The Lexicon of Botany Texts in Ireland and England: A Contrastive and Diachronic Case Study from the Late Modern English Period

Daniela Cesiri
University of Venice “Ca’ Foscarí”

1. Introduction

The present study is meant as a continuation of a national project (protocol n. 2008_C7BR9H) partly funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Scientific Research and entitled The popularization of scientific discourse in a diachronic perspective. The project section for which the present author is responsible deals with the analysis in terms of word-formation of botany popular terms as contained in botany texts addressed to non-experts published in Ireland during the nineteenth century (1735–1898, in particular; see Cesiri 2012 and forthcoming).

The time span taken into consideration is part of the Late Modern English (LModE) period, one in which botany takes the shape of a modern science ‘cultivated’ (in every sense) by the layman as well; the text types analyzed in the project are manuals of botany addressed to amateurs, containing a terminology which includes both the Latin (scientific) terms and the English (popular) terms for the species listed.

The research project started by considering a 1735 herbal by John K’Eogh, who wrote this work on Irish medicinal plants in order to introduce the plants’ properties and related medical treatments to the general public, who could use them in their daily lives. The terms used in K’Eogh (1735) are listed in alphabetical order, reporting the popular name in English first, a second synonym in English when available, then followed by the name in Latin and the name in Irish. Each of the 464 entries described contains a description of the herb and indications of where it grows, which part can be used and for what kind of remedy, along with indications on the preparation of the remedy itself. The analysis of the popular names of the plants in English revealed repeated patterns of word-formation, showing especially terms composed of one single noun and compounds of two and more terms, as in ‘water dropwort’, ‘garden endive’ and so forth. These repeated patterns were attributed by the present author to forms of what Gotti (2003: 73) defines as “nominal adjectivation, i.e. the use of a noun to specify another with an adjectival function”, a very common phenomenon in present-day specialized texts (cf. ibid.), present also in general language. Thus, the 1735 text shows the anticipation of a tendency typical of present-day scientific texts.

Three later texts from the mid-nineteenth century were chosen in order to investigate further into patterns of word-formation in Irish botany texts addressed to non-experts. Results from this time span will be discussed in greater detail in Section 5.1. below, but the three texts actually contained the same tendency to nominal adjectivation found in the 1735 herbal with a focus on terms in English only, as no names in Irish Gaelic or in Irish English were included.

The final time span investigated concerned the end of the nineteenth century. The texts analysed for this period showed popular terms in English for genera and main species composed preferably of one noun, with compounds created through nominal adjectivation and more complex strings of nouns reserved for the indication of sub-species.

The present investigation seeks to take the above-mentioned analysis further and to compare data from Irish botany texts to those from similar, contemporary English texts, especially from the mid-nineteenth century, for which more data are available from the research project. The text types considered in the project as well as in the present contribution include herbals, gardening manuals,
(semi-)professional botany books, and journals on botany and gardening, but they will be generally labelled as “botany texts” taking into consideration their common topic rather than the several ways in which this topic is dealt with in the different publications” (Cesiri 2012: 16).

To a minor extent, this study can also be considered as a continuation of Cesiri (2009), a paper included in the proceedings of the 2008 Symposium on New Approaches in English Historical Lexis (HEL-LEX 2), dealing with terms for addressing the readership in English cookery and gardening manuals of the nineteenth century. This constituted the starting-point for attention to the socio-historical background to the botanic interest so popular during the Victorian Age in the ‘British Isles’, England and Ireland in particular, which will be described in the following sections.

2. Botany texts in England

In England, the interest in the medical properties of herbs and plants, which constituted the basis of the future organization of botany in a scientific discipline, dates back to the ancient past of English culture. Indeed, the production of botany texts in England is as old as the history of the English language itself.

The earliest attestations (and references) are to be found in the Old English period (OE, c. 550 AD–1066); they are Anglo-Saxon herbals, which still contained a mixture of herbal medicine and folklore superstitions. The first copies of these manuscripts found by scholars so far date back to at least the eighth century (cf. Sinclair Rhode 1922: 1). These are followed by later medieval manuscripts, which could be either translations from Latin and Greek classics (as in FIGURE 1) or original texts which show an interest in the herbs for their medical properties and testify to the centuries-long tradition in the production and publication of botany texts in the vulgar language of the ‘populace’.

As for the terms for plants contained in these early herbals, we should distinguish between those works that relied on the Anglo-Saxon knowledge of local herbs, to which were added a minor number of continental species taken from manuscripts from the Greek or Latin tradition, and those works that were mere translations of the latter. In the first case, terms in Anglo-Saxon were reported in the herbals since “the Anglo-Saxons had names for, and used, a far larger number of plants than the continental nations” (Sinclair Rhode 1922: 8).

The invention of printing and its introduction into England in the fifteenth century spread botany texts further (cf. Arber 1938/1986). The first printed books written by Englishmen introduced in the country are a group of texts, such as John de Trevisa’s 1398 translation of De Proprietatibus Rerum, a medieval treatise in Latin written by Bartolomaeus Anglicum (Bartholomew the Englishman) between 1248 and 1296. However, the first herbals actually printed in Britain, and which became quite popular
in later periods are Richard Banckes’ 1525 *Herball* and Peter Treveris’s 1526 *Grete Herball* (from a French original, cf. Arber 1938/1986).

The late medieval texts were all written after the Norman Conquest; information on herbs and plants were mainly based on the French and Latin traditions (such as the school of Salerno, the most influential medical school of the time), which caused the Anglo-Saxon lore “[to] naturally fall into disrepute” (Sinclair Rhode 1922: 42). Indeed, these texts were mainly translations from Latin and the terminology contained a greater number of calques from Latin itself, or from Latin through French. Except for the Anglo-Saxon terms passed down through the centuries, the calques that constituted plant nomenclature in the early and late medieval herbals were the basis for the later popular terminology in English. These words contain traces of Greek and Latin languages (through calques or affixation processes) that were essential in later centuries, especially in the present-day, to the word-formation processes of new plant nomenclature.

The first herbal to be originally written in English is *Libellus De Re Herbaria Novus. A New Herball* published in 1538 by William Turner (considered the father of English botany, cf. Whitney 1988), followed by *A Newe Herball*, published in three parts between 1551 and 1568, which is considered the first original scientific herbal written in English by an Englishman (ibid.).

The most famous herbals handed down through the centuries, and which are also known to the general public of the present day, are certainly John Gerard’s *Herball* (1597, FIGURE 2) and Nicholas Culpeper’s *A Physicall Directory* (1649), *The English Physitian* (1652, FIGURE 3) and *The Complete Herbal* (1653), which combined the use of pharmaceutical and herbal knowledge with astrological connections (cf. Nagy 1988).

---

The first traces of scientific method used in botany texts can be found in some sixteenth century herbals, such as Brunfled & Weiditz’s Herbarum vivae eicones (on this see, for instance, McConchie 2011, Mäkinen 2006 and Smith 2006). However, the first scientifically-oriented methods in herbal medicine would be used consistently only during the eighteenth century and would provide the basis for the late modern and present-day botany texts (cf. Nagy 1988). During this period, we witness a widespread shift from popular herbals to botany as a science (see FIGURE 4 for an example of an eighteenth-century botany text) favoured by the institution of scientific ‘societies’ with a professional interest in this ‘new’ discipline. The societies’ annals were used to publish the work of their members and to ‘promote’ their activities to the relatively large community of learned men with an interest in botany. In these early scientific publications, the experimental essay was the preferred text genre, so common nowadays in the form of the research article. In fact, these publications of essays and monographic volumes of annals are considered the forerunners of present-day specialized, scientific journals (cf. Morton 1981).

In addition, it is during this very period that the non-expert interest in botany starts to rise (cf. Shteir 1997). However, it is quite different from the interest we find in periods such as the Victorian Age, when ‘common’ people from the upper middle classes took an interest in botany and the classification of herbs and plants. Indeed, in the case of the eighteenth century, the amateurs were educated men, who had a basic scientific knowledge and wished to know more about this new kind of science, which was also encouraged by the Church as a way of glorifying God’s creation and to keep the believers busy, and at least in the Church’s intentions, possibly away from temptation (cf. Endersby 2002).

The following period, the nineteenth century, will be explained in Section 4 below along with the parallel situation in Ireland.
3. Botany texts in Ireland

As for the history of botany texts in Ireland, we do not have accurate historical and diachronic accounts as in the case of England. However, we do have some interesting sources in studies on the folklore related to the use of herbs, such as Foster & Chesney (1998), Elliston & Hatfield (2004) and Kelly & Clark (2010).

Other information on the use of herbs can be found in medieval manuscripts in Irish, which are mainly copies or translations of original Latin and Greek classics, as in the case of English botany texts from the same period (cf. Dhonnchadh 2000).

Scientific observation of plants and herbs constituting the Irish flora starts only in the eighteenth century. Since this period, botany texts addressed to amateurs have provided classification of plants, their names in Latin and English, but only occasionally in Irish (as in K’Eogh 1735), and a description of the aspect of plants and herbs and their geographical environment. As Cesiri (forthcoming) found, in later texts there is no interest in the medical and/or culinary properties.

Some important volumes written by significant figures in the group of Irish professional botanists are Threlkeld (1726, whose author is considered the father of Irish botany; cf. Synnot 1997), K’Eogh (1735), Mackay (1836), Praeger (1934).
4. Botanic interest in Victorian England and Ireland

Gardening in general was a very popular recreational activity for the upper-middle and the middle classes in Victorian England and Ireland (cf. Endersby 2002 and Constantine 1981). During this period, an amateur interest in botany grew as well, involving men, women and even children with no particular scientific background in their education as had happened in the previous century.

There are many reasons for this interest: botany was easy, cheap, pious, healthy and suitable for an educated gentlemanlike/ladylike middle class (Endersby 2002). In particular, botany became increasingly popular since it was considered a scientific discipline easily accessible to non-experts. Other sciences, indeed, required complex equipment as well as more technical knowledge, which could be obtained only through academic studies, at that time not accessible to everybody for reasons of gender or social class (Endersby 2002). These characteristics made botany a recreational activity recommended by institutions to the middle classes.

During the nineteenth century, the Irish urban middle classes—almost in imitation of their British counterparts (Londoners in particular)—underwent a change in their living conditions compared to previous centuries (a different situation than the peasantry and rural middle classes). In particular, we might mention a certain growth in leisure activities and domestic recreations, which needed to be regulated as the everyday life of British bourgeois citizens already was (cf. Adelman 2009).

As already described in Cesiri (2009: 24–25), manuals regulating gardening and amateur botany were some of the most popular types of instruction books—after those regulating social etiquette and cooking—published during the nineteenth centuries (cf. Swinbank 2002). The popularity achieved by gardening manuals in England coincided with a new inclination in the urban middle classes, which “were moving out of the cramped and unhealthy inner city areas of London and the industrial towns of the North and the Midlands. They escaped to new homes in the suburbs. […] The distinctive feature of these new homes was that they were built with attached private gardens” (Constantine 1981: 388). These gardens demanded particular care which was taken in the hands of the owners who wanted “to occupy their hours of relaxation from city business in managing […] their suburban garden” (The Gardener 1867: 1–2, in Constantine 1981:388).

In the case of the Irish botany texts considered here, however, they are direct products of the growing interest in botany as a scientific discipline accessible to a general public of amateurs who did not have a particular education in the field.

Cataloguing and identifying species was a particularly popular recreational activity, which crossed genders and—to a certain extent—social classes as professional botanists from the upper classes and amateurs from the middle classes alike were all involved in field work (cf. Shteir 1997). This popularity led to the publication of the texts analysed in this study: volumes listing the names with scientific and popular terminology of local plants and herbs together with a description of their aspect, geographical environment and scientific classification. A first difference, which can be noticed from previous centuries, is the absence of references to either medical or culinary properties which might perhaps signal the ‘purely scientific’ rather than popular nature of nineteenth-century botany texts, not exclusively Irish.

5. The present study

As already mentioned in the Introduction, the aim of the present contribution is to compare popular names of plants and herbs found in Irish and English nineteenth-century botany texts in order to investigate patterns in the corresponding terminology and try to determine similarities and/or differences.

The selection of the terms to be analyzed was relatively easy as the texts were structured as glossaries with introductory sections on the geographical area(s) in which the plants/herbs grew or had been collected and the system of classification used. Each genus, species and sub-species of plant was followed by a detailed description of its aspect and the region or soil in which it prospered. The system
of classification was still the Linnaean system for all the texts considered; this made the selection even easier because the plants were arranged in approximately the same order. This allowed a comparison of those terms present in all the volumes examined as well as the analysis of terms of other species included in either volume.

The Irish botany texts are Mackay (1836), Power (1845) and Dickie (1864), which were already examined in Cesiri (forthcoming). The English botany texts are Maund (1836) and Francis (1842), selected because they are the same type of publication as the Irish ones and could be considered as comparable to the Irish sample. Other kinds of texts found for England were either too specific (botanists writing for other botanists) or they dealt with very specific species.

5.1. Irish botany texts

Table 1 below represents the distribution of only a sample of entries present in the three texts. Due to the extensive lists of items contained in the three volumes, this selection considered all the terminology used to refer to the same plants present in each of the three texts in order to have a comparable sample of entries for the three nineteenth-century volumes.

As for the terminology itself, it should be noted that all the names reported have the same status. The first term is used for the genera, whereas all the following terms are used to indicate all the different species and sub-species of the same plant. For this reason, they can all be considered as primary terms, a classification which the present author preferred to keep in the table (see also Cesiri 2012 and forthcoming).

TABLE 1. Composition of the entries listed in the three Irish 19th-century botany texts analyzed in Cesiri (forthcoming).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>First Term</th>
<th>Other Terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mackay</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1836)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1845)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dickie</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1864)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The classification used in Table 1 indicates that popular names might be composed by: one word only (indicated as 1 in Table 1, e.g., ‘buckthorn’ for Ramneæ), two terms joined with a hyphen but considered as one single term (1 (-), e.g., ‘wintergreen’, Pyrola), two words one of which is a possessive (2 (-), e.g., ‘Crane’s bill’, Geranium), two words of which one is composed of a hyphenated compound (2 (1+2 -), e.g., ‘soft-knotted Trefoil’, Trifolium striatum), two different words (2 diff, e.g., ‘sea chamomile, Asteraceæ anglica or A. maritima) or even three different words (3, e.g., ‘glaucous dog rose’, Rosa Caesia). As these examples illustrate, most of the terms describe—synthetically but effectively—the nature, the aspect or the properties of the species; terms which often derived from the creativity and sense of imagination of the populace or of those who classified them for the first time.

What is significant in this case is the distribution of the terms and their structure. Indeed, as we can see in Table 1, the first term is one single word, a noun, which might indicate a preference for conciseness and monoreferentiality even in the popularised terminology. The composition of the other terms is quite varied; preference seems to be given to two different words and to terms composed of a term ‘pre-modified’ by a hyphenated compound (e.g., ‘small-flowered Crowfoot’). There seems to be a preference for terms which describe plants with a phrase, reflecting both the empirical description of the items as also the specialised preference for conciseness and monoreferentiality typical of specialised discourse.

A representative sample of entries, chosen from those plants present in all the three texts, might be useful to illustrate the nineteenth-century terminology of the Irish botany texts.
Examples (1) to (6) also illustrate that there are some slight differences in the composition of the terms used in the texts themselves.

(1) *Thalictrum*:
- Mackay (1836)
  - *Meadow-Rue*;
- Power (1845)
  - *Rueweed*;
- Dickie (1864)
  - *Meadow Rue*.

(2) *Calthra*:
- Mackay (1836)
  - *Marsh-marigold*;
- Power (1845)
  - *Marshmarigold*;
- Dickie (1864)
  - *Marsh Marygold*.

(3) *Nymphaea*:
- Mackay (1836)
  - *Water-Lily*;
- Power (1845)
  - *Waterlily*;
- Dickie (1864)
  - *White Water-Lily*.

(4) *Cheiranthus*:
- Mackay (1836)
  - *Wall-flower*;
- Power (1845)
  - *Wallflower*;
- Dickie (1864)
  - *Wallflower*.

(5) *Arabis*:
- Mackay (1836)
  - *Rock-cress*;
- Power (1845)
  - *Rockcress*;
- Dickie (1864)
  - *Rock Cress*.

(6) *Cardamine*:
- Mackay (1836)
  - *Lady’s smock*;
- Power (1845)
  - *Bittercress*;
- Dickie (1864)
  - *Bitter Cress*.

These terms are only an illustrative sample of the general tendency found in the three texts. As we can see, in examples (2), (3) and (5), Mackay (1836) prefers the spelling of one word constituted by two words united by a hyphen, Power (1845) uses a single word, while Dickie (1864) indicates terms composed of two different words. In example (1), however, Power (1845) uses a term which, according to the OED, is used in the present day for the same species; in example (4), the term seems to be assessed as one single word (an orthography still in use in today’s popular terminology; cf. OED); example (6) shows that Power (1845) and Dickie (1864) use the same term (“bittercress”), while
Mackay (1836) uses one that is totally different (‘lady’s smock’). The OED indicates—after the scientific name in Latin—‘cuckooflower’ as its synonym but not ‘bittercress’, which is not cited in the entry; thus we might be induced to hypothesise that ‘lady’s smock’ and ‘cuckooflower’ are ‘more popular’ names than the one indicated by Power (1845) and Dickie (1864).

5.2. English botany texts

In the case of English botany texts, the two selected for this study included many genera and species, which included sub-species as well. A very limited group of these entries is in common in the two volumes and, for this reason, the present author decided to analyse patterns in the terminology reported by each single author rather than to compare the two authors between themselves.

The two volumes take the Linnaean system of classification as their guiding principle and are structured in an almost identical way, similar to that found in the Irish botany texts (and described in Section 5.1 above). Maund (1836) contains an additional section in the entries dedicated to the single species and sub-species and in which the etymology of the Latin name of each plant is explained, this constituting the only linguistic interest showed by the authors of any of the books.

Table 2 shows the composition of the terms found in the two English texts. The abbreviations used in the second row of Table 2 are the same as those used in Table 1; thus, we have terms composed of: one word (indicated by 1), one word composed of two terms united with a hyphen (1-), two words linked with a possessive (2’s, as in example (14)),1 two words of which one is a hyphenated compound (2:1+2 -, as in examples (7) and (14)), two words of which one is a possessive (2:1+2 ’s, as in (11)) and, finally, terms composed of two, three or more than three different words (2 diff., 3/+ diff., as in examples (8), (9) or (15)).

(7) Vine-Leaved Anemone (Anemone vitifolia);
(8) Showy Dendrobium (Dendrobium pulchellum);
(9) Rose-coloured flowered Hibiscus (Hibiscus roseus);
(10) Alpine Rose; or Rose of Sharon (Rosa Alpina);
(11) Hodson’s hybrid Mimulus (Mimulus roseo-cardinalis).
(12) Black Maiden-hair (Asplenium Adiantum-nigrum);
(13) Blue Bell of Scotland (Campanula);
(14) Enchanter’s Nightshade (Circaea);
(15) Gill go on the ground (Ground Ivy – Glecoma);
(16) Good King Henry (Chenopodium bonus Henricus);
(17) Queen of the Meadows (Spiraea ulmaria).

Another interesting point to highlight in the analysis of the more complex terms is that they are often prepositional phrases (see examples (10), (13) (15) and (17), for instance), which are highly descriptive and almost ‘iconic’ in their presentation of the plant, referring to the ancient past or to the simple creativity of those who created these terms.

1 Examples (7) to (11) are taken from Maund (1836); examples from (12) to (17) are from Francis (1842).
6. Conclusions

The comparison of Irish and English botany texts presented in this paper showed that Irish botany texts are more similar to one another compared to the English texts, which include several different species in the two volumes. However, the orthography and structure of the terms contained in the two English texts seems to be more homogeneous than the Irish ones. This might indicate that the terms themselves had already acquired a fixed structure since the terminology is similar to that used in the present day.

In terms of the use of this terminology in the two English authors, we might hypothesize that their use of the same orthographic variants could indicate that the community of discourse of English botanists was more organized than the Irish one as it had an older tradition as a ‘scientific’ community. Thus, the terminology shared within this community might have already achieved a certain homogeneity and consistency with respect to the more recent and less uniform corresponding Irish community.

However, the orthography of the terms does show similarities between Irish and English authors. This could be explained by contacts between the two ‘communities’ either directly (through epistolary exchanges) or indirectly (Irish authors reading books published in England and vice versa). However, no evidence for the ‘direct contact’ hypothesis can be adduced at this stage of research: the present author could not trace any correspondence between Irish and English authors, any references in the texts themselves or indication that a contact might exist at the level of publishers as it seems that the volumes published in Ireland were all original works by Irish botanists.

Contacts between English and Irish scholars and the related exchange of information about terminology cannot be excluded a priori because of this lack of evidence; however, it is the author’s present opinion that the ‘indirect contact’ hypothesis might be more likely, as these books could be accessible to both communities as reference works. Another element in favour of the ‘indirect contact’ explanation might derive from the Linnaean system of classification adopted in all the volumes compared in this analysis. A shared system of classification, nomenclature and theoretical approach to the study of local flora might be a common element for the two scientific (and discourse) communities, leading to the adoption of similar terminology.

Moreover, the fact that the Irish texts used a completely Linnaean approach is also of some interest for the scientific approach they adopt to communicate specialised contents to a public of non-experts. Indeed, it is worth mentioning that a full Linnaean system of nomenclature in England was adopted only in the 1780s by Colin Milne, replacing the until then persistent Ray-Tournefort system (cf. Stuessy 2009), which first introduced the concept of genus and of sexual classification of plants, but which proved to be rather limited for the creation of new terms after the discovery of new genera, species and sub-species (cf. Singh 2004). The Linnaean system developed the idea of the sexual system to classify plants further, by introducing a more universal system, which was able to classify already existing, newly-discovered plants as well as plants which were yet to be discovered.

Finally, considering the actual popular names indicated by the English authors, we might say that they show a greater attention to the documentation of the creativity of popular names—an attention, which is not present in the Irish authors, including popular names of plants/herbs with no reference to Irish Gaelic at all, in a period in which the Gaelic Revival was still an ongoing and successful cultural and literary movement. However, we do know that for the species included in the Irish nineteenth-century volumes there are terms in Gaelic along with ‘creative’ alternatives as shown in Cesiri (2012 and forthcoming, e.g., “Moss Growing on dead Men’s Skulls”, K’Eogh 1735: 82). Thus, the lack of these terms is not an indication of their loss in contemporary language but it might be due to a purely scientific—rather than ‘folkloric’—attention to the popular terms indicating the Irish flora.
References

Primary Sources


Power, Dr. et al. 1845. *Contributions towards a Fauna and Flora of the County of Cork*. Cork: Purcell.

Secondary Sources


Kelly, James & Fiona Clark (eds.) 2010. *Ireland and Medicine in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. Farnham: Ashgate.


Selected Proceedings of the 2012 Symposium on New Approaches in English Historical Lexis (HEL-LEX 3)
edited by R. W. McConchie, Teo Juvonen, Mark Kaunisto, Minna Nevala, and Jukka Tyrkkö
Cascadilla Proceedings Project Somerville, MA 2013

Copyright information
Selected Proceedings of the 2012 Symposium on New Approaches in English Historical Lexis (HEL-LEX 3)
© 2013 Cascadilla Proceedings Project, Somerville, MA. All rights reserved
ISBN 978-1-57473-455-3 library binding
A copyright notice for each paper is located at the bottom of the first page of the paper. Reprints for course packs can be authorized by Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

Ordering information
Orders for the library binding edition are handled by Cascadilla Press.
To place an order, go to www.lingref.com or contact:
Cascadilla Press, P.O. Box 440355, Somerville, MA 02144, USA
phone: 1-617-776-2370, fax: 1-617-776-2271, sales@cascadilla.com

Web access and citation information
This entire proceedings can also be viewed on the web at www.lingref.com. Each paper has a unique document # which can be added to citations to facilitate access. The document # should not replace the full citation.
This paper can be cited as: