The English Language in Ireland

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The English language was first taken to Ireland in the late twelfth century and despite many vicissitudes has remained there since, becoming the first language of the majority of the population in the course of several centuries. Initially, English was a minority language with Anglo-Norman the more important of the languages taken to Ireland. In addition, the Irish language which was spoken by the entire native population in the late Middle Ages remained that of the majority until well into the nineteenth century.

The long transition from English to Irish which characterised the linguistic history of Ireland in the past 800 years meant that bilingualism existed to varying degrees. It is true that native speakers of English came to Ireland and most of them continued that language there, especially on the east coast. But the majority of the population was always native Irish and the native speakers of English today are overwhelmingly descendants of Irish speakers who shifted to English in the past few centuries.

Although English ultimately became the dominant language in Ireland the centuries after the initial invasion were characterised by a decline in English due to a strengthening of Irish, with the shift from French to Irish by the Anglo-Normans, and due to inroads into the towns of the east coast – the stronghold of English after the Middle Ages – which were made by Irish speakers. But the tide turned on Irish in the seventeenth century due to military defeats which the Irish suffered at the hands of the English and due to the settlement of large parts of the north by English- or Scots- speaking Protestants. These external facts justify a division of the history of English in Ireland into two large time blocks, one from 1200 to 1600 and another from 1600 to the present-day.

The dialect of Forth and Bargy in the south-east corner of the country is the only survival of English from the first period, i.e. before 1600. This was the subject of antiquarian interest in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and glossaries of it were published, e.g. Barnes (1867). This material has been re-edited recently (Dolan and Ó Muirithe eds, 1996 [1979]) and a linguistic analysis is contained in Hickey (2007a, section 2.4).

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1. The north-south split

The dialects of the northern province, Ulster, are quite different from those in the south. The main reason for this is that they derive from Lowland Scots and forms of northern English which were taken to Ulster during the plantations of the seventeenth century. These varieties led to forms of English easily recognisable in the north to this day. However, the English of the two main ethnic groups in the north, Protestants and Catholics, are not usually distinguishable by their English (but see McCafferty 2001 for some differences with regard to innovation and conservatism in the respective communities).

Ulster speech has been treated in many publications, some of these book-length, such as Adams (ed., 1964), an early collection of articles or Mallory (ed., 1999), a somewhat more recent volume. In Ulster, the status of Ulster Scots is a topic of considerable controversy, not only among linguists (see the discussion in Hickey 2007a: section 3.3; Hickey 2011). Treatments of it as a separate language are Fenton (2001), a lexical study, and Robinson (1997), a more general one.

2. Language shift

The change in language for the majority of the Irish-speaking population has been viewed by many linguists as the chief source of non-standard features in Irish English though some scholars attributes these to inherited regional and/or archaic features of English or to independent developments. The case for contact has been discussed extensively in the literature (see the review in Hickey 2007a: section 4.2 and the references in Filppula 1999 and Corrigan 2010). More general information on language contact is available in Hickey (ed., 2010) and the issue of contact between Irish and English is centre-stage in Hickey (ed., 2011b).

3. Sociolinguistic developments

The three major cities of Ireland – Dublin, Belfast and Derry – have all been the subject of sociolinguistic investigations. Belfast English was described in a monograph by J. Milroy (1981) which, for its historical part, draws on the work of Patterson (1860) on mid-nineteenth-century Belfast English. L. Milroy (1987) is a book-length treatment of social network analysis – based on her work in Belfast during the 1970s and 1980s – and is regarded as a seminal work of modern sociolinguistics. Linguistic developments in Derry have been examined and analysed in McCafferty (2001). The situation in Dublin in the 1990s was one of dissociation where new varieties of English developed which were deliberately, albeit unconsciously, different from the local vernacular. The emergent forms served as the code for the newly affluent inhabitants of Dublin. An investigation into Dublin English emphasising the origins of and current developments in metropolitan Irish English can be found in Hickey (2005).
4. Scholarly research

The modern era of Irish English studies can be said to begin with P. L. Henry’s 1957 monograph (there had been some earlier studies, notably P. W. Joyce (1910) – a popular book on vernacular English in Ireland – and Hogan (1927) – an academic study with an historical slant). But it was Alan Bliss who was to revitalise the linguistic study of Irish English in the late 1960s and 1970s. Nowadays he is best known for his work on the representation of Irish speech in literature, see Bliss (1979). In this field one also finds Duggan (1969 [1937]), an early study, and Wall (1995), a lexical guide. The poetry of the first period – the early fourteenth-century *Kildare Poems* – have been edited twice, first in German by Heuser (1904) and then in English by Lucas (1995). In the sphere of translation the main work is Cronin (1996).


5. Present-day issues

*Pronunciation* The phonology of Irish English has been dealt with in many articles, e.g. by James and Lesley Milroy (on Belfast English) and in monograph form by Harris (1985). Hickey (2004) is a sound atlas with extensive coverage of all regional varieties of Irish English.

*Grammar* The morphosyntax of Irish English has received special attention by a number of scholars and results have appeared in monograph form, e.g. in Henry (1995), Filppula (1999) and in the relevant chapters of Hickey (2007a) and Corrigan (2010).

*Vocabulary* The lexicon of Irish English has traditionally been a focus of attention with many word lists being published already in the nineteenth century. This tradition has been continued in the work of many scholars who have produced dictionaries for Irish English in general (Clark, 1977 [1917] is an early work in this field) and also for the speech of regions of Ireland, e.g. Traynor (1953) for Donegal, Todd (1990) and Macafee (1996) for the north in general. Moynan (1996) is a treatment of English in Kilkenny while Beecher (1991) deals with local Cork English. The most general treatments are to be found in Dolan (2004), Share (2003), Ó Muirithe (1996, 2004) all of which contain much local vocabulary which derives from the Irish language and/or from archaic forms of English which survived in Ireland.

*Pragmatics* Recent research avenues include the pragmatics of Irish English and several studies have appeared based on data collected in the past few years, for instance by researchers working at the University of Limerick. The collection by Barron and Schneider (eds, 2005) offers a good overview of this area.
Transportation The spread of Irish English during the colonial period (1600-1900) and the question of Irish input to overseas varieties of English has been examined in Hickey (ed., 2004) and Hickey (2010).

Language and politics Issues of language and politics have been treated in depth by Tony Crowley, in the sourcebook, Crowley (2000), and in the monograph Crowley (2005).

6 Conclusion and outlook

Irish English is both a historically well-attested variety and a vibrant contemporary form of English. There is much sociolinguistic variation with change in recent non-vernacular varieties of Dublin English, showing new developments which have arisen during the economic boom which Ireland experienced in the 15 years up to 2008. Advanced Dublin English has features of pronunciation (vowel values and consonant shifts) which have spread rapidly to other parts of the Republic of Ireland (Hickey 2007b). There is no codified standard of Irish English, but supraregional usage, derived from middle-class Dublin English, was a de facto standard during the twentieth century. This has been affected by new Dublin English and the latter is quickly establishing itself as a model of non-local Irish English usage (Hickey 2012). In the research arena there are many new developments with certain subfields showing significant activity, e.g. the analysis of standard varieties of Irish English (Kirk and Kallen 2006, 2008), pragmatics and sociolinguistics. This shows that Irish English is a continuing subject of academic and general interest which can offer insights into language development and change of relevance to a wide audience outside Ireland.

References


Joyce, Patrick Weston 1910. English as We Speak it in Ireland. London: Longmans, Green and Co.


