

shamronicks

By Rita K. Farrelly

The proposed use of Ebonics, "Black English," in the nation's schools, has prompted a passionate national debate.

This third generation Irish-American's grammar is pretty good. Along with many friends, though, I've learned to commu-

nicate in ways that are distinctly Irish.

Early on, we realized that some expressions mean exactly the opposite. If you heard that "he'll get his," you knew that boyo shouldn't wait up for the tooth fairy. The same was true
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when your mother promised you something "when the cows come home." After a year, I stopped listening for a "moo" on Decatur Avenue in the Bronx. And eventually it dawned on me that Pat, who "died of a Sunday" did not succumb to a long homily, but a coronary.

Then there are words like "grand" and "lovely." Several years ago, I was visiting my alma mater. A nun said that a former teacher was in the president's reception room and "looked just grand. Would I like to see him?" I followed her only to find the good priest laid out in a coffin. "Lovely, isn't he? It's Himself, all right," she said, blessing herself. Stunned, I stifled a primal scream: "How can he be grand and lovely? He's dead!"

Context is everything. My grandfather Mike King once asked for a "wee glass" of beer. Cheerfully I obliged, giving him a tall beer glass that was filled to about one-third of the way up.

"Bedad," muttered my mild-mannered father, rushing over. A first lesson in bartending: Pour the beer very slowly down the side, allow the head to settle, then fill'er up to the brim. And never remove the can or bottle until it's empty. No "wee" for me after that.

Then there were words not spoken. When my grandmother Katie King said "Give us a tune there," I knew the "Rach 3" was worth a dime. Happily I couldn't play it. What I could play was an Irish tune. Any Irish tune netted a quarter; a medley, even more.

Mostly self-taught...I was ready to plunk for "McNamara's Band" in no time at all! I remembered that in January when the wonderful New York Jewish songwriter Burton Lane died. He'd written the score for *Fini-an's Rainbow* in 1947, and its hit tune: "How Are Things in Glocca Morra?" Instead of royalties for all those

living room performances, he now got a silent Hail Mary.

The Irish know what's in a name. Your mother's shouting your full Christian name, was not a good sign. "Rita Kathleen Theresa Farrelly" meant that my own "troubles" were beginning. And when someone slighted anyone in the family, my mother wiped out the oaf's name. From that day on, he became "Bum."

In 1969 a cleric was rude to her when my father was dying. In 1996 I was with a friend and met him again. She asked me his name: "Bum," said I, not missing a beat. (If my mother were alive that day, she'd have stood up in her grave and cheered... YES!) The Irish and elephants have similar genes: They never forget.

Mike Quill, the late head of the New York City Transport Workers' Union, had a way with names. He routinely taunted his nemesis, "Silk Stocking" Mayor John V. Lindsay, calling him "Mayor Lindsley." When it came to giving someone "the back of your hand," Mike was Cuchulain reincarnate.

Best of all are the ways the Irish make complex things simple.

In grammar school, I had a hard time grasping the difference between venial and mortal sin. A neighbor explained it: "Mortal is when you pour good Irish whiskey into a Four Roses bottle." Brilliant.

A stout egg-shaped fellow said it best: "When I use a word, it means what I choose it to mean - neither more or less."

Whether he died of a Monday or a Tuesday, I don't know. A fall and a wall had something to do with it.

Bedad, that Humpty O'Dumpty was right!

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