Dublin English

Current changes and their motivation

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Introduction

Among the varieties of urban English in the British Isles, that of Dublin enjoys a special position. There are several reasons for this. The most important is that while geographically within these islands, the English-speaking sector of the Republic of Ireland does not look to England for a standard reference accent of English. In the south of Ireland the prestige form of English is that spoken in the capital Dublin. Here the ceiling in terms of standardness is the speech of educated, weak-tie speakers on the south side of the city. For the southern Irish, Received Pronunciation is an extra-national norm not aspired to. Indeed the emulation of anything like this accent of English is regarded as snobbish, slightly ridiculous and definitely un-Irish. The sociolinguistic significance of this fact is considerable and will be evident in the discussion of the vowel shift currently in progress in the capital. At the present, the speech of Dublin is going through a major sound change which started not more than 15 years ago and which has led to a considerable gap between strongly local forms of Dublin English (henceforth DE) and those of the more fashionable quarters of the city. This change is the main subject of the present chapter.

The data for the present analysis has been collected over the past five years with particular attention paid during the last two years in a quantitative survey of speech among a selected group of informants. In essence, a series of commercial areas of Dublin were chosen as representative of lower class, mainstream and fashionable shopping quarters of the city. The occurrence of key variables was examined using a surreptitious observation procedure similar to that employed by Labov in his early investigations of New York English. This method proved particularly suitable for the observation of vowel realisations among speakers from shops in socially different parts of Dublin and corroborated findings made by the present author in other collections of data that the present-day changes are most often found among younger females on the lower range of the middle class. For reasons of space it is not possible to discuss the data collection techniques and results in detail. Suffice it to say here that the group designated as ‘fashionable Dublin English’ speakers below is that for which there is ample quantitative support of their innovative role in current changes in Dublin English.

1 History

The English language in Dublin has been spoken since the late 12th century when the first
settlers came up from the south-east where they had landed around 1169. The first 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 DE 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.

Documentation

The records of DE 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 elocutioner Thomas Sheridan (the father of the playwright) 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. Among the features he listed are the following (the phonetic values have been ascertained with reasonable certainty by interpreting his own system of transcription which is decipherable and fairly consistent).

1) Middle English /eː/ was not raised to /iː/. The pronunciation [eː] 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. Hogan (1927: 65) noted in his day that the non-raised vowel was rapidly receding. Today it is somewhat artificial; the pronunciation is also found in the north of the country, where equally it is a retention of an earlier value.

2) A pronunciation of English /ai/ from Middle English /iː/ 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 DE.

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 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>
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<th>Local Dublin</th>
<th>Non-local Dublin</th>
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<tr>
<td>thank, tank</td>
<td>[tæŋk]</td>
<td>thank [tæŋk]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tank</td>
<td>[tæŋk]</td>
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</table>

Already in Sheridan’s days linguistic behaviour was apparently prevalent which aimed at dissociating middle class speech from more local forms as evidenced in the many instances of hypercorrection which he quotes: ‘instead of *great* they [middle class
Dubliners - Sheridan’s group of speakers, RH] say greet, for occasion, occeesion, days dees, &c.’ (1781: 142).

The supra-regional variety of English In the Republic of Ireland, that is excluding the north which, because of its different demographical history, is linguistically quite separate from the rest of the country, there is something like a supra-regional standard which is characterised by the speech of middle class urbanites. This can be classified into different sub-varieties on the basis of features which are found in one and not the other. For instance the urban speech of Cork may show a tendency to raise /æ/ before nasals, e.g. pen [pɛn], and that of Dublin may raise and lengthen /θ/ before voiceless fricatives, e.g. lost [lʊst]. Despite this there is a core of common features which can be taken as characteristic of general middle class speech of the south and it is these which the non-Irish use as clues for identifying an Irish accent, e.g. rhoticism (with a velarised [ɻ]), dental stops for dental fricatives, fricativisation of /t, d/ intervocally and pre-pausally, monophthong equivalents of the RP diphthongs /ei/ and /əʊ/, alveolar /l/ in all positions, the retention of the contrast between /ʌ/ and /ə/ and the lack of any significant distinction between phonemically long and short low vowels before voiced consonants (as in words of the palm and dance lexical sets, for instance, both with [əː]) to mention just some of the more salient features.

2 Contemporary Dublin

Like any other modern city Dublin shows areas of high and low social prestige. The city 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 sixties, 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.

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 around Ballsbridge and Donybrook 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 DE known as the ‘Dublin 4 Accent’. The less prestigious parts of the city are known by their district names such as the Liberties in the centre of the city, immediately north of the river Liffey and Ballymun, the only suburb in Ireland with high-rise flats and which is associated with adverse social conditions.

2.1 Varieties of Dublin English

Any discussion of English in Dublin necessitates a few basic divisions into types. For the present chapter 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. For want of a better term, this group is labelled ‘fashionable’.

(2) 1) local Dublin English
    2) non-local Dublin English — a) mainstream Dublin English
        b) fashionable Dublin English

A central issue in contemporary DE is the set of vowel shifts which represent the most recent phonological innovation in Irish English. 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 DE diverge from those in local DE, 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 (Hickey 1998, 1999). It is furthermore a clear instance of speaker-innovation leading to language change, much in the sense of James and Lesley Milroy (J. Milroy 1992: 169-72; 1999; J. and L. Milroy 1997).

3 Features of local Dublin English

A common practice in discussing varieties of English is to avail of the lexical sets established by Wells (1982). This provides a framework for dealing with variation both within a single variety as well as across differing ones. For instance, the vowel in face is a diphthong in RP but a monophthong in Irish English but there is a real sense in which one is concerned in each case with the same systemic entity: a long mid front vowel. Furthermore, the notion of lexical set allows one to discuss variation among sets of varieties satisfactorily. With some speakers of northern Irish English, for example, the word pull belongs to the strut lexical set rather than to the foot set. Recognising this alignment saves one from assertions like ‘the realisation of /u/ is [ʌ] in pull’ which is plainly inaccurate.

Wells’ original set needs some modification when dealing with contemporary Dublin English because this variety contains realisations which are not necessarily of importance in forms of British English. In particular four extensions are required.

1) MEAT is needed to refer to the reflexes of Middle English /eː/.
2) GIRL is required alongside nurse as there is a two-way distinction among short vowels before /r/.
3) **DANCE** is necessary as words with /aːnC#/ have [ɑː] in RP but [aː] in Irish English, a sociolinguistically sensitive realisation. This item is not given by Wells as a representative of a lexical set in its own right but it is mentioned in his examples for the bath lexical set (1982, 2: xviii).

4) **PRIDE** must be included here as it has /ai/ before a voiced consonant and hence a different realisation than does the diphthong in the price lexical set.

For the discussion of consonants below a comparable technique has been used. Here small capitals are employed to refer to systemic units. Thus the difficulty of what symbol to use on a phonemic level is avoided. For instance, to speak of th and dh circumvents the problem of whether to assign [t, d] to /θ, ð/ or /t, d/ respectively in the context of southern Irish English.

### 3.1 Consonants

1) **R-deletion** Popular DE tends not to be rhotic or only weakly so; the loss of /r/ is clearest in unstressed word-final position, as pronunciations like [prəʊtə] for *porter* testify. The allophony of vowels deriving from a former sequence of short vowel plus /r/ is quite complicated because of rounding which occurs after labials in this position and a general lengthening resulting from mora compensation on the loss of /r/.

   The labial rounding can be accompanied by retraction giving a vowel continuum from low front rounded to back mid to high rounded.

   (3) a circles [sɛːkʃəz]  
   b first [fʊːst] ~ [fʊːst]

   Now the speech of the middle classes in Dublin has one remarkable feature and that is its rhoticism (Wells 1982: 418). The fact that syllable-final /r/ should be maintained so consistently in educated DE is deserving of comment. If there were a tendency for this variety to approximate to more standard forms of (British) English then one would expect rhoticism to decline. However, this would create a similarity with popular DE which would work against the aim of increasing the distance between low and high prestige varieties of English in the capital. In this respect Dublin is similar to New York. In both cities rhoticism is prestigious as lower class speech tends to lack syllable-final /r/. But within the context of English in the British Isles the maintenance of rhoticism cannot be interpreted as a shift towards standardisation.

2) **TH, DH-fortition** It is safe to assume that the realisation of the first sound in the thought lexical set in popular DE as an alveolar plosive [t] is not a recent phenomenon. Hogan (1927: 71f.) notes that it is found in the seventeenth century plays (assuming that t, d represent [t,d]) and furthermore in the Dublin City Records (from the first period, i.e. before the 17th century, see above) where the third person singular ending -th appears as -t. According to Hogan alveolar realisations are common in rural varieties in the south and south-west of Ireland. Here they are probably a contact phenomenon deriving ultimately from the realisation of non-palatal /t,d/ in Irish. Hogan incidentally also remarks on the dental stops which are found in present-day Irish English (loc.cit.). The acoustic sensitivity of the Irish to the shift from dental to alveolar derives not least from
the merger which results from it as indicated by such homophonic pairs as thinker and tinker, both \([t\text{ŋ}k\text{ə}]\) and third or turd, both \([t\text{u}\text{d}]\).

3) T-lenition The clearest phonetic feature of southern Irish English is the reduction of /t/ to 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, Hickey 1993: 220f.) and would suggest that it was a feature of English in Ireland in the first period.

The lenition of /t/ — phonetically \([t]\) — intervocalically or pre-pausally is not continued in non-local DE beyond the initial stage with the exception of one or two lexicalised items such as Saturday \([\text{ˈsæh}\text{ðe}]\). However, it is precisely the extension beyond the apico-alveolar fricative which is characteristic of local DE. The sequence is usually as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
4) & /t/ \rightarrow [t] \rightarrow [h] \rightarrow [0] \\
\text{motorway} & \quad [ˈmət\text{ə}\text{we}] \quad [ˈmə\text{h}\text{we}] \quad [ˈmə\text{we}] \\
\text{thought} & \quad [tət\text{ʃ}] \rightarrow [tə\text{h}] \rightarrow [tə\text{ }] \\
\end{align*}
\]

4) Post-sonorant stop deletion This feature is unique to DE. In other varieties in the Republic the tendency is not to delete the stop in this position but to retain it and, if voiced, to devoice it, e.g. *bend* \([\text{bənt}]\). The Dublin phenomenon is confined to positions after /n/ and /l/ and may involve a glottal stop as a reflex of the deleted sonorant.

\[
5) \quad \text{pound} \quad [\text{pəwən(?)]} \quad \text{belt} \quad [\text{bəl(?)}]
\]

5) NG-fronting The realisation of the final nasal of the present participle is one of the most common variables in all varieties of English. In this respect DE is no exception with the low-prestige varieties preferring [n] over [ŋ].

3.2 Vowels

4) Vowel breaking Long high vowels are realised as two syllables with a hiatus between the two when they occur in closed syllables. The hiatus element is [j] with front vowels and [w] with back vowels.

\[
6) \quad \begin{array}{ll}
\text{a} & \text{clean} \quad [\text{kliŋən}] \quad \text{but: be} \quad [\text{biː}] \\
\text{b} & \text{fool} \quad [\text{fuwəl}] \quad \text{who} \quad [\text{huː}]
\end{array}
\]

The disyllabification of long high vowels extends to diphthongs which have a high ending point as can be seen in the following realisations.

\[
7) \quad \begin{array}{ll}
\text{a} & \text{time} \quad [\text{təŋm}] \quad \text{but: fly} \quad [\text{flai}] \\
\text{b} & \text{pound} \quad [\text{pəwən}] \quad \text{how} \quad [\text{heu}]
\end{array}
\]

If one recognises a cline within local DE then this disyllabification is definitely at the lower end. For instance, the front onset of the vowel in the mouth lexical set is quite
common in colloquial, but not necessarily local varieties of DE. However, one does not have an hiatus [w] or the deletion of the post-sonorant nasal (with or without a glottal stop as trace).

4 The Dublin Vowel Shift

In present-day Dublin the speakers of what is labelled here ‘fashionable Dublin English’ (see (2) above) are engaging in a shift of most long vowels and diphthongs which constitutes a divergent development away from local Dublin English. This shift centres around the /ai/ diphthong and the low back vowels and has led to a phonetic redistribution of values for these sounds which are discussed in the following sections.

The variable (ai) in Irish English The first point to note is that a conservative pronunciation of (ai) in Dublin is maintained in lower class speech as [aɪ] (historically, also the middle class realisation). The supraregional variety of the south has for (ai) a diphthong which has a low mid or low front starting point, i.e., either [æɪ] or [æɾ]. What is significant here is that a non-central starting point is the commonest one for most varieties of southern Irish English. If one now considers local DE one finds that its realisation for (ai) as [aɪ] is quite stigmatised in Dublin. One can maintain that the greater the phonetic separation of middle class DE from more local forms in the capital grew, the more the corresponding forms of the lower social classes became stigmatised. However, the matter does not end there. For middle class Dubliners the [aɪ, æɾ] pronunciations sufficiently delimit them from local DE. But increasingly, a back starting-point is being used for this diphthong, i.e. in a word like style the pronunciation is not [stɑɪl] but rather [stæɪl]. This retracted starting-point is particularly noticeable before /r/ so that the name of the country is realised as [aɪəɾlɒnd] rather than [aɪɻɒnd] in fashionable DE.

Distribution of the (ai) shift The most noticeable aspect of the shift is that is does not apply to all possible inputs as can be seen from the following words with (ai).

(8)  

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rice</td>
<td>[rɑɪs]</td>
<td>rise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tight</td>
<td>[tɑɪt]</td>
<td>tide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>life</td>
<td>[lɑɪf]</td>
<td>lives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The generalisation here is that retraction to [aɪ] only occurs before voiced segments. This makes phonetic sense: the retracted onset of the diphthong assumes a laxer muscular setting and the tongue travels a longer distance down and back for [aɪ] than it does for the unshifted realisation [a].

It is difficult to predict whether this distribution will remain typical for the Dublin Vowel Shift. It may very well be that it is only characteristic of an initial phase and that the shift will spread to all instances of (ai), masking the present distribution. Or it may freeze at this stage, as has been the case with the similar phenomenon of Canadian Raising (Chambers 1973) which maintains a differential realisation of the vowels in the price and mouth lexical sets before voiceless and voiced segments respectively.

General shift of low vowels The vowel shift in DE is not just confined to the realisation
of (ai). Other vowels in the area of this diphthong are affected, particularly the diphthong in the choice lexical set and the low and mid vowels in the lot and thought sets which usually have a lower realisation than in Britain (or unrounded in the case of the lot vowel).

\[(9)\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{boy} & \quad /\text{o}/ \quad \rightarrow \quad [\text{boi}] \\
\text{pot} & \quad /\text{o}/ \quad \rightarrow \quad [\text{pot}] \quad \rightarrow \quad [\text{pat}] \\
\text{law} & \quad /\text{o}/ \quad \rightarrow \quad [\text{lo:}] 
\end{align*}
\]

These realisations show that the change has the characteristics of a chain shift, that is, it affects several segments by a process of retraction and raising in phonological vowel space.

**Fashionable Dublin: How to avoid local features** The retraction of low vowels and the raising of back vowels is the most acoustically salient feature of fashionable DE and it is this which constitutes the core of the Dublin Vowel Shift. But other avoidance strategies are used to maximally differentiate fashionable forms from local forms of Dublin speech. The following list give some indication of what is involved here.

a) Local DE has a distinction between historic back and front short vowels before /\text{r}/, in the nurse and girl lexical sets, [\text{n\text{u}:} (\text{i})\text{s}] and [\text{g\text{e}:} (\text{i})\text{l}] respectively. But because the open front realisation is so typical of local DE, there is a migration in fashionable DE of historically front long vowels to the central rhotic type as seen in words from the square lexical set like *carefully* ['\text{kef}f\text{a}li] and *daring* [d\text{ar}\text{i}\text{n}]. This realisation has no precedent in the history of Irish English.

b) Connected with the previous feature is the strict avoidance of schwa retraction before /\text{r}/ in nurse words such as *third* [\text{th\text{r}}d], *purse* [\text{p\text{r}}s], not [\text{tu:} (\text{i})\text{d}] and [\text{pu:} (\text{i})\text{s}].

c) The local back rounded vowel /\text{u}/ in the strut lexical set is replaced by an unrounded front vowel which is almost /\text{i}/, as in *Sunday* [\text{s\text{i}_nde}].

d) A syllable-final retroflex /\text{r}/, [\text{\text{l}}], is used which has the advantage of marking the /\text{r}/ even more clearly vis à vis the popular forms of DE which, if at all, only have a weak syllable-final /\text{r}/.

From these considerations it is clear that the vowel shift is not simply an approximation to mainstream British pronunciations of English, after all syllable-final /\text{r}/, the lack of /\text{\text{a}:}/ in words of the dance lexical set, the differential retraction of /ai/ all point to the independence of Irish English from Britain. Furthermore, there is an imperviousness in Ireland to many sociolinguistic features of British urban speech, for instance the loss of initial /\text{h}/, t-glottaling or th-fronting.
(10) Summary of Dublin Vowel Shift

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

- *time* \([\text{tæim}] \rightarrow [\text{təim}]\)
- *toy* \([\text{təi}] \rightarrow [\text{təi}], [\text{təi}]\)

b) raising of low back vowels

- *cot* \([\text{kət}] \rightarrow [\text{kət}]\)
- *caught* \([\text{kɔt}] \rightarrow [\text{kɔt}], [\text{kət}]\)

\[ \begin{array}{ccc}
\text{ai} & \text{o} & \text{o} \\
\text{o} & \text{a} & \text{ɔ} \\
\end{array} \]

\[ \begin{array}{ccc}
\text{Retraction} & \text{ai} & \rightarrow \text{ai} \\
\end{array} \]

To understand the framework for vowel realisations such as those just mentioned it is appropriate at this point to juxtapose the vowel systems of the three main variety groups in DE organised as standard lexical sets.

(11) Local Dublin English Mainstream Fashionable

A long vowels

- *fleece* \([\text{fliəs}] \rightarrow [\text{fli:s}] \rightarrow [\text{fli:s}]\)
- *face* \([\text{feːs}] \rightarrow [\text{feːs}] \rightarrow [\text{feːs}]\)
- *palm* \([\text{pæm}] \rightarrow [\text{paːm}] \rightarrow [\text{paːm}]\)
- *bath* \([\text{bæt}] \rightarrow [\text{baːt}] \rightarrow [\text{baːt}]\)
- *dance* \([\text{dæns}] \rightarrow [\text{daːns}] \rightarrow [\text{daːns}]\)
- *thought* \([\text{taːh}] \rightarrow [\text{toːt}] \rightarrow [\text{toːt}]\)
- *goat* \([\text{gɔəh}] \rightarrow [\text{gout}] \rightarrow [\text{gout}]\)
- *goose* \([\text{guwəs}] \rightarrow [\text{gus}] \rightarrow [\text{gus}]\)

B diphthongs

- *price* \([\text{præs}] \rightarrow [\text{praːs}] \rightarrow [\text{praːs}]\)
- *pride* \([\text{praːd}] \rightarrow [\text{praːd}] \rightarrow [\text{praːd}]\)
- *mouth* \([\text{mæʊt}] \rightarrow [\text{mæut}] \rightarrow [\text{mæut}]\)
- *choice* \([\text{ʃaɪs}] \rightarrow [\text{ʃəs}] \rightarrow [\text{ʃəs}]\)

C rhotacised vowels

- *start* \([\text{stət}] \rightarrow [\text{stəɾːt}] \rightarrow [\text{stəɾːt}]\)
- *north* \([\text{nət}] \rightarrow [\text{nəɾːt}] \rightarrow [\text{nəɾːt}]\)
- *force* \([\text{fɔːs}] \rightarrow [\text{foːs}] \rightarrow [\text{foːs}]\)
- *nurse* \([\text{nəs}] \rightarrow [\text{nəɾːs}] \rightarrow [\text{nəɾːs}]\)
- *girl* \([\text{gəl}] \rightarrow [\text{gəɾːl}] \rightarrow [\text{gəɾːl}]\)
- *near* \([\text{nər}] \rightarrow [\text{nəɾ}] \rightarrow [\text{nəɾ}]\)
square  [skweə]  [skweə']  [skwəŋ]
cure  [kjura]  [kjura']  [kjuran]

D  *short vowels*

kit  [kɪt]  [kɪt]  [kɪt]
dress  [dres]  [dres]  [dres]
trap  [trep]  [trep]  [trep]
lot  [lət]  [lət]  [lət]
strut  [strut]  [strut]  [strut]
foot  [fʊt]  [fʊt]  [fʊt]

E  *unstressed vowels*

comma  [ˈkɒmə]  [ˈkɒmə]  [ˈkɒmə]
letter  [ˈleɪtə]  [ˈleɪtə]  [ˈleɪtə]
happy  [ˈhæpi]  [ˈhæpi]  [ˈhæpi]
horses  [hɔ:zəz]  [hɔ:zəz]  [hɔŋzəz]

Notes

1) Not all speakers of local DE lack syllable-final /r/.
2) t-lenition can be manifested as [h], or [t] in somewhat less casual speech.
3) The vowel deriving from historical /ər/ tends to be very open, hence the transcription as [ə].
4) In the goat lexical set fashionable DE has a diphthong with an increasingly central starting point. Synchronically this is a coincidental similarity with RP arising in DE from the upward movement of the vowel in the thought set. The more this closes the greater the degree of diphthongisation found in goat words. From an historic point of view this motivation may be similar to that in RP.

5  **Discussion**

There is an essential premise for the current changes in DE and that is that speakers are unconsciously aware of minute phonetic shifts which are taking place in the language around them and that they themselves can and do become the proponents of such changes. Speakers also recognise unconsciously the direction in which a change is moving and can thus force the change beyond the stage which is it at currently. For instance, if a speaker intuitively grasps that back vowels are being raised then he/she can actively participate in this process, e.g., by raising [ŋ] beyond [ɔ] to [o] in words of the lot lexical set. In order to do this of course speakers must first of all realise that there exist gradations along a cline of pronunciations. Speakers are unconsciously aware of such a spectrum by exposure to variation in the community of which they are members and by noticing the relative frequency and the conditions of occurrence (situation, speaker group, etc.) of sets of pronunciations for given phonological segments. They build up an awareness of variation and change which is part and parcel of their knowledge of their native language. Without this assumption there is no principled and coherent way of explaining the origin and course of a shift like the current one. Assuming unconscious awareness
accounts for the non-random nature of change; it sees speakers as aware of the direction in which their language is moving.

*Pushing the vowel shift* Speakers of fashionable DE would seem to notice the trajectory on which the vowel shift is located even though their own personal realisation of key vowels may not be at the most innovative end. Furthermore, this explains why young speakers are seen to push the vowel shift. The trajectory for the shift is unconsciously recognised by speakers and they can not only move within a degree of personal variation on this curve but they can also shift their range of realisations in the direction of innovation, in this case backwards and upwards, often beyond the current upper end of the trajectory.

(12)  
\[
[\text{bi}] \rightarrow [\text{oi}] \rightarrow [\text{o}]
\]

boys [botz]; noise [noiz]

There would appear to be a certain awareness of this behaviour in contemporary DE as a term has emerged in recent years for a kind of exaggerated accent which is putatively typical of one of the more prestigious areas of Dublin (the aforementioned ‘Dublin 4 accent’). Speakers with this accent are recognised as having more extreme vowel values for the vowel shift and are often ridiculed by more mainstream speakers. However, with time, such extreme values may come to be regarded as possible realisations for other groups of speakers if the latter no longer come to regard the speech of a small minority as unduly exaggerated.

*Downward percolation* A change rarely remains restricted to one layer in a society. For the Dublin Vowel Shift a phenomenon can be observed, albeit embryonically, among local varieties of DE. This is what I term ‘downward percolation’. It denotes the adoption of the shift by speakers who would not normally show it as they have come to realise that it is typical of more prestigious speech in the city, for instance in pronunciations like [stail], [taim], [maild], etc. If this happens on a broad scale, the ultimate fate of the shift is then uncertain. What has started as a feature unique to socially pretentious speakers in Dublin may well spread vertically in the city (as it is beginning to do regionally for many younger generation urbanites) and very gradually lose the significance it has at the moment as a delimiting factor vis à vis the lower classes in the capital.

*Propagation of sound change* In current sociolinguistic discourse two models are considered valid scenarios for language change, these are the view ultimately propounded by the Neogrammarians and that known as lexical diffusion, (Wang (1969); Chen and Wang (1975)). The Neogrammarian view of a sound change implies that any possible input is affected, i.e. the change is phonetically gradual and lexically universal. In the present case this means that all instances of /ai/ are retracted. If this were the entire story then there would be no exceptions, the change would show *Ausnahmslosigkeit* ‘exceptionlessness’. This is not always the case, however, as some potential input to a change shows phonetic resistance, which acts as a brake on the Neogrammarian advance. With reference to the Dublin Vowel Shift the cases of phonetic resistance are those where /ai/ occurs before a voiceless segment, which, because of its fortis quality, results in a somewhat shorter vowel preceding it so that the tongue has less time to move down and back to the position for [ai].

The lexical diffusion hypothesis essentially claims that a change starts with some words and spreads to others, encompassing the entire vocabulary of a language, given the
important proviso that the change does not lose momentum, i.e. that it is carried through along the S-curve to 100%. With the lexical diffusion model, a question arises which is not of relevance with the Neogrammarian model, i.e. what words are affected and is there is any generalisation which can be made as to those which first undergo the change, that is how does the change proceed through the lexicon?

Participants in and progress of sound change There is a standard wisdom on the occurrence of Neogrammarian advance versus lexical diffusion: Labov (1981: 304) maintains that ‘low-level output rules’ typically show gradual change across the board (Neogrammarian advance) whereas ‘changes across subsystems’, e.g., long to short vowels, proceeds by a process of lexical diffusion.

Now the current investigation of the Dublin Vowel Shift shows quite clearly that what I call motivated participants — fashionable Dubliners — display the Neogrammarian advance for the shift whereas what I term detached participants — socially conscious urbanites from outside Dublin — exhibit lexical diffusion, although the change is still in its infancy and constitutes a case of Labov’s ‘low-level output rules’.

With the group of detached participants the first word to show the Dublin Vowel Shift is *Ireland* and its derivative *Irish*. This is almost a test case, a keyword, for those speakers who are beginning to participate in the shift. The keyword view of lexical diffusion is closely linked to the notion of salience of certain words. Often the words are used as carrier forms for a characteristic pronunciation of a group; common items with this function are the keywords *Irish* and *Ireland*, the numerals *five* and *nine* along with various frequently occurring adjectives like *wild, mild, kind*; nouns like *time, mind, side*; verbs like *rise, drive, hide*, etc.

Types, tokens and lexical diffusion The theory of lexical diffusion implies furthermore that not only does a certain change — a new vowel value — spread gradually through the lexicon of the variety/language affected, but also that not all tokens of a given type (lexeme) exhibit the new pronunciation immediately. This is clear in the group of detached participants and, if the observations on the Dublin Vowel Shift are correct, it would seem that the older members of this group show the new pronunciation for given lexemes only for a percentage of tokens, e.g. the realisation \([a\text{-}i\text{-}l\text{-}q\text{-}\text{and}]\) rather than \([a\text{-}l\text{-}q\text{-}\text{and}]\) is found with only some tokens of the country’s name. Any situation like this with co-variants occurring alternatively implies that there is external conditioning on their occurrence. The circumstances for the use of the retracted diphthong in Irish English is something which is certainly sensitive to social factors in discourse settings.

The question arises from the observations made above as to why lexical diffusion is typical of detached participants. The answer lies in the lack of motivation on their part. For urbanites outside Dublin there is no reason to use a different realisation of *(ai)* from that which they acquired natively, usually *[a]l*. Hence they do not grasp the motivation among their metropolitan counterparts actively involved in the shift. They adopt the shift as they are confronted with it in words with high salience (*Ireland* and *Irish*) and/or high statistical frequency (numerals, common adjectives, nouns, verbs, etc.).

Another issue which arises in this context is the length of time for which there are two types of propagation. The distinction in the course of a sound change — Neogrammarian advance or lexical diffusion — appears to hold most clearly while the shift is taking place. Furthermore, depending on such aspects as the quantitative relationship of motivated participants to detached participants the latter may be marginalised by the former and the shift takes place fully. Or the level of exposure may
lead to detached participants adopting an ever increasing number of words with the new pronunciation and this may eventually lead to the demise for them of their old pronunciation as it does not survive anywhere in their lexicon. Both these situations would mask the stage of lexical diffusion and make the sound change appear to have proceeded by Neogrammarian advance.

Conclusion It would seem fitting to conclude this overview of current Dublin English with a conjecture about the future. In linguistic terms the issue is called the termination problem. It really involves two questions, depending on linguistic model. The first is: when is a sound change, proceeding by lexical diffusion, complete? The answer is fairly simple: when there is no unconditional instance of the original sound value left and when further movement in vowel space does not appear to be happening, e.g. the lowering of early modern English /u/ more or less terminated when the value [ä] (in southern British English) was reached by all words which participated in the shift.

The second question is when is a change, which is taking place by Neogrammarian advance, complete? The answer here is that there is no termination point. There is simply a stage when speakers regard the change as having crossed a phonological threshold, i.e. when a pronunciation is assigned to one phoneme as opposed to another. This is particularly clear when phonemic contrast either arises or is lost.

But when the new pronunciation is moving towards a value not already present in the phonological system of the variety concerned — as is the case with the new [ɔɪ] of the Dublin Vowel Shift — then there is no given end-point.

It is too soon to say what will happen to the Dublin Vowel Shift. For its continuation the behaviour of key sectors of Dublin society is most important. Assuming that the unarticulated goal of these speakers is to evolve a form of speech phonetically distinct from that of local DE, then that goal is all but attained. The shift has created the new allophones [ɔɪ] for former [ai] (in the pride lexical set), [ɔi] and [oɪ] for former [ɔɪ] (in the choice lexical set) but there are no threatening mergers so that there is no system-internal pressure to continue on a shift cycle and to re-align phonemic oppositions.

Epilogue. How do supra-regional varieties of language arise? The changes described here can be seen as characteristic of the genesis of non-local varieties of language in general. The Dublin Vowel Shift is clearly not motivated by any external influence on DE, such as that of southern British English, let alone American English. Furthermore, it is not internally motivated as is analogical change such as morphological regularisation (the discrete replacement of one form by another). The only remaining conclusion is that it is motivated by social factors within Dublin.

It is also not unreasonable to conclude that the Dublin Vowel Shift shows an incipient stage of a new supra-regional variety: the emergence of non-local forms in the speech of the metropolis could well, given the dominant social and economic position of the capital, lead to these forms become defining features of the supra-regional variety of English throughout the entire Republic of Ireland.

Note

1) The sound referred to here is an apico-alveolar fricative (similar to the realisation of /s/ in those languages without an /s/-/ʃ/ contrast such as Dutch, Finnish, Greek, Spanish, etc.). Note that it is quite distinct from the laminal-alveolar fricative [s]
so that kiss [kɪs] and kit [kɪt] are not homophones in southern Irish English. There is no symbol for this sound in the IPA. The present author uses a subscript caret to indicate the apical and open articulation, a convention introduced in Hickey 1984.

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