1. Introduction

The idea for this paper came from a number of increasingly disconcerting experiences the author had when using historical-regional corpora for his work on the relationship between forms of Irish English and varieties of colonial English at locations overseas (Hickey 2004). These experiences demanded a major rethink about using such corpora, indeed they raised many doubts about historical continuities in the course of this work. For the present paper a couple of cases where difficulties have arisen with historical-regional corpora are presented with a discussion about whether there is an answer in principle to the quandary they give rise to.

All scholars avail themselves of standard wisdoms in their work. In a way they save one from additional effort: if a standard wisdom is accepted, then one can proceed to one’s own task with less preliminary matters to deal with. However, if one is considering toppling a standard wisdom then the essential question needs to be asked: what alternative is there if a standard wisdom is rejected? With that in mind, the first case can be presented.
2. Second person plural *youse*

Nonstandard varieties of English have some means of their own to distinguish between singular and plural second person pronouns (Hickey 2003a). There is a whole battery of devices available here. One need only think of *y’all, y’uns, youse, ye, yez*, the Caribbean *unu*, the Tok Pisin *yupela*. The form of interest here is *youse* which is reputedly of Irish English origin. There is no doubt that *youse* is common today in Irish English and found colloquially in American, Australian, New Zealand and South African English (Wright 1997) where it is assumed to be due to Irish speakers, though the relative quantities of Irish input at these different anglophone locations varied greatly.

With the demise of *thou* in Ireland, *you* came to be understood as the pronoun with singular reference and the gap to be filled therefore was that in the plural. The Irish second person plural pronoun is *sibh* [ʃɪv], phonologically unlike anything available in English then or since. The Irish solution was to find a form which was different from *you* and which could function as a plural pronoun. Basically, there were two pathways open at that time. The first was to use the inherited *ye* as a marker of second person plural. The second, and apparently later option, was to create a synthetic plural by appending the regular plural suffix *-s* to the already present *you*, yielding *youse* [ju(:)z]. Later a combined form arose, *yeh* [jiz] or with reduction [jez] or [jaz]. For the possible transportation of English abroad it must be noted that there is a chronological sequence involved here:

- *ye* from twelfth century onwards
- *youse* not before early to mid-nineteenth century
- *yeh* not before mid-nineteenth century

The form *ye* is doubtlessly the continuation of the inherited pronoun from medieval Irish English. It has continued to this day and in the south of Ireland it is the non-stigmatised form for plural second person pronominal reference. Analogical possessive forms, *yeer* and *yeers*,
developed with the use of *you* for the singular because the related forms *your* and *yours* came to have exclusive singular reference. However, these must have been quite late developments: the possessive forms are not attested anywhere in the plays contained in *A Corpus of Irish English* (Hickey 2003b). This might be an accident of documentation, but given the widespread occurrence of *ye*, one would expect in a collection of over 50 plays that the possessive forms would occur if they existed. The presence of *yer* and *yeers* in contemporary southern Irish English means that, for lack of historical attestation, one must assume that these are recent forms.

The vernacular character of *youse* in present-day Irish English points to an origin in Irish, that is to those Irish speakers in the main period of language shift from the seventeenth to the late nineteenth century for whom English would have been a second language and which would have shown a high degree of transfer from Irish. *Youse* can then be seen as a regular plural formation by simple attachment of suffixal *-s* to the existing pronoun *you*. This assumption is supported by other instances of analogical extension which can be seen in Irish English, e.g. the use of negative epistemic *must*, as in *He musn’t be in his office* for *He can’t be in his office* and is in line with other such phenomena in language shift by adults through contact and without any instruction.

If one is making a case for *youse* being a specifically Irish development then one must exclude any English source. With the help of available text corpora this issue can be resolved with reasonable certainty. For instance, the sampler of the *Early English Correspondence Corpus* (Nevalainen / Raumolin-Brunberg 1996; Nevalainen 1997) does not reveal a single instance of *youse*, although *ye* and *thou* abound.1

Equally in the 138 texts of the Early Modern English section of the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts* there is not a single instance of *yous(e)* or *ye(e)z*. The situation for Ireland can be seen by examining *A Corpus of Irish English*. Here the form *yous(e)* occurs abundantly in

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1 *Thou* is by far the most common second person pronoun (372 instances, with *ye* occurring 19 times). This holds for the 23 texts in the public domain version of this corpus, covering letters from the end of the sixteenth to the end of the seventeenth century.
the plays of John Millington Synge (1871-1909) and with later writers like Sean O’Casey (1884-1964) and Brendan Behan (1923-1964).

A further fact can be cited here to underline the Irish origin of youse. The form is found in England in only a few areas, Liverpool (Trudgill 1986: 139-141) and Newcastle (Beal 1993); and in Scotland in Glasgow and, spreading out from there, in central Scotland (Macafee 1983: 51). It is hardly a coincidence that these are the areas of Britain with greatest Irish influence.

If the above considerations justify the assumption that youse is not English but Irish, the next question would be: when did it arise? When one looks at earlier writers a different picture emerges from that later on: Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849) in her novel Castle Rackrent (1800), which attempts to display the speech of the native Irish realistically, has many instances of ye (11) but not a single one of youse(e). The Oxford English Dictionary gives the earliest attestation from Samuel Lover’s novel Handy Andy. A tale of Irish life (1842). This in general concords with A Corpus of Irish English, where no attestations are to be found before the mid-nineteenth century.

Does the historical picture which this documentation suggests match the situation with overseas varieties of English? The answer is, just about. For Southern Hemisphere English and United States English in the urban north-east, southern Irish emigration from the mid-nineteenth century onwards would have provided enough input with youse for this to catch on in overseas forms of vernacular English.

It should be said, however, that the corpus attestations prevent us from pushing back youse before the mid-nineteenth century and the switchover from Irish to English started a lot earlier than that. One could of course claim that this is an accident of attestation, that it might be a case of the dog which did not bark. But writers like Maria Edgeworth have very many Irish English features and if youse was around, it is fair to assume that she would have used it in her narrative prose. The geography speaks in favour of this too: she grew up and lived in rural Longford – north central Ireland – which at around 1800 would have had many speakers of Irish still.
3. Habitual marking in varieties of English

The habitual exists as a grammatical category which may or may not have overt marking in a variety of English. The semantic concept of habituality refers to an action which is repeated for a length of time at certain intervals which are regarded as sufficiently regular for the action to be referred to in a holistic manner (if the repeated action is punctual in nature then one is dealing with iterative aspect). In mainstream varieties of English habituality is expressed by the simple present as is obvious from sentences like *The government introduces its budget in early spring. He lectures on Thursday morning.* For these varieties the habitual aspect is expressed by an implicit contrast with the progressive form. For other varieties of English there exists a special marking of the habitual. Basically, as shown in Table 1, there are four means employed in the arena of anglophone varieties for the present tense habitual (the habitual past is normally lexicalised, i.e. the verb *used to* is employed).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suffix</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suffixal -s on the verb stem</td>
<td><em>I meets my sister on a Friday afternoon.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffixal -s on <em>be</em> with the lexical verb in the progressive form</td>
<td><em>He bees working at the week-ends.</em></td>
<td>There may be varieties, e.g. AAE, where the <em>be</em> form is not inflected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffixal -s on <em>do</em> plus <em>be</em> with the lexical verb in the progressive form</td>
<td><em>He does be buying and selling old cars.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffixal -s on <em>do</em> alone followed by the lexical verb, e.g. South-West British English.</td>
<td><em>He does work in the garden a lot.</em></td>
<td>The inflected verb form may be invariant <em>does</em>, as in Barbadian English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Marking options for the habitual in varieties of English.
3.1. Possible trans-Atlantic connections

For this section the major article in the field, the study by John Rickford of New World forms of the habitual (Rickford 1986), is to be considered. Here Rickford compared New World English varieties with those in the British Isles both in South-West British English and in Irish English. Rickford is furthermore concerned with the possible diffusion of (does) be as an aspectual marker from Irish English to African American English in the United States. He devotes a large portion of the article to determining how extensive and of what nature the contact between the Irish and African American populations of America was, beginning, however, with the Caribbean (Barbados, Montserrat and to a lesser extent St. Kitts), where there is an historically attested Irish influence due to the Cromwellian deportations in the mid-seventeenth century (during what is called the homestead phase before African slaves arrived in large numbers). Rickford also points out that later there was considerable contact between Irish indentured servants and African slaves. He continues his outline of demographical developments by sketching the emigration to America at a later stage (a shift northwards took place in the eighteenth century with the switch from earlier deportation to later immigration). The linguistic analysis in this paper opens with a consideration of habitual aspect marking in African American English and Irish English. Rickford then looks at periphrastic do, a common feature of southwestern varieties of English and suggests that this too could have diffused from the speech of the many immigrants from this part of England into the Caribbean area.

A similar study is that by Winford (2000) in which he takes a close look at superstrate antecedents of aspectual marking in Caribbean English, specifically in mainstream Barbadian English, which he regards as an intermediate variety independent of basilectal English on Barbados and not deriving historically from the latter via decreolisation. Winford (2000: 228f.) initially favours South-West British English as the source of the Barbadian English structures involving forms of do, viz. does for the habitual, did for the relative past and done for the perfective (completive) aspect. The thrust of his investigation of Barbadian English is that does in this variety
“represents a case of reanalysis of a superstrate form under contact-induced change”.

My assumption here is that Africans acquiring approximations of the settler dialects in seventeenth-century Barbados re-interpreted does as a Habitual marker on the model of the Present Habitual categories in their native languages. The evidence available to us indicates that most of the likely substrate languages introduced to Barbados in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries had a distinct Habitual category’ (Winford 2000: 231). However, later in the same article he maintains that the Irish English input was significant on Barbados. The reason for considering the latter is that Barbadian English favours the use of invariant does, rather than uninflected do, as well as the co-occurrence of does with be. Both these features are not characteristic of present-day South-West British English nor do they seem to have been, at least for the nineteenth century, as attested in the study by Elworthy (1877).

3.2. The rise of uninflected be in African American English

Although most forms of mesolectal creole English in the Caribbean (except Jamaican English) have does /dəz/ as the expression of habitual aspect, it is a notable feature of African American English that this does not occur, but it is found in Gullah (Rickford 1986: 260). This fact is a major difference between the latter variety and the speech of other African Americans and may offer support for the view that Gullah is an imported creole from the Caribbean which developed independently of African American English of the southern United States.

The concern in this section is with the use of uninflected be in African American English and its possible historical source. Sentences illustrating its current use would be: I think those buses be blue. The children be at school when I get home. They be done left when I get there. (Green 1998: 39; 2002: 47-54). There are essentially three views on the rise of uninflected be to express habituality in New World varieties of English.

1) It arose in Caribbean English and was carried to the south of the
later United States. Unstressed, proclitic *do* (Rickford 1986: 265) was deleted, which left the bare *be* to express habituality (Rickford 1980). In Bahamian English this intermediary stage is attested (Holm 1994: 375). An essential difficulty with this interpretation is that it requires that uninflected proclitic *do* was dropped and inflection introduced for those varieties which use *bees*, i.e. an inflected form of *be*.

2) It is an inherited habitual marker from Ulster Scots which was passed on to African American English in its early stages due to the large number of northern Irish immigrants in the eighteenth century, especially with those in South Carolina. There may be evidence for a continuation of *beon* ‘to be’ with habitual meaning from the Northumbrian variety of Old English. In Scotland this was the predecessor of Scots which was transported to the United States via Ulster (Traugott 1972: 177ff., 190f.). Rickford (1986) further maintains that the use of *be* in African American English and *does be* in Caribbean creoles may well reflect a differential influence of northern Irish English on the former and southern Irish English on the latter. However, the question of contact between Irish and African Americans in the later United States is unresolved, particularly as the former settled further inland (the eighteenth-century Ulster Scots moved through western Pennsylvania to the Appalachian and Piedmont areas) whereas the African Americans were to be found on the Atlantic seaboard.

3) The use of uninflected *be* (as above) is an innovation in nineteenth-century African American English as it is not attested in the documents for Ulster English which are extant before this date (Montgomery / Kirk 1996: 318f.). This view assumes that if habitual *be* did in fact already exist in early Ulster English then it would be attested somewhere. This leaves one with a shared nineteenth-century innovation – habitual *be* (uninflected in African American English, inflected in Ulster English) – between two varieties which showed some contact historically, but little if any settlement overlap. This innovation is incidentally not found anywhere else between two varieties of English. The argument of Montgomery / Kirk is reinforced by the fact that habitual *be* does not occur in present-day or historical forms of Appalachian
English where influence from Ulster was considerable (Montgomery 2001: 136). A minor but not irrelevant point is that the investigation by Montgomery / Kirk (1996) is of emigrant letters in Ulster English and of present-day material outside the core areas of Ulster Scots settlement in northern Ireland. Montgomery (p.c.) is of the opinion that habitual *be* was borrowed from Ulster English into Ulster Scots.

The last view is the most recent and it throws doubt on many of the postulations concerning the historical continuity of habitual forms in New World English. If Montgomery / Kirk (1996: 331) are right in their rejection of a link between African American English *be* and regional British/Irish English then a similar question must be asked about the link between the *do/does + be* habitual, derivatives of which are found in the Caribbean, and southern Irish English. The attestations of this type of habitual are now considered in the light of corpus texts from the history of Irish English.

### 3.3. The corpus evidence

The essential question here is whether one can find enough reliable evidence to decide conclusively on an historical link between the occurrence of the habitual in Caribbean English and in regional forms of English in the British Isles. The two major varieties which to this day show a formally marked habitual are (i) South-West British English and (ii) Irish English (various forms). English in the south of Ireland generally favours the *do/does + be* habitual. This is somewhat similar to the position in the south-west of England, but here an uninflected *do* is used with a lexical verb and does not require *be*. Two sentences to illustrate the main difference would be: *He does be fishing a lot* (southern Irish English) versus *He do fish a lot* (south-western British English). This difference is significant because for Barbadian English and Bequia (Williams 1988: 263) as well as Trinidad (Harris 1986: 183) it is the *do + be* model which applies. But the situation is by no means clear cut and in mesolectal varieties *do + be* constructions are common (Harris 1986: 191).

To come closer to an answer to the current question concerning
the origin of New World habitual marking, the electronic corpus *A Corpus of Irish English* (Hickey 2003b) was consulted. This contains attestations of Irish English from the early modern period, from the late 1590's onwards.

The most prominent of the authors who wrote such texts is undoubtedly Shakespeare who has the Irishman Captain Macmorris speak with a putative Irish accent in the ‘Four Nations Scene’ in *Henry V*. The other English authors who wrote pieces with stretches of Irish speech are Thomas Dekker (?1570-1632), Ben Jonson (1573-1637), Thomas Randolph (1605-1635), Thomas Shadwell (?1642-1692) and John Durant Breval (c 1680-1738). The imitation of Irish English by non-Irish authors seems to be largely restricted to broad renderings of pronunciation in eye dialect and perhaps the occasional use of an Irish word in the texts for flavour.

Among the attributable prose fragments by an Irish author from the seventeenth century is *The Siege of Ballyally Castle* (1642) by one Maurice Cuffe. But this piece is descriptive and unlikely to have attestations of the habitual, given its textual structure. The earliest play which contains a large stretch (its seventh scene) in what was putatively Irish English is *Captain Thomas Stukeley* (1605). The author is unknown but the assumption that he was English may be justified as the main character of the play is one who defended Dundalk during its siege by the native Irish in 1566. In addition to these texts there are various macaronic items with Irish and English but these are again unlikely to contain any instances of an habitual given their narrative structure.

Two small pieces from the seventeenth century are by Irish authors: *Hic et Ubique* (1663), a short dramatic interlude by Richard Head (1637-1686) and *Ireland Preserved, or the Siege of Londonderry* (1705) by John Michelbourne (1646-1721). The latter author is the more important of the two as he appears to have spent his life in Ireland (which Richard Head did not) and died in Derry. The piece mentioned here, *Ireland Preserved*, contains a number of syntactic features of Irish English, notably the immediate perfective (in a future sense) as in *I'll bee after telling dee de Raison.* The lack of an

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2 See McCafferty, in press, for a full discussion of the origin and development of this structure in Irish English.
habitual in this piece is thus a setback in the search for an early attestation of this syntactic feature of later Irish English.

Eighteenth-century literary documents become increasingly uninteresting to the linguist as the language in plays by such writers as William Congreve (1670-1729), George Farquhar (1678-1707), Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774) or Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816) was far too standard to show such vernacular features as an habitual even if this had existed then. The conclusion from considering several play extracts and short texts which exist from the late sixteenth century to the eighteenth century is that these do not contain any occurrence of the later habitual structure with \textit{does/do + be}.

The period when attestations of this structure begin to appear in abundance is the mid-nineteenth century. The first writer to make frequent use of this form of the habitual is the playwright Dion Boucicault (1820-1890), as shown in the following examples:

(1) Sure he does be always telling me my heart is too near my mouth
    \textit{(The Shaughraun, 1875)}

(2) I do be afraid to go near some girls for fear of spoilin' their new and beautiful clothes \textit{(Arrah na Pogue, 1864)}

Later notable literary figures followed suit, above all Lady Augusta Gregory (1852-1932), John Millington Synge (1871-1909) and Sean O’Casey (1884-1964). In the plays of these authors there are hundreds of attestations like \textit{I do be on the watch every night} \textit{(O’Casey, Shadow of a Gunman)}. This situation is all the more surprising as several prose authors of the early nineteenth century do not have any sentences with \textit{does/do + be} despite their representation of Irish English in narrative stretches of their texts. Three authors in particular are noted as reliable observers of the native Irish in their manners and customs and who attempt to represent the speech of these people in their writings: Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849) author of \textit{Castle Rackrent} (1800), William Carleton (1794-1869) author of \textit{Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry} (5 vols., Dublin, 1830-33), the brothers John (1798-1842) and Michael Banim (1796-1874), authors of \textit{Tales of the O’Hara Family} (6 vols., 1825-26). Going on literary attestation, with careful electronic retrieval (these texts are all in \textit{A Corpus of Irish English}), a
picture emerges in which the habitual with *does/do + be* in Irish English is a new structure arising in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

This picture, dictated by literary attestation, poses several difficulties. Assuming that the writers just quoted are reliable portrayers of Irish peasant speech, one is forced to assume that the appearance of the *does/do + be* habitual is located towards the end of the language shift period. Recall that this began in earnest in the seventeenth century with the widespread plantation of Ireland, both north and south, with speakers of English and the general reorientation of the Irish-speaking population towards the increasingly more important English language. But if the motivation for the rise of the *does/do + be* habitual lies in the desire on the part of Irish speakers to gain an equivalent in English to the habitual in Irish (Hickey 1997) then why did this not occur in the seventeenth century when the language shift had really got under way? There are two possible answers to this.

(1) The literary attestations are misleading because they do not represent the *does/do + be* habitual in the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries although this existed in the speech of the Irish. But it is extremely unlikely that a structure could exist for two centuries in a variety and not be recorded anywhere, especially in texts specifically intended to represent this nonstandard variety – particularly because that other very Irish structure, the immediate perfective seen in *He’s after breaking the glass*, is attested abundantly from the seventeenth century onwards.

(2) The account of the rise of the habitual as a search for categorial equivalence on the part of the Irish learning English from the seventeenth century onwards is incorrect. This structure arose spontaneously in the first half of the nineteenth century, finding its way into literary representations by the 1860’s.

If the second is the more likely of the two explanations then how should this have occurred? The answer would seem to lie in an extension which happened in Irish English in the early nineteenth century. To explain this observe the fact that in *Castle Rackrent*
by Maria Edgeworth (this regional novel is contained in *A Corpus of Irish English*) there are no *does/do + be* habitual sentences but the structure *do + be* does indeed occur. Consider the following attestations:

(3a)  Ah, don’t be being jealous of that, (says she) I didn’t hear a sentence
(3b)  that’s a great shame, but don’t be telling Jason what I say.
(3c)  (says I) don’t be trusting to him, Judy;
(3d)  Nay don’t be denying it, Judy, for I think the better of ye for it

(*Castle Rackrent*, 1801)

The occurrence of the continuous with the (negative) imperative in Irish English was and is quite typical. Its source would seem to lie in Irish where the habitual verb form *bí* ‘be’ is always used in the imperative; the nonhabitual *tá* ‘is’ only occurs in the indicative. The habitual in Irish requires a continuous form of the lexical verb it governs. Examples of its use are the following:

(4a)  *Ná bígí ag déanamh imrí*
     [not be-HABITUAL-YOU(pl) at doing worry]
     don’t worry
(4b)  *Ná bí ag labhairt mar sin*
     [not be-HABITUAL-YOU(sg) at speaking like that]
     don’t talk like that

One must now revise the statements made about the *does/do + be* habitual: there are no occurrences of this in the indicative before the middle of the nineteenth century, but many of it in the imperative. The language change which lies behind the attestations at this crucial period could very well be an extension of the (negative) imperative habitual to the indicative (this is what one then recognises as the *does/do + be* habitual of later Irish English):

(5)  *Don’t be worrying about the children.*  ([negative] habitual imperative)  \(\rightarrow\)
     *She does be worrying about the children.* (habitual indicative)

With authors of the mid-nineteenth century and later, like Dion Boucicault, one finds the habitual in both imperative and indicative uses. A few examples of the former from Boucicault’s plays are the following:
Raymond Hickey

(6a) Nora Kavinagh, don’t be provokin’ that boy before he’s able for ye.
(6b) Don’t be showin’ the sorrow in your breast
(6c) and don’t be showin’ her the rags of your heart (Arrah na Pogue, 1864)
(7) But don’t ye be after forgettin’ your pretty girl (The Colleen Bawn, 1860)

The extension postulated here gains additional credence from a further extension which occurred with the habitual. Consider the following three sentences which show the outset of this chain of developments and the two extensions which are attested in present-day Irish English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>negative habitual imperative &gt;</td>
<td>Don’t be worrying about the children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>habitual indicative &gt;</td>
<td>She does be worrying about the children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>character trait</td>
<td>His uncle does be a hard worker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Extension of the habitual in Irish English.

The step from (2) to (3) is a typical case of metaphorical extension. A person who is always working hard is regarded as a hard worker, formally the habitual comes to be used to express a characteristic of an individual.³

If this explanation for the relatively sudden appearance of the does/do + be habitual in nineteenth-century Irish English is accepted then certain developments can be linked to it. Montgomery / Kirk (1996) are puzzled by the fact that the typical habitual of northern Irish English, i.e. inflected be /biz/, is not attested before the early nineteenth century. They note that the Irish scholar O’Donovan in his *A Grammar of the Irish language* (1845) incidentally mentions the attempts of the Irish to produce an equivalent to the habitual of Irish (his consuetudinal present): “The Irish attempt to introduce this tense even into English, as ‘he bees’, ‘he does be’, &c.” (O’Donovan 1845: 151, also quoted in Montgomery / Kirk 1996). There are a number of interesting facts here. The first is that O’Donovan associates the habitual with Irish speakers and the second that he had already done this by 1845.

³ Sentence (3) is an actual attestation from recordings by the present author of Waterford English.
So perhaps the use of the *does/do + be* habitual goes back as far as the beginning of the nineteenth century but had not established itself throughout the entire country to have reached the areas where the characters of the prose works of Edgeworth, Carleton and the Banim brothers stemmed from (this is a minor issue of exact dating). The third fact is that O’Donovan explicitly mentions *bees* as an optional equivalent to the habitual among the Irish. Unfortunately this statement is too short and imprecise to construe an interpretation of it as referring to Irish speakers using English or just any Irish people, including those in the north/north-east of the country for whom this form, *bees*, was probably that used to express the habitual, and still is to this day. This matter is all the more tantalising as O’Donovan was born in Co. Kilkenny in the east/south-east of Ireland (Boylan 1988: 288), an area where there is just a possibility that *bees* survived as an habitual marker from archaic forms of English.4

The lack of attestations for inflected *be* before the nineteenth century, which is the central theme of Montgomery / Kirk (1996), might on the other hand suggest that the northern Irish English speakers began to use inflected *be* in this habitual sense on the model of the *does/do + be* habitual which had become established in other varieties of Irish English.

4. Conclusion

The assumption of clear lines of historical continuity which is implied in studies such as Rickford (1986) and Harris (1986) is seen upon closer examination, and above all on the examination of historical corpora, to be somewhat hasty. The picture which emerges from the textual attestation of key varieties such as Irish English is not as conclusive as supporters of historical connections would like it to be. It is, however, difficult to say what conclusions should be drawn from this. On the one hand, there are clear structural parallels between input

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4 His home county was one of the first parts of Ireland to be settled by the English in the late medieval period.
dialects and varieties of Caribbean English, but linking up the details of form and determining the precise historical movements of settlers proves to be an intractable task.

The key question for this contribution is whether the absence of a feature from historical corpora is sufficient to conclude that this feature did not exist for the speech community whose language is represented in such corpora, especially when the authors of the corpora are specifically trying to portray the vernacular speech of this community and when we are considering features present in contemporary forms of just this speech. There is no simple answer to this question, but findings such as those presented here should admonish us to caution in assuming that features – found in varieties which have external historical connections – were present in these forms from the very beginning. If there is a total absence of attestation in a variety, traditionally regarded as providing input to another, then one may be forced to accept that common features among present-day varieties may well be due to independent developments.

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