

Print Edition

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Difficult---or Different?

BY DIAN KILLIAN, PH.D. • THE GAELIC EFFECT: HOW THE IRISH LANGUAGE CAN SAVE THE WORLD • 17 OCTOBER 2026

I love giving gifts. It's one of my love languages! The next Grá Mór raffle is November 1st, featuring Effie Brush's new book *Paper Projects in Particular*. Thank you everyone for being here (I appreciate you!) and to paying subscribers for your support. Thanks too (who writes in Irish on Substack—check it out!) for donating this month's prize, and allowing use of her graphics in today's essay. Míle buíochas.

The tension between



Full colors (By Effie Brush, from Paper Projects in Particular; used with permission.)

This past week, a close friend told me about someone who visited Ireland. This person is a polyglot and very confident with languages. After seeing signs and other texts as *Gaeilge* (in Irish), they reported back that Irish is really strange looking and difficult. I was sad hearing this. I love Irish and find her so inspiring! Yet it struck me how “strange” and “difficult” came together. What’s the relation between the two? Is Irish difficult—or just different? And who gets to decide?

“This motif of the disguised benefactor or unlikely friend or lover is connected, I believe, to the ancient beliefs wound into traditions of hospitality: anyone could be a god or angel or fairy in disguise. [...] The irony of this makes for good plotting, but is also a reminder to us not to be arrogant in our assumptions.” —Weiss

A house in the air

Since I was five years old, I have loved the picture book *Miss Twiggley’s Tree*. Miss Twiggley lives in a tree with her dog Puss, who does all the

shopping and errands (I wish my cats could do that!). She sleeps in a hat, makes kites, and has tea with bears. She's also shy—so hides when people stop by. Yet:

Text within this block will maintain its original spacing when published

Miss Twiggley and Puss
Were happy up there,
High above ground
In a house in the air

The mayor's wife though won't have it. It's "Simply disgraceful," to live "...in a tree, And never come down...[and] To not be at home, When I call around...!" She tells her husband to get rid of this "nuisance."

Yet a hurricane hits and the whole town becomes a "stormy sea." Miss Twiggley and Puss are ready: hammocks are hung, extra platforms built. She makes a big pot of stew ("to feed quite a few"), puts on the kettle and butters the bread. The townsfolk arrive drenched in make shift boats—including the mayor's wife. Soon everyone is "cozy and warm, sheltered and fed." The mayor's wife even sleeps in Miss Twiggley's bed. In the end:

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Now the townsfolk were glad,
Just as pleased as could be,
That funny Miss Twiggley
Lived in a tree

Before the storm, Miss Twiggley seemed odd—an anti-social, middle aged woman who'd never married (Miss) and lived alone (with her dog). Yet her very oddness (living in a tree) is ultimately what saves everyone.

Please re-stack and share. Thank you!



Holding life. (By Effie Brush from Paper Projects in Particular; used with permission)

Don't Spenser me

As we see in *Miss Twiggley's Tree*, when defining something as difficult or challenging it's in relation to the observer. There's also power at play—power that we can easily take for granted and not see. Who gets to decide what's "different" or "strange"—or challenging or difficult? English dominates the world today. It's easy for us to say that a language that doesn't look or sound like English (or other dominant Western European languages) is "difficult." Yet that's an assessment from the dominant language/world view. Spenser (see my last essay) found the Irish difficult and disliked much of what he saw in Irish culture. Brehon laws and fostering were very different from what he knew in England. As the colonizer, he clearly felt he was the one to decide what's right/wrong and best for the Irish; in effect, what was too "different" (and uncontrollable) for him needed "correcting" (i.e. suppression).

"...criticism is a mode of autobiography."—Oscar Wilde

Enjoying what's difficult

When I lived in New York City, I regularly led a workshop at the 92nd St Y. called “Enjoying Difficult People—including Yourself!” People are “difficult” because they say or do things we don’t like or accept. As we become more disconnected, we increasingly define others in static ways based on their behavior: they are (at least in our minds) “unfair,” “unprofessional,” “selfish,” “rude,” “egotistical,” “insensitive,” etc. It’s no longer about what they’re saying or doing; it’s who they *are*. In the end, these assessments tell us more about our own feelings and needs than the person we’re assessing. If we’re calling someone “unaware,” for example, we clearly are longing for awareness. I want to emphasize that this does not mean that we tolerate any and all behaviors. Yet focusing on the person (as being difficult or even impossible) is a red herring. It’s their behavior—not the person—that’s leading to our discomfort. It’s the behavior that can be more easily addressed and changed. If someone is a difficult (or worse) kind of person or a language deemed “difficult,” where is the space for learning?



Unexpected dancing. (By Effie Brush from Paper Projects in Particular; used with permission.)

Is minic a bhuaile aingeal vácach ag an doras. —An itinerant angel often knocks at the door.

Welcoming the stranger...

We're living in polemical times, with a radical loss in shared reality and civil discourse. The "other" (what's different) is especially made to be ominous and threatening. "They eat pets," for example, or most recently (and somewhat ironically), "James Talarico is a vegan." All this works to emphasize (even though fabricated and inaccurate) how unacceptably different the "other" is. Talarico in contrast has reminded us about a cultural tradition: welcoming the stranger. He reminds us about two other directives: to love God and your neighbor. All of this is about embracing strangeness. What could be more different from/for the human ego than the meta/super-consciousness of the divine? How do we begin to even fathom or imagine it? Our neighbor may not seem so different—yet can be. Often our neighbor is the stranger. How do we embrace what we don't know and is uncomfortable and new?

"But we can't forget the other representation of the Disguised Stranger as an enemy at the door. This reflects a very real way we encounter the unfamiliar."—Weiss

When I have a judgement that Irish is difficult or weird, it's my own insecurity speaking. Will I be able to get this? How much time and energy will it take? How ridiculous and clueless will I be in this bumpy process of learning? Ultimately, it's a plea for understanding: about how long it's taking, the effort I'm making, and where I am now in my progress. "It's not me! It's not my fault! I am a capable person—it's just this language that's impossible!" Yet none of this is intrinsically about Irish. If Scots-Gaelic or Manx was my first language (or even Welsh or Cornish), English would seem difficult and odd. We're inundated every day and on almost every square inch of the planet with English. It's the norm. It's the dominant world view. It's the mayor's wife.

From an English speaker's view, vowels and consonants combine in Irish in unexpected and often mind-tripping ways. When I first saw for example *bhf*- at the start of a word (as in *An bhfuil...?* "Are you...?") I was like WHAT? How do you get your mouth around a bunch of consonants like that?! Irish traditionally has 18 letters (more now through loan words, like *zú*) yet more than 40 sounds. So "*bhf*," depending on your dialect, is how you get "v" or "w." Highly creative! At first I was also dismayed to learn about broad and slender consonants. Each consonant in Irish can be pronounced in either way, depending on the vowels around it. The concept I can grok (*i* and *e* are the vowels that make consonants slender), yet it's actually getting those full consonant sounds out of my mouth. Yet there's a wealth in those Irish sounds, richness and nuance; now English (especially standard American English) just sounds flat and paltry to me. I listen to native Irish speakers the way I listen to a musician's technique, hoping to master it. The same is true of vowel diphthongs in Irish. When you really listen, there's music there.



Taking flight. (By Effie Brush from Paper Projects in Particular; used with permission.)

When I lean into what's different—when I allow myself to be curious—I crack open again and again. I get to experience aliveness and beauty. What's challenging, becomes surprising. What's surprising is what wakes me up. If I stay with the familiar, I miss out. And these current times call for alertness—for the view from tall trees. At the very point where we could collapse into exhaustion, complacency and despair, what's “difficult” leads directly to vulnerability and what's new. What can I learn from that crucible—including about my own resistance?

Sending this with love,

Dian (i mBaile Átha Cliath—in Dublin)

P.S. Hear the pronunciation of Irish words in the dialect of your choice [here](#).



In memory of Séamus, my familiar...

Not able to become a paying subscriber? *Ná bí buartha.* (Don't worry.) Treat me to just a *cupán tae* (a cup of tea) here.

