Prisoner 2, "Shaybo", may seem to be an exception to this, but "Scholara" is almost certainly a nickname, and "Shaybo", following the Dublin usage of adding —o or —bo to the short form of a name (see below), may be derived from "Shane" or "Seamus". The character called "Dunlavin" probably has a nickname deriving from his home town in Co. Meath as this is not a common surname. "Neighbour" is a nickname due to his use of that word as a term of address (55). This would suggest that prisoners look for anonymity in the jail by giving and using created names with each other; they may not wish to be easily identified by other ex-prisoners and society in general when they leave the jail. The other possibility is that men in institutional situations, such as the army and boarding schools, prefer names for each other that bond them against outsiders and have meaning only in these closed worlds.

These types of naming, of origin, and of class form contrasts with all of the other characters. Firstly, the warders and officials in the prison usually have specific titles and surnames. This detail shows that they are assured of a place in society, are prepared to be recognised officially, and are not part of the closed group of prisoners. Secondly, their talk about topics such as pay and promotions combined with the previous consideration, means that they can be considered lower middle class. The Governor, some of the principal officers, and "Holy Healey" the Department of Justice visitor, would be more definitely middle-class. In fact, the sub-hierarchy of all of the prison officials, their various ranks, and their jockeying for position, are clearly indicated. As a group they are associated with the bourgeoisie in general, who are seen as part of the whole machinery which oppresses the prisoners: Regan says of the Departmental visitor: "Holy Healey ... 's a fine bloody imposter, isn't he? Like an old I.R.A. man with a good agency in the Sweep now. Recommend me to the respectable people!" (99). Regan thus implies that former fighters in the War of Independence have received their reward by being handed sinecures in bourgeois employment. Religion is also associated with the status quo: in Prisoner A's words: "I never saw religion do anything but back up the screws" (99). Regan however has words of appreciation for their prison chaplains, the Canon and the young clergyman, because they help the condemned men going to their deaths. The fact that the Canon has taken the job because he has done something nefarious, helps

his prison credibility. Nor does Regan blame the hangman: "Himself has no more to do with it than you or I or the people that pay us, and that's every man or woman that pays taxes or votes in elections" (103); in other words, the whole adult population, especially the bourgeoisie, is responsible for capital punishment.

Class resentment appears in the reaction of the prisoners not only to the prison officials but also to Prisoner D, a well-connected man, described in the Dramatis Personae as "a middle-aged bourgeois", who has been jailed for embezzlement and who still speaks as a capitalist:

I thought it more discreet to remain in concealment while I smoked but I could not stop down there listening to talk like that, as a ratepayer, I couldn't stand for it, especially those libellous remarks about the judiciary. ... According to that man, there should be no such thing as law and order. We could all be murdered in our beds, the innocent preyof every ruffian that took it into his head to appropriate our goods, our lives even. Property must have security! What do you think society would come to without police and judges and suitable punishments?

Chaos! In my opinion hanging's too good for 'em. ... I shall take it up with the minister when I get out of here. I went to school with his cousin. (93-4).

This leads to a predictable reaction from Prisoner A: "Who the hell does he think he is, a bloody high court judge?" (94). They joke over his boast that his nephew has gone to the prestigious English military academy Sandhurst, likening it to their education in "Parkhurst", an English prison. He is an anomaly, a fact indicated by the innocent comment of young Prisoner C: "A college educated man in here, funny, isn't it?" (95). However, in matters of economics, Prisoner D is ready to fight another prisoner for the condemned man's letters because they can be sold to the newspapers. D: "I'm a businessman." A: "Fair enough. Amn't I a businessman myself? For what's a crook, only a businessman without a shop?" (124). Prisoner D"s attempt to converse in Gaelic with Prisoner C fails, because he is using it as a badge of class, boasting that he has taken his gold medal in Irish, but he cannot manage to carry on the conversation when Prisoner C takes his language competence in good faith and speaks to him fluently. Similarly middle-class discourse, in the form of educated speech with literary allusions, is found in the utterances of the sex offender, called by the prisoners "The Other Fellow":

My God! Is this what I've come to, mixing with murderers? ... I mean, a murderer would be justified in taking his own life, wouldn't he? "We send him forth", says Carlisle, you've heard of Carlisle, haven't you? – "We send him forth, back to the void, back to the darkness, far beyond the stars. Let him go from us." (52).

This reinforces the idea that middle-class prisoners are excluded from the generality and associated with the worst crimes in the prison, thus reversing the social order of society outside the prison.

Not only do the prisoners resent the middle-class, but they also have their own pecking order for themselves. The sex offender, referred to as "The Other Fellow", is at the bottom of the pile, not just because of his class but because of the nature of the crime. He is referred to as "the dirty man-beast", and Dunlavin resents the fact that this newcomer has been placed in the cell next to him. He is pleased that the other nearby empty cell is not to house another such offender: "Ah, no, it's only the murderer, thanks be to God" (42). It is comical that the "Other Fellow" and Prisoner D, conversely, see the other prisoners as socially below them by the nature of their crimes. Prisoner A, on the other hand, has done time not only in Ireland, but also in the English prisons Parkhurst and Dartmoor, and believes that this entitles him to be disrespectful to Warder Regan. However, this plain-speaking warder is a leveller of all pretensions, whether it be of social class, the justice system, or in this case the prison pecking order which gives status to macho-type crimes:

We all know you're a hard case. ... There's the national inferiority complex for you. Our own Irish cat-o'-nine tails and the batons of the warders loaded with lead from Carrick mines aren't good enough for him. He has to go Dartmooring and Parkhursting it. It's a wonder you didn't go further while you were at it, to Sing Sing or Devil's Island (98).

He compares it to "doing the returned Yank in front of these other fellows" (98).

Besides middle-class discourse, class is also closely associated with the degree of usage of Hiberno-English, prison jargon, and Gaelic, as the following sections will show.

Hiberno-English usage in the play

A number of Hiberno-English usages are found in the play. Concentration for the purposes of this paper will focus on the most prominent ones, and will examine their usage by the different characters. Three phonological types of representation will be considered, with seven of vocabulary and seven of grammatical and/or syntactical usage. Their frequencies of occurrence are indicated in Appendix A.

With regard to phonological indications, the word queer is indicated by the respelling "quare" (Dolan 211); in this play it is part of the phrase "the quare fellow", which is a euphemism for the man about to be executed. The pronunciation and re-spelling of my as "me" (Share 182; O'Farrell 11) and the re-spelling of by as "be" (Share 17) are the other two phonological features.

In the area of lexicography, a Gaelic word is used once, outside of the specific utterances in Gaelic by the two characters from the Kerry Gaeltacht. It is "floocholach" (91); (*flaithiúlach*, meaning generous or extravagant) and spoken by Regan. A hybrid word with a Gaelic suffix, "jackeen" (Ryckeghem *apud* Kallen) meaning in a derogatory way "Dubliner", is used twice. A word used more often in the play is one which originates from an older form of English (Kallen 19), "mot", meaning girlfriend. Another word in this drama which has a particular meaning or slant in Ireland is: "bog" (Dolan 32-3), often accompanied by nouns, as in "bogman" and "bog barbarian"; in Dublin it

means the country areas outside of that city, and sometimes the prison of Portlaoise in the Midlands. A very specific Dublin usage is the addition of —o to a name (Hickey 2004); this appears in the name "Shaybo", as seen above. Another phrase common in Hiberno-English, but particularly associated with Dublin is the plural form of "you" in the word "youse" (Hickey 2002, 173; Dolan 292). There is a reference to Irish beliefs in the phrase "seventh son of a seventh son" (Logan 53), and to the ancient Irish families of physicians in the succeeding phrase "or one of the Lees from Limerick" (*Book of the O'Lees* 10, ii) in Dunlavin"s attempts to flatter Warder Regan, and to distract him from the fact that he is surreptitiously drinking from the bottle of methylated spirits which is being used as a rub for rheumatism.

In grammatical terms, there are quite a number of occurrences of Hiberno-English forms. First of all there is the non-standard use of the definite article (Filppula 68-9; Share 44). It is used most memorably by Neighbour indicating the hardships of life for an alcoholic once outside the prison: "[t]he hard floorboards under you ...the cold and the drink shaking you", but also by Young Prisoner 1, and in a pietistic way by Warder 2: "I"ll have the sister"s children pray for you". There is considerable use of unbound reflexives (Filppula 77-8; Odlin 39): "myself" rather than "me" as in the phrase "myself and that man". In a similar way we find the word "yourself" as in the phrase "Yourself, sir, come on now ..." (77). The word "himself", usually denoting man in charge, and in this play meaning the hangman, is used seven times. In a play whose characters are all male, the phrase "herself", meaning wife or woman in charge, is understandably used just once, by Regan in describing the fears of a man going home drunk to his wife: "for fear of what herself will say when they get in the door" (115). "Itself" and "ourselves" are also used.

Some verb forms occur often. The use of a progressive form with certain verbs is used (Jean-Marc Gachelin *apud* Hickey 2002, 183), as in the phrase "He'll be just fixing up the man" (47). The "after perfect" (Filppula 101), as in the phrase "wasn't he after leaving the black box" (111) is used often. The "be perfect" (Filppula 117) is used just once, by Dunlavin: "No, but they're finished hanging up the top row" (55). The "medial object perfect" (Filppula 107), as in "He has him well recommended" (108) is used twice.

A final chosen example is the use of clefting, a form of emphasis common in Hiberno-English speech and achieved through specific syntactical transformations (Filppula 244), as in the phrase: "It's me she's waving at" (55) and "A methylated martyr, that's what I am" (75).

On looking at Appendix A, the frequency of occurrence of these Hiberno-English, or Irish-English, utterances is seen to form distinct patterns in the play. The dialect is used by most of the characters in the play, who are all male and almost all Irish. Most of the prisoners use Hiberno-English. The exceptions are the two middle-class prisoners, D, an embezzler, and the "Other Fellow", a sex offender; thirdly, the Englishman on remand. Of 151 usages in total, the largest number, thirty-five, or almost a quarter, comes from

the utterances of Dunlavin, an old man who has spent many years of his life in jail. He is followed among the prisoners by Neighbour and Young Prisoner 1 with sixteen each, about one-fifth. All of the prison officials use Hiberno-English, but to a lesser degree than the prisoners. However, the second greatest number can be found in the speech not of a prisoner but of Warder Regan: twenty-one, half-way between the total of the old lags, Dunlavin and Neighbour. The significance of this will be examined below, as it is also true of Regan's usage of prison jargon.

The place of origin of the prisoners and warders does not seem to determine use of the dialect. One prisoner is from the Kerry Gaeltacht. The bulk of the prisoners seem to be from Dublin, where the prison is situated, according to the references they make to the city and its concerns (the Royal Canal, North Crumlin, the North Wall, St James' Street), and by their scorn for country people. Outside Dublin, their knowledge of geography is confined to jokes about Corkmen and Northerners, and the Bog (that is, Portlaoise Prison in the Midlands); they have a clearer idea of the prisons of England. The country areas of Ireland are sometimes associated with the bourgeois, for example, "so as you'd think God was in another department, but not long off the Bog ... " (63); perhaps the warders were often from outside Dublin. The places of origin of the warders and officials are unclear, except for the Irish-speaking one, Crimmin, who is from the same Kerry island as Prisoner C.

The usage is age – related, however, as well as being a marker of class: the largest proportion of the words and phrases are found in the speech of Neighbour and of Dunlavin, old prisoners who have been in prison many times, or "lags" in prison jargon. This is especially marked when Dunlavin is having his rheumatic legs rubbed with methylated spirits by Warder Regan, while he takes the opportunity to swig surreptitiously from the bottle:

Ah, that's massive, sir. 'Tis you that has the healing hand. You must have desperate luck at the horses; I'd only love to be with you copying your dockets. Ah, that's it, sir, well into me I can feel it going.

... May God reward you, sir, you must be the seventh son of the seventh son or one of the Lees from Limerick on your mother's side maybe. Ah, that's the cure for the cold of the wind and the world's neglectment. (65)

## Prison jargon

Many of the terms used by the characters in this play could be termed prison jargon. Those chosen in this article are special language terms used in prison, often euphemistic, and with the highest frequencies of usage in the text. These are: *screw, lag, flowery dell, doing birdlime, chokey, nick,* and *to top.* Terms not picked are usually self-explanatory and may be used outside prison, for example, *bail, remand, reprieve, landing.* Their distribution by user is indicated in Appendix B.

Firstly, the word "screw", meaning warder, is used universally; by prisoners and occasionally by the warders themselves. Secondly the term "lag", or prisoner doing a long term, similarly "laggings", needs to be considered. These terms are used by the prisoners for the most part; in fact, the new prisoner, the "lifer", queries the definition (60). Thirdly, there are two rhyming slang usages. The first of these is "flowery dell" for cell. A similar usage is "doing birdlime" for "doing time". Both of these terms are euphemisms, like others considered above.

The term "chokey", meaning a punishment cell in solitary confinement, down in the darkness of the prison basement, is harsher than the official term, and presumably arises because such incarceration can lead to suicide. The stage directions call it "punishment cell", Neighbour calls it "the solitary" and the Chief Officer calls it "the cell under the steps". The term "chokey" is used almost exclusively by the prisoners. When Warder Donnelly uses the term to the Chief Officer, he is corrected: "Where?" Donnelly then says: "In the punishment cells, sir"; to which the Chief replies: "That's more like it". This would suggest that the gap between warders and prisoners includes different language codes. A warder using a term normally employed by prisoners is seen as failing in his duty.

The term "nick" has two usages. Dunlavin and Prisoner A use it to mean "prison", but Prisoner B uses it to mean "watch out". "To top" means to execute by killing. It is a term especially applicable in prisons where the original form of the sentence involved beheading. It is used very widely in the play, not surprisingly, as the work centres on a prison hanging.

When it comes to the use of prison jargon, the following conclusions emerge: there are seventy-one examples of the chosen terms. The greatest number of these, twenty, or over a quarter, are used by Prisoner A. This is not surprising as he has done a number of long sentences. Almost as many, sixteen, are used by Dunlavin; he can be described as institutionalised, an alcoholic whose whole endeavour in the play is to secure a place in a half-way house after his next discharge from prison. He is also humorous and full of stories about prison life. Most of the other prisoners make some use of the terms, except for young Prisoner C from Kerry, who is a relatively new arrival and a native speaker of Gaelic, and the middle-class new arrival, Prisoner D. The warders and officials use the terms rarely; Regan employs two of the terms and three others use just one each. The fact that Regan uses both Hiberno-English and prison jargon more than the other prison warders and officials, and almost as frequently as the prisoners, suggests long familiarity with prison life, but more importantly, a degree of empathy with the prisoners. This is in line with his humane attitude to prison life, and his open disagreement with the death penalty, an opinion which he is not afraid to express to his superiors, even if it gets him into trouble. Prisoner A says after getting a rebuke by Regan: "I never seen a screw like that before" to which Prisoner B replies: "Neither did anyone else" (99). Regan will be complained to the Governor by the chief, but probably will not be penalised as he is too useful, being the one called for by the condemned men for their last night, and a sort of mediator with the prisoners if needed.

## Gaelic in the play

The use of Gaelic is confined in this text to three medium to short exchanges, two exclamations, an extract from an official Memorandum, and some lines from a traditional song. Its function is also related to the theme of class, but again it is not the standard social class. The language is not introduced until five pages into Act 2, when Prisoner C, from the Kerry Gaeltacht, surprises the older prisoners with a remark which follows Prisoner B's phrase "God is good": "And has a good mother" (76). After that he uses both Gaelic and English, Gaelic when horrified by the details of the hanging: "To bfoiridh Dia 'rainn" ("May God protect us") (76), and after that only to people who know the language: for example, he exchanges a phrase or two with his old acquaintances in the juvenile section. Similarly, the middle-class prisoner D who boasts that he has taken a gold medal in Irish is discomfited when he cannot understand Prisoner C as the latter proceeds with the conversation in that language (95). The young man has more success with Warder Crimmin (91-2) who comes from the same area, and who visits him surreptitiously to give him news from home. These two men, one a prisoner and one a warder, know each other as they come from a small Gaelic-speaking island off the coast of Kerry. They are also islanded in the prison by sharing the same language and culture which is not known to the other inhabitants within the walls. They are more cut off from the generality of prisoners and warders than the English prisoner on remand, as the Englishman uses the same term "chiner" (78, 104, 122) as the young prisoners from Dublin. When Prisoner C remarks that the condemned man was kind to him when "Jackeens would be making game of [him]", this irritates Dubliner Prisoner A, who replies acidly: "Sure, it's a terrible pity about you and him. Maybe the jackeens should spread out the red carpet for you and every bog barbarian that comes into the place" (97), showing irritation at what he sees as a slur on Dublin prisoners. Prisoner C is an outsider in his view.

In addition, as these two Gaelic speakers are kind and compassionate, they are cut off the more from all except Warder Regan, and with him form another society within a society, that of the genuinely good and clean of heart who put pity before rules and regulations. They are not appreciated by the other prisoners or the warders, but all three are called upon by the condemned man to help him in his last hours: Regan and Crimmin to be the warders on watch with him, and Prisoner C to ease his mental pain by singing the traditional song. Regan sums it up thus to Crimmin:

The quare fellow asked for you especially, Crimmin; he wanted you because you're a young lad, not yet practised in badness. You'll be a consolation to him in the morning when he's surrounded by a crowd of bigger bloody ruffians than himself, if the truth were but told. (101).

It is worth remarking that Behan learned to speak Gaelic from a native speaker while in prison himself, and used it as a medium for his writing. *The Hostage*, for example, was written originally in Gaelic under the title *An Giall*. In spite of his roistering reputation around the world, Éamonn de Buitléir has stated that Behan was unlikely to

be troublesome in pubs when he was in the Gaeltacht or with Irish speakers. This would suggest a significantly respectful attitude towards the language and its users even to the point of straining credibility in this play: Prisoner C is there because of some crime he has committed, after all.

Virtue is not confined to the Gaelic speakers and Regan exclusively in this play, however. When it comes to an evaluation of the compassion of the prison population, the picture can be complex. They may seem at times to be cynical and hardened about the fate of the Quare Fellow. Though they bet on the odds of his reprieve, profit by getting cigarettes for digging his grave, and fight for his last letters which they wish to sell to the newspapers, the horror of the death appals them. They shriek and howl all together as he is led to his death. In addition, they hold to a principle of "honour among thieves" in that they trust one another to contact the mate who will bail the English prisoner out; a prisoner who pretends that Mickser will take the money but not do the request is angrily rebuked by the others. Thus, it is seen to be the common culture of the prison and their status as working class that unites them, rather than nationality. This applies also to their use of language. Though the English prisoner is ridiculed "The voice of the Lord!" when he calls down "I say, I say, down there in the yard" (79), they are ready to facilitate his request because he is one of them; his term "chiner" for friend (104, 122), is also used by Scholara (78).

#### **Conclusions**

Having paid attention to different kinds of discourse and jargon in this Behan play, certain conclusions can be reached. Firstly, Hiberno-English and prison jargon are widely used, both by prisoners and most of the officials. Secondly, the type of language used discriminates between various categorisations: prisoners, especially the older ones, use Hiberno-English and prison jargon, which are less used by the prison officials, and disappear from the speech of the most highly placed in the hierarchy of these officials, becoming indistinguishable from general middle-class speech. Thirdly, the educated middle-class speech of two of the prisoners, lacking in both Hiberno-English and prison jargon, alienates them from the general prison population. This and the nature of their crimes make them conversely into the lowest class in the estimation of the prisoners. Fourthly, the English prisoner, though using a different type of cultural expression and accent, shares prison jargon and values with the Irish ones, indicating a bond of solidarity. Finally, the use of Gaelic indicates a sub-group which, though divided by one being a warder and one a prisoner, have a culture as well as a language in common. This culture indicates a moral sense and a compassion superior to that of their companions, whether prisoners or prison officials, apart from Warder Regan. The latter could be described as the hero of the play, or at least the most vocal exponent of basic humanity as Behan sees it.

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	Ch:	Prisoner in 'chok	ey'																				
	it/St:	Title of play and	stage di	recti	ons																		

Warder Regan	Warder 1 – Donnelly	Warder 2	Warder Crimmin	Chief Warder	Governor of Prison	Hangman
Rega:	W.1:	W.2:	Crim:	Chief:	Gov:	Hg:

## Appendix B

		Frequencies	s of (	nooc	of occurrence of prison jargon	of p	rison	jargo	u									
Word	Dunlavin	Dunlavin Neighbour		PrB	PrC.	PrD 1	PrEY	P1 Y	P2 Mi	cks. P	Ch StD	Regar	Pra PrB PrC PrD PrE YP1 YP2 Micks. PCh 11th Regan W.1 Donn W.2 Crimm Chief Gov. Hg Tot	1 W.2	Crimm Cl	nief Go	v. Hg	Tot
screw	9	2	( '	7 5	10			П	7	П	2			1				28
lag-gings	1	1	_ :	,							П	2	1					12
flow. Dell	2							_										4
d. birdlime				_	_													1
chokey				_														7
nick				5	10													7
top	9	33	4)	5	_		7											17
Total:	16	9	2(	20 12	0	0	7	7	7	1	1 3	7	2	2 0	1	0	0	0 71

							(Scholara)	(Shaybo)		
Dunlavin	Neighbour	Prisoner A	Prisoner B	Prisoner C	Prisoner D	Prisoner E	Young Prisoner 1	Young Prisoner 2	Mickser	
Dun:	Neig:	PrA:	PrB:	PrC:	PrD:	PrE:	YP1:	YP2:	Mick:	

Title of play and stage directions Warder Regan Warder 1 – Donnelly Prisoner in 'chokey' YP2:
Mick:
PCh:
Tit/St:
Rega:
W.1:
W.2:
Crim:

Governor of Prison Warder 2 Warder Crimmin Chief Warder Chief: Gov: Hg:

Hangman

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