Ireland and the English Language

The story of an uneasy relationship
Language attitudes in the history of Ireland
Gerald of Wales
Gerald of Wales (?1146-?1220) was an Anglo-Norman prelate who visited Ireland as secretary to Prince John in 1184, and wrote two unflattering books about Ireland: *Topographia Hibernica* (1188) and *Expugnation Hiberniae* (1189)

“[The Irish are] a filthy people, wallowing in vice. Of all peoples it is the least instructed in the rudiments of the faith. They do not yet pay tithes or first fruit or contract marriages. They do not avoid incest.”
Elizabeth I (1533-1603), Queen of England and Ireland (1558-1603), last of the Tudors. She was a fervent advocate of the Anglicisation of Ireland in religion, language and culture.
Spenser, Edmund (c. 1552-1599), English poet

[The Irish] do use all beastly behaviour that may be, they oppress all men, they spoil as well the subject, as the enemy; they steal, they are cruel and bloody, full of revenge, and delighting in deadly execution, licentious, swearers and blasphemers, common ravishers of women, and murderers of children.

_A View of the Present State of Ireland_ (1596)
Richard Stanihurst (1547-1604) was from Dublin and regarded the penetration of the Irish language into the Pale as something to be resisted at all costs. He wrote *The Description of Ireland* (1577), included in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*. 
Excerpt from *The Description of Ireland* (1577)

“...this canker took such deep root, as the body that before was whole and sound was by little and little festered and in a manner wholly putrified... it is not expedient that the Irish tongue shall be so universally gagged in the English Pale: because that by proof and experience we see, that the Pale was never in more flourishing estate than when it was wholly English, and never in worse plight than since it hath enfranchised the Irish.”
18th century English views

“The Irish from the beginning of time had been buried in the most profound barbarism and ignorance; and as they were never conquered or even invaded by the Romans, from whom all the western world derived its civility, they continued still in the most rude state of society, and were distinguished by those vices alone to which human nature, not tamed by education, or restrained by laws, is for ever subject.”

19th century English views

“I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country ... to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not see it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours.”

Charles Kingsley *Letter to his Wife from Ireland* (1860)
19th century caricatures of the Irish
19th century racism directed against the Irish

The Iberians are believed to have been originally an African race, who thousands of years ago spread themselves through Spain over Western Europe. Their remains are found in the barrows, or burying places, in sundry parts of these countries. The skulls are of low, prognathous type. They came to Ireland, and mixed with the natives of the South and West, who themselves are supposed to have been of low type and descendants of savages of the Stone Age, who, in consequence of isolation from the rest of the world, had never been out-competed in the healthy struggle of life, and thus made way, according to the laws of nature, for superior races.
Irish attitudes to Irish

The major Catholic leader of the first half of the 19th century, Daniel O’Connell, was decidedly against the Irish language (as was the writer William Carleton in his later life). In a statement, attributed to O’Connell by someone recollecting him, he maintained:

“I am sufficiently utilitarian not to regret its gradual abandonment. A diversity of tongues is no benefit; it was first imposed upon mankind as a curse, at the building of Babel. It would be of great advantage to mankind if all the inhabitants of the Earth spoke the same language. Therefore though the Irish language is connected with many recollections that twine around the hearts of Irishmen, yet the superior utility of the English tongue, as the medium of all modern communication, is so great that I can witness without a sigh the gradual disuse of Irish.”
Irish attitudes to Irish

After the Famine there were still many areas of rural Ireland where Irish was spoken but where the language was avoided because it was considered to bring bad luck.

Irish schoolchildren often had to wear a tallystick around their necks on which notches were made when they were caught speaking Irish. They were then punished for this.
Geoffrey Keating / Seathrún Céitinn (c 1580-1644, a member of an Old English family). He wrote a native narrative of Irish history *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* ‘Store of Knowledge about Ireland’ which did much to enhance the cultural assessment of pre-Norman Ireland and so throw a better light on native Irish culture.

A further monument of this type is the *Annals of the Four Masters*, compiled under the directionship of Mícheál Ó Cléirigh.
the hidden ireland
Daniel Corkery

AN DUANAIRE
1600-1900
Poems of the Dispossessed
Seán Ó Tuama
Thomas Kinsella
Enduring attitudes to Irish and English
Some authors in the first half of the 20th century felt that the Irish language was going to survive in a Gaelicised form of the English language.
There are many studies of the specific vocabulary of the English language in Ireland. These books cover a range of vocabulary, not all of which is current but more a remnant of former usage with the rural population.
Nonetheless, the attitude of many people today towards the Irish language is still characterised by a bad conscience over language shift and loss.
Our uneasy relationship to English

This uneasiness is seen in the lack of recognition we accord English. Although the first language of over 99% of the native born population of Ireland, there is no academic support given to the English language, no chairs, no positions dedicated to English linguistics although this is true of all universities outside Ireland.

Equally, we give full academic support to Irish, with departments and chairs in every university in Ireland, although the numbers of native speakers is now probably below 50,000 (going on the statistics of the 2006 census).
Our uneasy relationship to English

A sign of maturity in our relationship to English would be if we ceased to regard support for English as a rejection of Irish.

Furthermore, we should recognise Irish English as our vernacular, the native colloquial form of English which we speak. It would then be on a par with American English, Canadian English, Australian English, South African English, etc.

We should not regard the English language as somehow the possession of the English but just as much ours as theirs, if fact the language “belongs” to anyone who speaks it natively.
Website for the Irish language: www.uni-due.de/DI
Website for Irish English: www.uni-due.de/IERC
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