

LEONARD AND HUNGRY PAUL: THE APPEAL OF AN IRISH NOVEL TO AN ENGLISH AUDIENCE REVEALED THROUGH ANTHROPOLOGICAL FINDINGS AND A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

Alina-Roxana POPA

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Abstract:

The paper discusses an extract from a novel published in 2019 by an Irish author, Rónán Hession, Leonard and Hungry Paul, which is one of the book club selections discussed in one of The Times 2025 podcasts, and which was very well received by the mostly English Times Radio audience. This analysis seeks to identify reasons why the English public resonates with the book, by bringing forward characteristics of Englishness underlined in a popular anthropology book, Watching the English, written by Kate Fox, an Oxford scholar. Recently selected as a set text for the Irish Junior Certificate in English in secondary schools, Hession's novel nonetheless plays upon themes, which, apparently, could also function as traces of English behaviour and values: social dis-ease, humour, irony, privacy, politeness, fairness, self-consciousness, the importance of not taking oneself too seriously, etc. The corpus study limits itself to a scene where two of the characters meet for the first time, following how these themes transpire at a linguistic level, therefore this text functioning as a proof of the cultural flexibility and exportation of Englishness across the Irish border through a shared language.

Keywords: Englishness, pragmatics, politeness, irony, humour.

Rezumat:

The novel written in 2019 by Rónán Hession, Leonard and Hungry Paul, follows the interaction of a few ordinary people in the present era, against an urban background. The name of the city is not stated in the book, but it is globally marked by the mention of brand names such as Tesco or McDonald's, or the generic presence of shops, streets, a hospital, or the proximity of an airport, which relieves the plot of any specific socio-geographical conflicts. Moreover, major conflict is absent throughout the novel as a narrative device, being replaced by the depiction of minor inner struggles as some character becomes romantically involved, another prepares to get married, while they



have lunch with parents at home, or one spends time with his friend over board games. Our attention is arrested by small gestures or dialogues, such as the extract analysed in this paper, a scene which allows us a glimpse into the quiet lives of common people.

The novel was one of the book club selections discussed in an episode of *Off Air*, a *Times Radio* programme available in podcast format, broadcast on the 7th August 2025, with Rónán Hession, the Dublin-based author, as a guest. One of the programme hosts, Fiona Glover, makes the following comment when addressing Hession: “I think out of all the books that we’ve done in our Book Club, and you are book number nine, yours is the one that has met with very, very little reader resistance at all; everybody has just really, really loved it.” (*The Times Podcasts 2025*: minute 33). *Times Radio* was launched in 2020 as a by-product of *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* (*Times Radio 2026*), with roughly the same audience as the newspapers, the most significant segment being in London and the south of the UK (Statista 2026). According to *Hurst Media Company* (2020), 86% of *The Times* target audience are ABC1s, a marketing term denoting a consumer in the UK “from one of the three higher social and economic groups, which consist of people who have more education and better-paid jobs than those in other groups” (Cambridge Dictionary 2026), mainly voters of the Conservative Party.

The fact that this UK audience from among the higher social strata should be so favourable to a cultural product coming from an Irish author suggests that there is a high degree of identification with what the novel represents; the conjecture of this paper is that the characters manifest behaviours and values which the *Times Radio* English audience recognize as their own, thus there being no “other” that this conservative public should resist.

The present paper rests its argument on the findings presented in *Watching the English. The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* (2014), the popular work of an Oxford anthropologist, Kate Fox. The scholar maintains that the core characteristic of Englishness is what she calls a **social dis-ease**,

[...] a shorthand term for all our chronic social inhibitions and handicaps. [...] It is our lack of ease, discomfort and incompetence in the field (minefield) of social interaction; our embarrassment,

insularity, awkwardness, perverse obliqueness, emotional constipation and general inability to engage in a direct and straightforward fashion with other human beings.” (Fox 2014: 401)

Fox argues that the English have a series of “antidotes” to this social dis-ease, some “reflexes” that they resort to in order to facilitate interaction, namely **humour**, **moderation** (which she defines as an avoidance of extremes, excess and intensity, or the fear of *fuss*), and **hypocrisy**. These are supported by a series of world views or outlooks: **empiricism** (or pragmatism); **Eeyorishness** or humorous mock-moaning as a facilitator of social interaction and bonding (not to be confused with genuine tearful despair, which is prohibited); **class-consciousness**. English values are concerned with **fair-play**; **courtesy**/politeness; **modesty** or the “strict rules about the *appearance* of modesty, including prohibitions on boasting and any form of self-importance, and rules actively prescribing self-deprecation and self-mockery.” (Fox 2014: 408) The anthropologist explains that, while the English as a nation do not hold monopoly on these characteristics, their specificity lies in the degree of emphasis that the English place on them.

The extract from *Leonard and Hungry Paul* consists of seven pages (Hession 2014: 63-69) rendering the scene in which a man in his thirties, Leonard, a ghost-writer of children’s encyclopaedias, meets Shelley, a woman that he will later fall in love with; Shelley is a single mother, an art college drop-out, who acts as a fire warden at the time he meets Leonard and who is the more disinhibited and socially adept of the two characters.

The first interaction between the two characters is prompted by a circumstance which represents what Fox calls a “cultural remission” (Fox 2014: 88) instance, i.e. an event which allows the temporary relaxation of cultural norms, such as the prohibition on talking to strangers. Thus, the analysed scene in the novel starts with Leonard being interrupted from his work at his office desk by the fire warden:

He looked up at a girl who was standing beside him and mouthing something.

Leonard took his headphones off with snappy overacted impatience.

‘Can I help you?’ he asked.

‘Fire alarm. We have to go.’ (Hession 2019: 63)



The mention of the headphones worn by Leonard signals the character's preference for privacy, as these act as a barrier between him and the invasion of the rest of the world. The character's isolation becomes apparent when we understand that he is immune to exterior acoustic signals, as the girl was "mouthing something". This preference for privacy is also marked by an adverbial phrase of manner structured as a prepositional phrase containing a noun phrase acting as its complement, with a noun head and pre-modifiers: "with snappy overacted impatience".

The expression "Can I help you?" acts as a negative politeness strategy, as it respects the listener's autonomy by avoiding a direct, intrusive or more aggressive questioning.

From a functional point of view, Leonard's question, "Can I help you?", signals availability, while the context prompts it being interpreted as a request for the interlocutor to give a justification for her presence, so operating as a subtle provocation; having established his preference for privacy, this is a polite challenge for the girl to give him a reason that can explain her intrusion.

Speaking about cultural remission, Fox underlines that such an event "does not mean abandoning all inhibitions and doing exactly as you please. It means quite specifically, a structured, ordered, conventionalised relaxation of normal social conventions." (Fox 2014: 90) Thus, Shelley responds to Leonard's challenge by providing a conventional phrase that functions as a directive: "Fire alarm." This is a performative speech act, which in this case justifies the intrusion of privacy by urging the rapid evacuation of a building.

When analysing politeness in pragmatics, George Yule (2006) explains the difference between negative and positive face, these being strategies that the two characters use in the scene:

Negative face is the need to be independent and free from imposition. **Positive face** is the need to be connected, to belong, to be a member of the group. So, a face-saving act that emphasizes a person's negative face will show concern about imposition (*I'm sorry to bother you...; I know you're busy, but...*). A face-saving act that emphasizes a person's positive face will show solidarity and draw attention to a common goal (*Let's do this together...; You and I have the same problem, so...*). (Yule 2006: 119-120)

We note the subsequent use of positive politeness by Shelley, who softens the directive of the first phrase ("Fire alarm") by employing a solidarity strategy through the use of the first person plural pronoun and the deontic modal expressing obligation based on external circumstances: "We have to go."

Shelley's next reply is another example of how the character relies on politeness and moreover, on irony and humour:

'Fire alarm,' she repeated. You have to get out of here. Run for your life. Please. If you don't mind.' (Hession 2019: 63)

The woman switches from the previous use of "we" to "you" as a more direct form of address in relation to the deontic modal "have to", which contributes to a reinforcement of the conative function of this speech act, focusing on the addressee and aiming to produce a specific action or behaviour.

George Yule also underlines that "Emergency situations [...] occasion the use of direct commands, regardless of who is being addressed [...]" (Yule 2008: 63) We note that the woman proceeds with the use of an imperative sentence ("Run for your life."), which further intensifies the force of the directive speech act, in an approach described by Yule as "bald on record" (*Ibidem*). The subsequent use of "Please.", a marker of routine politeness, followed by "If you don't mind.", an instance of negative politeness which mitigates or hedges the previous imposition, makes the speaker's stance ironic and potentially confrontational. More specifically, irony resides in the clash between the urgency of the situation, as the addressee needs to take immediate action, and the indirectness of the speech act involved in negative politeness.

Regarding the role of hedging, we also note that "Politeness and hedging have become forms of social interpretation of verbal and non-verbal behaviour revolving around the concept of saving face, thus playing a crucial role in social interaction strategies." (Boncea 2013: 7)

Next there is a series of replies in which the woman insists on Leonard to comply with her request, as he manifests his reluctance while believing the fire alarm is just a drill. When he finally leaves his desk, Shelley follows with a remark which is also an instance of irony:

Leonard gave in and walked huffily towards the door. 'No need to thank me for saving your life,' she called behind him. (Hession 2019: 64)



“No need to thank me” is a negative politeness response to gratitude, meant to make the interlocutor feel comfortable and unobligated. But in this context, given that Leonard shows a complete lack of gratitude for a gesture that could be as significant as the value of someone’s life, there is an incongruity between the situation and the actual words, the behaviour of one character and the reaction of the other, which results in irony.

Further on, as the fire warden reacts to Leonard’s intention to use the lift by reminding him that this is forbidden under the circumstances, we have another exchange which employs humour and irony:

‘How do I get down then?’

‘Most people use the stairs, but you can also abseil or climb the outside of the building like Spiderman if you know how to do that. C’mon, stop being difficult. Disobeying a fire warden is seven years bad luck.’ (*Ibidem*)

Instead of giving a straight answer to Leonard’s question, Shelley gives him options through the phrase “most people... but”, a rhetorical device used to introduce a marked contrast between a general rule and a specific exception. Since the exception is reduced to absurdity, irony thus becomes a rhetorical tool employed in order to persuade the interlocutor to take the obvious course of action. The informal conative interjection “C’mon”, followed by a direct call to the interlocutor to respond to the addressed requests under the form of an imperative sentence, “stop being difficult”, is then softened by negative politeness. In this case, an impersonal statement referring to neither the speaker nor the hearer is used as a “deference strategy” (Yule 2008: 66), which is further marked by humour relying on the juxtaposition of formal, detached language and an absurd content relating to superstition: “Disobeying a fire warden is seven years bad luck.”

Another sequence from Shelley’s part is an example of combining negative politeness (the negative-interrogative deontic modal structure “can you not” functioning as a hedge rather than a direct command, framed as a simple task by the softening adverb “just”), with positive politeness as a solidarity strategy (“with all the others”):

‘Look, can you not just go assemble yourself at the corner between the park and the museum with all the others. Please?’ (Hession 2019: 64)



The analysis of what follows concerns humour that is used in order to diminish the potential heaviness of an interaction. This is in line with what Fox (2014) calls “The First Commandment of English humour – the Importance of Not Being Earnest rule”:

Any who initially fail to grasp the fine distinctions involved, and cross the line between permitted seriousness and forbidden solemnity, are soon made painfully aware of their error – by relentless and merciless ridicule. [...] You can take your duties and responsibilities [...] seriously, but [...] [not] take *yourself* too seriously, and become too humourlessly earnest, over-zealous, self-important or pompous [...]. (Fox 2014: 107)

In this line of thought, the scene unfolds with Shelley making a humorous gesture that is meant to both diffuse the impression of “solemnity” that might have been left by her exercising an official role and Leonard’s own “earnestness” in making a “fuss” about his being pressured into compliance:

“Leonard did what he was told and as he walked off she blew a little whistle that was on a string around her neck, which startled him and gave her a giggle.” (Hession 2019: 64)

Another segment of the scene shows Shelley coming to engage in a dialogue with Leonard after the fire alarm episode comes to a conclusion, in order to enquire about the books she had noticed he was working on, having confused him with the editor of the series. There is a fragment where an omniscient voice guides us through the story’s context concerning this character:

Mark Baxter, BEd, was the overseeing author and hardly lifted a finger on the whole thing. Interns from his office just emailed all the changes and feedback, while Mark was away on the conference circuit, presumably sleeping with more interns, the BEd in his title providing a clue as to where he did his best work. (*Idem*: 65-66)



Besides the humorous association between BEd, the character's title, and his promiscuous behaviour, the content of this excerpt contains an element of gossip, which is deemed valuable, according to Kate Fox, in the context of the English being obsessed with the concept of privacy. Thus, gossip has a high value in a type of "forbidden-fruit effect" (Fox 2014: 43), the stress on privacy also pointing to the concept of English social dis-ease.

The next interchange, in which Leonard corrects Shelley's misunderstanding, is a mix of several elements that pertain to Englishness: humour, irony and the importance of not being earnest, or of taking yourself too seriously:

'Oh no, I'm not Mark Baxter. He's the author of those books, I'm just the content supervisor. He decides what's in the book and I just write it up.'

'Oh, really? Is that a job?'

'I hope so,' said Leonard a little too sensitively. (Hession 2019: 66)

Similarly, we note here Leonard's concern so as not to appear to be boasting about the importance of his position, a fact identifiable through the use of the diminishing adverb "just". The question "Is that a job?" functions as an irony of understatement, since the effort or significance of someone's activity is framed as unclear. Fox (2014: 64) also speaks about the understatement rule when it comes to English irony, thus the text providing another example of a parallel between traits of Englishness and Hession's novel. Moreover, Leonard's next reply being modulated by the adverbial phrase "a little too sensitively" signals his failure to appreciate the ironic comment, therefore being corrected for his excessive degree of concern about not being taken seriously. "A little too..." functions as an indirectness tool for conveying an attitude, as it hedges the criticism implied by "sensitively", therefore avoiding the harshness of a direct accusation.

Shelley's next reply brings to our attention another concept that is specific to the idea of Englishness, namely the concern for fairness:

'I don't mean it that way. I just think it's unfair that you do all the work and he gets his name on the book. You should at least get a co-credit.' (Hession 2014: 66)



We note that the woman uses a sequence of three statements which build her case for diverting the interaction from a prospective confrontational direction towards one that favours the interlocutor. Consequently, the concept of fairness acts here as a face-saving tool used to mitigate the face-threatening act realised by the previous perceived criticism. More precisely, the first sentence, “I don’t mean it that way.”, marks the idea that the speaker’s intended meaning does not align with the interpreted meaning; the sentence is a pragmatic politeness device, a hedge that manages both the speaker’s face, who wishes to be liked, and the hearer’s face, who does not want to feel offended. The phrase “I just think” in the next sentence also functions as a hedge, it structures a non-confrontational counterpoint following the perception of the interlocutor’s offence-taking. “I just think” also anchors the meaning of its object clause “it’s unfair”, establishing Shelley’s favourable attitude towards her interlocutor. Finally, the concept of fairness is further exploited through the force of the deontic modal “should”, which is invoked in this case because the speaker perceives a transgression of this notion. As Fox outlines in her work,

“Many of the rules examined [...] highlight the immense importance of the concept of ‘fairness’ in English culture. This is not to say that other nations lack such a concept – what is distinctively English is our overwhelming national obsession with ‘fair play’. (Fox 2014: 174)

Further on, one of Leonard’s replies in the scene when being offered a biscuit by Shelley touches upon the idea of male incompetence in the art of seduction:

‘No thanks,’ said Leonard patting his slightly protruding stomach and immediately regretting he had done so in front of a girl, of all people. (Hession 2019: 66)

This example relies on situational humour, in which Leonard’s awkwardness is revealed by the description of a gesture that he makes, namely drawing attention to the unflattering image of his stomach in front of someone from the opposite sex. The expression “immediately regretting



he had done so” signals a shift in the character’s perspective, implying that his initial evaluation of the situation and his consequent gesture was inadequate, resulting in embarrassment. As Fox argues, “most English comedy is essentially about embarrassment” (2014: 70), and moreover, this instance is compounded by male embarrassment, which the same author comments as follows:

The average English male may be highly sexed, but he is not, it must be said, an accomplished flirt. He is not at his best when confronted with what one of my male informants called ‘a female person of the opposite species’. He is usually either reticent, tongue-tied and awkward, or, at worst, boorish, crass and clumsy. (Fox 2014: 327)

A further example of Leonard’s increasing anxiety relating to the interaction between him and Shelley is depicted in a humorous account of his cringing and self-conscious ruminations when evaluating his own behaviour:

He catalogued his mistakes with an amplified sense of embarrassment: the way he missed her humorous cues, his stilted aloofness, his patting of his stupid, stupid, stupid, what-was-I-thinking stomach. He wanted to bang his head on the desk. (Hession 2019: 67)

We note the enumeration of his perceived mistakes contains three types of noun phrases: a complex noun phrase with a noun head and a post-modifier relative clause (“the way he missed her humorous cues”); a noun phrase with pre-modifiers (“his stilted aloofness”); a noun phrase with a pre-modifier and a complex string of post-modifiers (“his patting of his stupid, stupid, stupid, what-was-I-thinking stomach”). The pre-nominal adjectival phrase modifying “stomach” uses the repetition of the adjective “stupid” and the hyphenated clause “what-was-I-thinking” for emphasis, this being further amplified by the next sentence, which conveys Leonard’s extreme frustration through a suggestive image of self-inflicted pain (“He wanted to bang his head on the desk.”).

The rest of the scene relating to this first encounter between the two characters consists of around two pages (67-68) in which we witness



Leonard's stream of thoughts about his ineptness in flirting. Among these, there is a noteworthy instance in which Leonard is overcome with self-reproach about having failed to initiate introductions:

He never even asked her name. What kind of rude, self-absorbed person would forget to extend a hand and ask her name? Idiot! He never even said his own name. All he said is that he wasn't Mark Baxter, which was true of pretty much everybody except Mr Mark Baxter, BEd, himself. (Hession 2019: 68)

In this excerpt, the character's exasperation is rendered through a first affirmative sentence marked by the adverbial phrase "never even", which signals that asking that person's name was the minimum expectation in that context, and that failing to do so was a violation of social etiquette; there follows a rhetorical question in which the adjective pre-modifiers of the noun phrase head "person" serve as self-characterisation tools, reinforced by the exclamation "Idiot!", which is also used to express frustration with himself; there is further emphasis in the repetition of the "never even" phrase, which builds up to further frustration through the parallel symmetrical structure ("her name" – "his own name"); the last sentence relies on contextual shared-knowledge humour, as the association of the previous gossip element springs to mind by referencing the subject of humorous gossip ("Mr Mark Baxter, BEd, himself"). The "name" issue informs this whole sequence, the importance of which is decoded by Kate Fox, making us realise that failing to reveal names in initial encounters actually reinforces a cultural stereotype pertaining to "social dis-ease":

You do not go out to someone at a party (or in any other social setting where conversation with strangers is permitted, such as a pub bar-counter) and say 'Hello, I'm John Smith,' or even 'Hello, I'm John.' In fact, the only correct way to introduce yourself in such settings is not to introduce yourself at all, but to find some other way of initiating a conversation – such as a remark about the weather. (Fox 2014: 38-39)



In conclusion, there are several traces of Englishness in the analysed extract, which are linguistically realised through different means: the preference for **privacy** is signalled by negative politeness; gossip, which relates to privacy, is marked by humour or contextual shared-knowledge humour; directives justify the invasion of privacy in an exceptional circumstance; directives are mitigated through hedges, softening adverbs, both positive and negative politeness, impersonal statements used as deference strategies; **irony** and **humour** are realised through negative politeness, indirect speech acts, incongruity between the characters' speech and their behaviour, rhetorical devices for contrast between a general rule and a specific absurd exception, the juxtaposition of formal, detached language and an absurd content; **modesty**, the prohibition on boasting and the importance of not being earnest are identified through the use of diminishing adverbs, adverbial phrases as indirectness tools for conveying an attitude and criticism hedges, interrogative questions as ironic understatements; **fairness** as a face-saving tool is realised through politeness and hedges; **social dis-ease**, which pervades all the other aspects of Englishness, is also transparent through the idea of male incompetence in the art of seduction, this manifesting in situational humour and the description of anxiety: complex noun phrases with modifiers, hyphenated clauses and repetitions for emphasis; the avoidance of mentioning names also relates to social dis-ease and is used as a trigger for the humorous self-conscious stream of thoughts rendered through adverbial phrases, rhetorical questions, exclamations, or repetitions.

Without being exhaustive, the present analysis of the extract from the novel *Leonard and Hungry Paul* provides a perspective on how Englishness is expressed at linguistic level. Moreover, it offers a proof that a shared language contributes to the flexibility and transferability of English cultural stereotypes, resulting in public non-resistance and the assimilation of the "other".

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