Dublin English
Evolution and Change
Research topics in Irish English

Previous literature on Irish English has been concerned with certain areas of research

1) The emergence of Irish English during the language shift period (18th and 19th centuries)
2) The language of Irish literature written in English

More recent approaches include the following:

1) The nature of Standard Irish English: International Corpus of English – Irish component, called ICE-Ireland
2) The pragmatics of Irish English, especially in contrast to other varieties of English.
3) Sociolinguistic change in Dublin and its spread to the rest of Ireland.
Research into English in Ulster has been concerned with two main topics

1) The nature of social networks (studies of English in Belfast by James and Lesley Milroy in the 1970s and early 1980s)

2) The structure and development of Ulster Scots (based on varieties of English taken from Scotland to Ulster in the 17th century). This research is closely associated with the ethnic identity of the Ulster Scots population in present-day Ulster.
Literature on the English language in Ireland
The vocabulary of Irish English
For the following consideration of Dublin English the research paradigm known as *Language Variation and Change* has been employed. This examines minute variation in language and considers how the preference for certain variants in certain groups in society can lead to language change over time.
The English language in Dublin
Location of Dublin with its hinterland
English in Ireland

The English language has been spoken in Dublin since the late 12th century when the first English and Anglo-Norman settlers came up from the south-east where they had landed around 1169. The next few centuries form the first period which lasted up to around 1600 and which in its closing phase was characterised by considerable Gaelicisation outside the capital and within. Despite this resurgence of native culture and language, English never died out in the capital and there are some features of colloquial Dublin English which can be traced to the first period.

The 17th century in Ireland marks the beginning of the second period and is characterised chiefly by the re-introduction of English on a large-scale. This happened in the north of the country with a steady influx of immigrants from the Scottish Lowlands who came to form the base of the Ulster Protestant community. In the south, the new English settlers came as a result of plantations and land confiscations under Oliver Cromwell in the mid 17th century; the input here was largely from the west midlands and north-west of England.
The records of Dublin English are slight and consist before 1600 mainly of municipal records which here and there betray the kind of English which must have been spoken in the city.

For an historical background to present-day speech one must look to the elocutionist Thomas Sheridan (the father of the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan) who in 1781 published *A Rhetorical Grammar of the English Language* with an appendix in which he commented on the English used by middle class Dubliners, the ‘gentlemen of Ireland’ in his words, which he regarded as worthy of censure on his part. Sheridan’s remarks are a valuable source of information on what Dublin English was like two centuries ago. The features he listed are commented on below.
A RHETORICAL GRAMMAR
OF THE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE.
Calculated Solely for the Purposes of Teaching
PROPRIETY OF PRONUNCIATION;
AND
JUSTNESS OF DELIVERY,
IN THAT TONGUE,
BY THE
ORGANS OF SPEECH.

By THOMAS SHERIDAN, A.M.

DUBLIN:
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3809 f. 11.
Features mentioned by Thomas Sheridan (1781)

1) Middle English /e:/ was not raised to /i:/.

   The pronunciation [e:] can still be heard in Dublin in words like tea, sea, please. Of these, the first is still found as a caricature of a by-gone Irish pronunciation of English. Today it is somewhat artificial; the pronunciation is also found in Northern Ireland, where equally it is a retention of an earlier value.

2) A pronunciation of English /ai/, from Middle English /i:/, as [ei] is found, though it is uncertain whether Sheridan means this or perhaps [œi] which would tally better with what is known from present-day Dublin English as in wild [wœil(d)].
Consonants in Dublin English

When discussing consonants Sheridan remarks on ‘the thickening (of) the sounds of *d* and *t* in certain situations’. Here he is probably referring to the realisation of dental fricatives as alveolar plosives as found in colloquial forms of Dublin English today. There is no hint in Sheridan of anything like a distinction between dental and alveolar plosive realisations, which is an essential marker of local versus non-local speech today.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Local Dublin</th>
<th>Non-local Dublin</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>thank, tank</em></td>
<td>[tæŋk]</td>
<td>[tæŋk]</td>
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The city of Dublin lies at the mouth of the river Liffey in the centre of the east coast, and spreads along the shores of the horseshoe shape of Dublin bay. The suburbs, which have increased dramatically since the 1960’s, reach down to Bray and beyond into Co. Wicklow in the south, to the West in the direction of Maynooth and to the north at least to Swords, the airport and beyond. The Dublin conurbation now encompasses about a third of the population of the Republic of Ireland.
The Dublin Metropolitan Area

Kildare
1 Ranelagh
2 Harold's Cross
3 Rathmines
4 Rathgar
5 Terenure

6 Kilmainham
7 Inchicore
8 Crumlin
9 Walkinstown

Roundwood

Irish Sea

Town names and landmarks are indicated on the map.
Contemporary Dublin

Like any other modern city Dublin shows areas of high and low social prestige. Within Dublin there is a clear divide between the north and the south side of the city. The latter is regarded as more residentially desirable (with the exception of Howth and its surroundings on the peninsula which forms the north side of Dublin bay). Within the south there is a cline in prestige with the area from Ballsbridge and Donnybrook out to Foxrock enjoying highest status. This is the area of certain key complexes like the Royal Dublin Society (an important exhibition and event centre in the capital) and the national television studios (RTE) and of the national university (University College Dublin) in Belfield. This entire area is known by its postal code, Dublin 4. Indeed this number has given the name to a sub-accent within Dublin English which has been known as the ‘Dublin 4 Accent’, now referred to simply as ‘D4 English’ or as ‘Dartspeak’, ‘Dart English’. The less prestigious parts of the city are known by their district names such as Tallaght to the west, the Liberties in the centre of the city and Ballymun in the north near the airport, the only suburb in Ireland with high-rise flats and which is associated with adverse social conditions.
The prosperous area and postal district "Dublin 4" from which an extreme form of fashionable Dublin English formerly took its name, now often in a shortened form as in "She speaks with a D4 accent". More recently the label "Dartspeak" has come to be used, referring to the parts of the city served by this suburban railway.
Varieties of Dublin English

Any discussion of English in Dublin necessitates a few basic divisions into types. For the present contribution a twofold division, with a further subdivision, is employed. The first group consists of those who use the inherited popular form of English in the capital. The term ‘local’ is intended to capture this and to emphasise that these speakers are those who show strongest identification with traditional conservative Dublin life of which the popular accent is very much a part. The reverse of this is ‘non-local’ which refers to sections of the metropolitan population who do not wish a narrow, restrictive identification with popular Dublin culture. This group then subdivides into a larger, more general section which I label ‘mainstream’ and a currently smaller group which vigorously rejects a confining association with low-prestige Dublin.

1) *local* Dublin English
2) *non-local* Dublin English —
   a) *mainstream* Dublin English
   b) *new* Dublin English
A central issue in contemporary Dublin English is the set of vowel shifts which represent the most recent phonological innovation in Irish English (see below). This is not surprising as Dublin is a typical location for language change given the following features. 1) The city has expanded greatly in population in the last three or four decades. The increase in population has been due both to internal growth and migration into the city from the rest of the country. 2) It has undergone an economic boom in the last 15 years or so, reflected in its position as an important financial centre and a location for many computer firms which run their European operations from Dublin. The increase in wealth and international position has meant that many young people aspire to an urban sophistication which is divorced from strongly local Dublin life. For this reason the developments in fashionable Dublin English diverge from those in local Dublin English, indeed can be interpreted as a reaction to it. This type of linguistic behaviour can be termed local dissociation as it is motivated by the desire of speakers to hive themselves off from vernacular forms of a variety spoken in their immediate surroundings.
Variable features in Dublin English

T-lenition The clearest phonetic feature of southern Irish English is the realisation of /t/ as a fricative with identical characteristics of the stop, i.e. an apico-alveolar fricative in weak positions. This cannot be indicated in English orthography of course but vacillation between t and th for /t/ is found already in the Kildare Poems (probably early 14th century) and would suggest that it was a feature of English in Ireland in the first period.

Extensions include the lenition of /t/ in a weak position beyond the initial stage of apico-alveolar fricative to /r/ then to /h/ with final deletion as in the following instance.

/t/ [t] \rightarrow [r] \rightarrow [h] \rightarrow \emptyset
water [waːtə] [waːrə] [waːhə] [waː]
Variable features in Dublin English

Breaking of long vowels in closed position
   clean [kliːn]  fool [fuːl]

Central onset for /ai/ diphthong
   time [tɛjm]  fly [fləi]

Fronting of /au/ diphthong
   down [dəʊn]  bout [bʊt]

Historically short vowels before /r/
   circle [səːkl]  first [fʊs(t)]

Early modern English short /u/
   Dublin [dʊblən]
Dissociation: How to avoid local features

Speakers of both mainstream and new Dublin English generally avoid the local features I have already mentioned.

But the speakers of new Dublin English have developed strategies for maximising the phonetic differences between realisations typical of their own variety and those of local Dublin English. This has been achieved by moving away — in phonological space — from the realisations found locally.

The following list gives some indication of what is involved here.
Dissociation: How to avoid local features

a) Local Dublin English has a distinction between historic back and front short vowels before /r/, in the NURSE and GIRL lexical sets, [nɜː(r)s] and [ɡə(r)l] respectively. But because the open front realisation is so typical of local Dublin English, there is a migration in fashionable Dublin English of historically front long vowels to the central rhotic type as seen in words from the SQUARE lexical set like *carefully* [kərˈfɛli] and *daring* [dəˈrɪŋ]. This realisation has no precedent in the history of southern Irish English.
Dissociation: How to avoid local features

b) Connected with the previous feature is the strict avoidance of schwa retraction before /r/ in NURSE words such as *third* [tɜːrd], *purse* [pɜːrs], not [tuː(r)d] and [puː(r)s].

c) The local back rounded vowel /u/ in the STRUT lexical set is replaced by an unrounded front vowel which is almost /ɪ/, as in *Sunday* [sɪ-ndə].

d) A syllable-final retroflex /r/, [ᵢ], is used which has the advantage of marking the /r/ even more clearly vis à vis the popular forms of Dublin English which, if at all, have only a weak syllable-final /r/.
The Dublin Vowel Shift
The Dublin Vowel Shift

In present-day Ireland the major instance of language change is undoubtedly the shift in pronunciation of Dublin English. To understand the workings of this shift one must realise that in the course of the 1980’s and 1990’s the city underwent an unprecedented expansion in population size and in relative prosperity with a great increase in international connections to and from the metropolis. The in-migrants to the city, who arrived there chiefly to avail of the job opportunities resulting from the economic boom formed a group of socially mobile, weak-tie speakers and their section of the city´s population has been a key locus for language change. Speakers began to move away in their speech from their perception of popular Dublin English, a classic case of dissociation in an urban setting. This dissociation was realised phonetically by a reversal of the unrounding and lowering of vowels typical of Dublin English hitherto. The reversal was systematic in nature, with a raising and rounding of low back vowels and the retraction of the /ai/ diphthong and the raising of the /ət/ diphthong, representing the most salient elements of the change.
Summary of recent shifts in Dublin English

a) retraction of diphthongs with a low or back starting point

\[
\text{time} \quad [\text{taɪm}] \rightarrow [\text{taɪm}] \\
\text{toy} \quad [\text{toɪ}] \rightarrow [\text{toɪ}], [\text{toɪ}]
\]

b) raising of low back vowels

\[
\text{cot} \quad [\text{kɒt}] \rightarrow [\text{kɒt}] \\
\text{caught} \quad [\text{kɔːt}] \rightarrow [\text{kɔːt}], [\text{kɔːt}]
\]

\begin{align*}
\text{Raising} & : 01 & 0: \\
& \uparrow & \uparrow \\
\text{Retraction} & : \text{œ₁} & \text{œ} & \text{œ}: \\
& \uparrow & \uparrow & \uparrow \\
\text{ai} & \rightarrow & \text{di}
\end{align*}
Changes in vowel constellations in Dublin English

Vowel space of older mainstream speech

Vowel space of new pronunciation

I  go  u:  goose

[toy  o, o:]

cought, cork

I  go  u:  goose

cought, cork
Gender and language change
1) GOAT *diphthongisation*  
*new feature*  

[go.ʊt] versus [gʊt]  

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{n} & \text{yes} & \text{no} \\
\text{Male} & 18 (45\%) & 22 (55\%) \\
\text{Female} & 34 (85\%) & 6 (15\%)
\end{array}
\]

Test sentence: *They had a GOAT on their farm.*

2) R-*retroflexion*  
*new feature*  

[nɔː.t] versus [nɒːt]  

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{n} & \text{yes} & \text{no} \\
\text{Male} & 17 (43\%) & 23 (57\%) \\
\text{Female} & 36 (90\%) & 4 (10\%)
\end{array}
\]

Test sentence: *They’re travelling up NORTH.*

3) T-*flapping*  
*traditional feature*  

[ˈr-] versus [ˈt-]  

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{n} & \text{yes} & \text{no} \\
\text{Male} & 28 (70\%) & 12 (30\%) \\
\text{Female} & 15 (38\%) & 25 (62\%)
\end{array}
\]

Test sentence: *There’s a LETTER for you today.*
Gender-differentiated realisations

new features:
C1−GOAT_diphthong (f) (85%)
C2−GOAT_diphthong (m) (45%)
C3−NORTH_retroflex-/r/ (f) (90%)
C4−NORTH_retroflex-/r/ (m) (43%)

traditional feature:
C5−LETTER_T-flapping (f) (38%)
C6−LETTER_T-flapping (m) (70%)

Diphthongisation, retroflexion and flapping
When language variation proceeds towards language change it becomes more and more noticed by the general population. In this situation the change is universally condemned (true for all instances). In the case of Dublin English negative references abound to the front vowel in a word like *roundabout* or the perky ‘r’ in a word like *Cork* or the high vowel in a word like *toy*. Sometimes a label arises for the new pronunciation. This happened in Dublin where it was called ‘Dortspeak’ (from ‘Dartspeak’) for a time.

But people can get used to anything, including a new pronunciation, and with time the excitement and the condemnation subsides and the ‘new’ becomes ‘normal’ until the next set of changes comes along.
The New Pronunciation in Ireland
Supraregional varieties

Supraregionalisation is an historical process whereby varieties of a language lose specifically local features and become less regionally bound.

Supraregional varieties (of English in the British Isles) are found in northern England, Scotland and Ireland.

Take the north of England as an example: this is a region which has a geographical and cultural identity of which speakers are aware. There is clearly a northern type of accent in England and this arose through a set of local features being used across the subregions of the north and kept to by non-local speakers for identification purposes vis à vis the south of England.

Supraregional (non-local) features

\[ [a] \text{ in BATH lexical set} \quad [u] \text{ in STRUT lexical set} \]
Historically, supraregional varieties have arisen through the suppression of vernacular features leading to forms of a language in which there is less variation than in local speech, e.g. general northern British English.

A supraregional variety can also arise through the adoption of a geographically confined variety by sections of a population spread over a much larger area. In such cases the variety which triggers this process stems from a source which has prestige in the society in question, typically the capital of a modern nation state. This is what has happened in the Republic of Ireland over the past 15 years or so where changes in Dublin English have spread to the entire country. Features of this recent metropolitan variety will be discussed in the following under the heading *The New Pronunciation*. 
The New Pronunciation of southern Irish English involves above all the realisation of vowels and of the liquids /l/ and /r/. Other segments do not seem to be affected by the shift in pronunciation. However, two points should be emphasised in this context:

1) the dental stop realisations of the THOUGHT and THIS lexical sets, which has been part of the supraregional variety of English in the south of Ireland since at least the beginning of the 20th century, are maintained in the New Pronunciation.

2) among young female speakers, especially in Dublin, there is a slight affrication of /t/ and /d/ in syllable-initial position. This may be an age-grading phenomenon which disappears with full adulthood. It is certainly sub-phonemic at the present. However, it is difficult to predict the course of such developments.
Back vowel raising In its original form in the capital, the Dublin Vowel Shift consists of low vowel retraction and low back vowel raising. The only exception to this general movement in vowel space is the non-rhotic long low vowel in the BATH and DANCE lexical sets. This vowel is always [ɑː] in Irish English. A retraction to [ɑː] would be seen as an adoption of an English accent and has always been regarded as unacceptable for the native Irish, indeed speakers with this retraction, are ridiculed as having a ‘grand [ɡrɑːnd] accent’. Probably, for this reason it has not been participating in the general retraction and raising of the Dublin Vowel Shift.

When comparing the New Pronunciation with conservative mainstream Irish English it is remarkable that a merger has occurred, the lack of which has hitherto been a prominent feature of Irish English. This is the for/four-merger where the formerly distinct vowels /ɒː/ and /oː/ have collapsed due to the raising of the former to [oː], its realisation in new Dublin English today.
Recent literature on Dublin English and Irish English in general
A Source Book for Irish English

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