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Brogues and blarney

The representation of Irish speech in American comics

From the earliest days, Irish characters have played a prominent role in American comics. The hero of Richard F. Outcault's *Hogan's Alley*, the first American comic strip to feature a speech balloon, was an Irish child named Mickey Dugan, better known as "The Yellow Kid". Likewise, the star of Frederick Burr Opper's long-running series *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 their speech was rendered shared a great deal with existing portrayals of the Irish in theatre and in joke books (see Hickey 2010; Walshe 2020), and involved respellings to reflect an Irish accent, non-standard grammar to reflect Irish English usage, and lexical and discourse markers that were deemed to be typical of the variety. While some of these features continued to index Irish identity in comics throughout the twentieth century, others also came to the fore, particularly outside the genre of the "funnies".

For example, research into the speech of Irish heroes and villains in Marvel and DC superhero comics (Walshe 2012; 2013) found that characters' Irishness was marked less by traditional phonological features per se than by allegro speech features, i.e., elision and the use of weak forms. Moreover, rather than relying on grammatical features to create a sense of Irishness, vocatives such as *lad*, *lass*, *bucko*, and *boyo* played a more important role in conveying an Irish identity. Building on this research, the current study examines a corpus of American comics from a variety of genres and publishing houses to offer the most comprehensive overview yet of how Irish speech has been conveyed by US comic writers in the last 100 years.

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