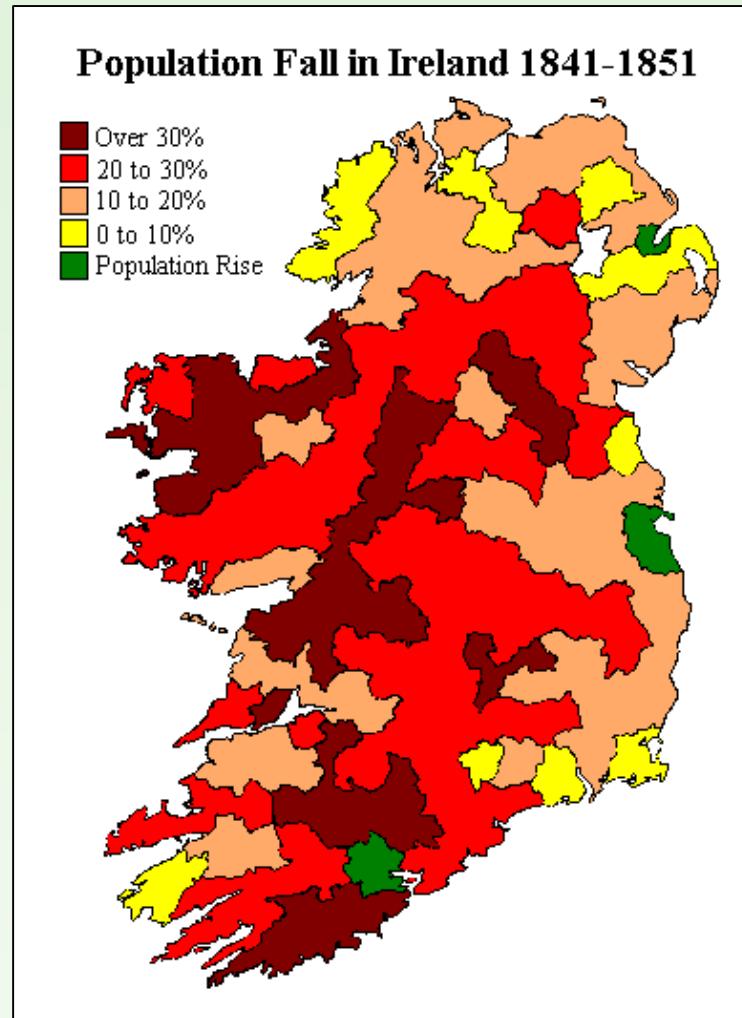


The Aftermath of Shift



Language and Identity in Ireland



Raymond Hickey, University of Limerick

tír gan teanga, tír gan anam

‘a country without a language of its own is without a soul’

This conference is about Irish English, so it is about the native language (i.e. first language, acquired in early childhood) of over 99% of the Irish-born population of the Republic of Ireland. In this respect it is comparable to a conference on the French language in France, the German language in Germany, the Italian language in Italy.

But is that really the case?

There is no-one at the conference from an English department in Ireland, that is the departments which are dedicated to the topic of the conference – English – are not represented here at all.

Now consider a fictitious situation for a moment.

Can you imagine a conference in the Sorbonne in Paris on the French language or in the Humboldt University in Berlin on the German language in which **nobody** from either the French or German departments was present?

Can you image a situation in which the **only** people at such a conference working in either French or German were from **outside** the respective countries?

Well, that is the situation we have here. It is most certainly not the fault of the organisers but it has its roots in a much wider issue which I would like to talk about for the remaining time I have, namely, the relationship of the Irish to the English language.



Ireland and the English Language

The story of an uneasy relationship

Given the above situation, I think that you might accept that the Irish have a relationship to English which is not typical for the populations of other countries vis à vis their native language.

Why is this the case? The reasons for the complex relationship of the Irish to English has to do with the historical shift from Irish to English.

Consider the nature of this shift for a moment. Apart from the small numbers of English settlers in Ireland one can safely say that the vast majority of people in Ireland at the beginning of the early modern period, say around 1600, were Irish speakers. This group remained the majority up to at least the first half of the nineteenth century.

As is known to the audience here the catastrophic event which tipped the scales in favour of English was the Great Famine of 1845-8 which decimated the Irish-speaking population. Furthermore, subsequent emigration bled the Irish-speaking areas most. Other matters are significant here, not least the fact that the primary school system, instituted in the 1830s, made no provision for Irish. Publishing in Irish and third-level education through Irish hardly existed.

Now the main period of shift was from about 1850 to 1880 and the chief reason was the realisation by Irish speakers that the only way forward both in Irish society and abroad after emigration was to shift to English.

In short, the Irish abandoned their own language and by the end of the 19th century the number of people speaking Irish as their first language was well below 10%.



Note that in this painting it is the young girl who is reading the letter from overseas, written in English. The parents are listening attentively hoping to understand the language while the older man on the left is completely detached.



The distress of emigration and the breaking of one's ties with one's background comes across clearly in this picture of parting for a ship leaving Ireland.

Talking about the language shift

The language shift is a trauma of the first order. However, discussions of it tend to background the agents in this process. In Irish the expression used is *Meath na Gaeilge* 'the decline of the Irish language' rather than *Tréigean na Gaeilge* 'the abandonment of the Irish language'. In English one finds the following terminology:

Agency backgrounded

Decline of Irish

Agency foregrounded

formal terms

abandonment

forsaking, deserting

informal terms

give up, drop

Teaching in school

The language shift is not taught in Irish schools. It does not figure in history lessons where it could be given a rightful place beside such key events as the Battle of the Boyne (1690) or the Act of Union (1801).

The Department of Education and Science, An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta, has a number of documents on Irish history.

The Leaving Certificate History Syllabus is a 47-page document setting out topics and themes for history lessons in preparation for the school-leaving examination which qualifies pupils for entry to tertiary education on a university level. It contains two fleeting references to the decline of Irish.

The document *History: Guidelines for Teachers* does not have a single reference to the decline or abandonment of the Irish language.

Topic 5: Colony versus kingdom – tensions in mid-18th century Ireland, 1715-1770

Perspective	Elements	Case studies
<i>Politics and administration</i>	<p>The “Protestant Nation”; the structure of central government administration; courts, grand juries, assizes, boroughs, parliament.</p> <p>Wood’s halfpence, 1722; Drapier’s letters; Dean Swift’s pamphleteering.</p> <p>Attempts at reform; the Patriots; the Catholic Committee.</p> <p>Possible French intervention: Thurot’s expedition.</p> <p>Townshend’s viceroyalty; money bills.</p> <p>Political effects of Seven Years’ War in Ireland.</p>	The Ponsonbys
<i>Society and economy</i>	<p>Population change; subdivision of holdings; forms of tenure; the potato; poverty, famine, disease.</p> <p>Absentee landlords, middlemen, cottiers, labourers, spalpeens, journeymen; women and rural society.</p> <p>Trade fluctuations; expansion of the provision trade; increase in smuggling; customs and excise dues.</p> <p>Enclosures; agrarian unrest; model villages; planned towns; new industries; linen and brewing.</p>	The Whiteboys
<i>Culture and religion</i>	<p>Relaxation of Penal Laws; Catholic education.</p> <p>The rise of the Dublin theatre; na Cúirteanna Filíochta; foreign influences on Irish traditional music; decline of the Irish language.</p>	<p>The trial of Fr. Sheehy</p> <p>(nothing to do with language)</p>



What is our native language?

Many Irish people maintain that Irish is their native language and defend it irrationally. Consider the uproar which arose when plans to abolish the chair of Old Irish in UCD three years ago became public. There were letters to the editors of national newspapers complaining bitterly of the betrayal of our native language by the heartless administrators of the university. But the people expressing their outrage were virtually all native speakers of English. Here is a typical example of these letters:

Downgrading of Old Irish

Madam, - It's a funny sort of a university that refuses to provide teaching of the native language and culture of its own people at undergraduate level.

Could you imagine Oxford University refusing to teach Early and Middle English, or Heidelberg University refusing to teach Old and Middle High German or Oslo University refusing to teach Old Norse. One could go on and on. . .

What is a university? Is UCD a university? - Yours, etc,

A post-colonial interpretation of Irish English

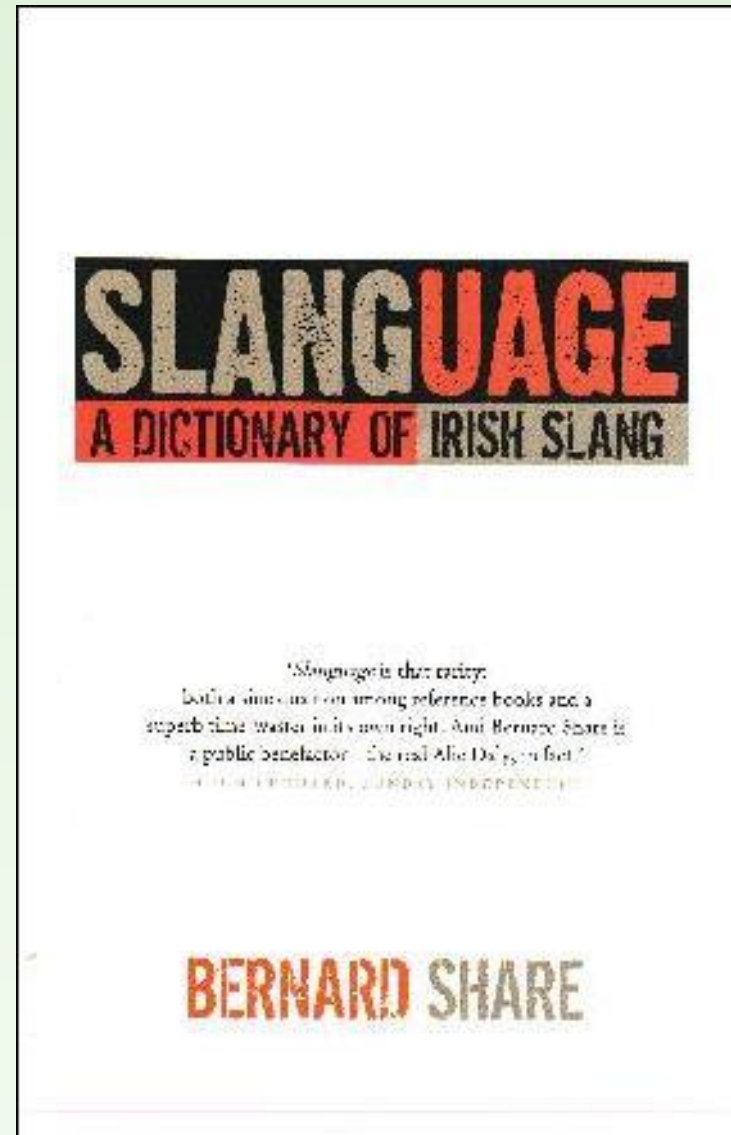
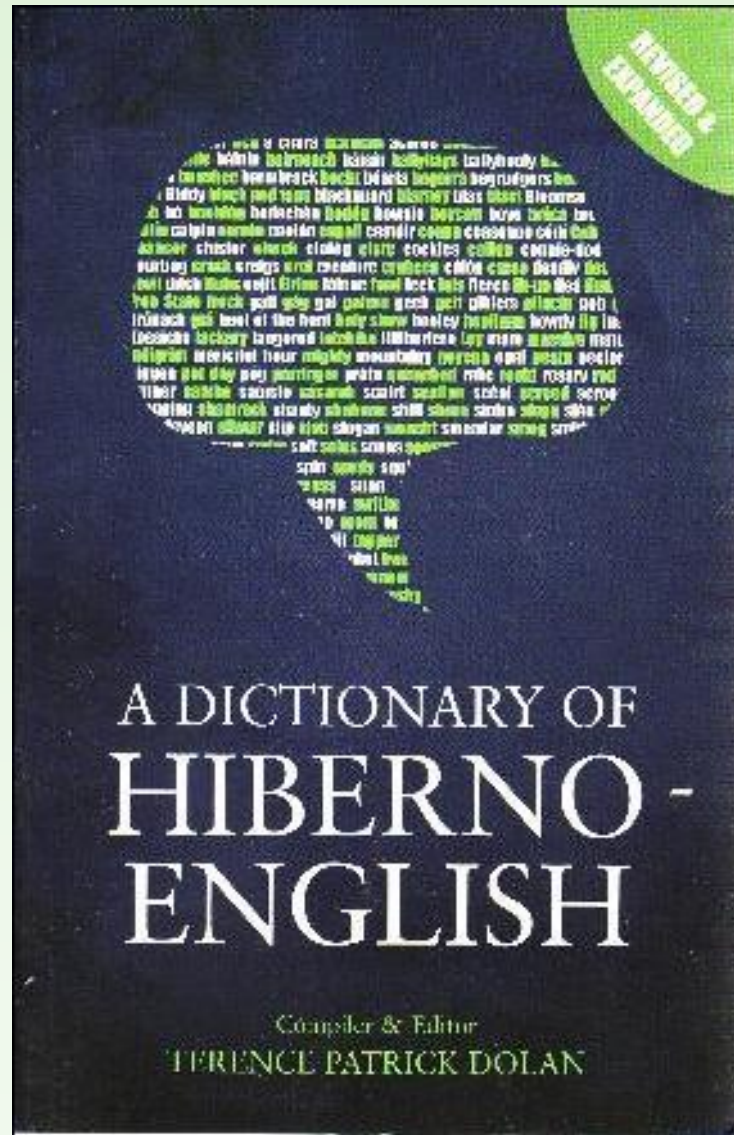
Many scholars posit that post-colonial cultures have *internalised* the belittling attitudes of the colonisers towards them and continue these attitudes long after achieving independence. This would seem to be true for the Irish as well.

For instance, one of the ways the Irish handle their own variety of English is to belittle it, regard it as something exotic, out of the ordinary, not part of our everyday life. For this, they have the term 'Hiberno-English' which is something quizzical, unusual, slightly bizarre. 'Hiberno-English' is not 'Irish English', it is not recognised publicly as a central part of our identity as is American English for the Americans, or British English for the British.

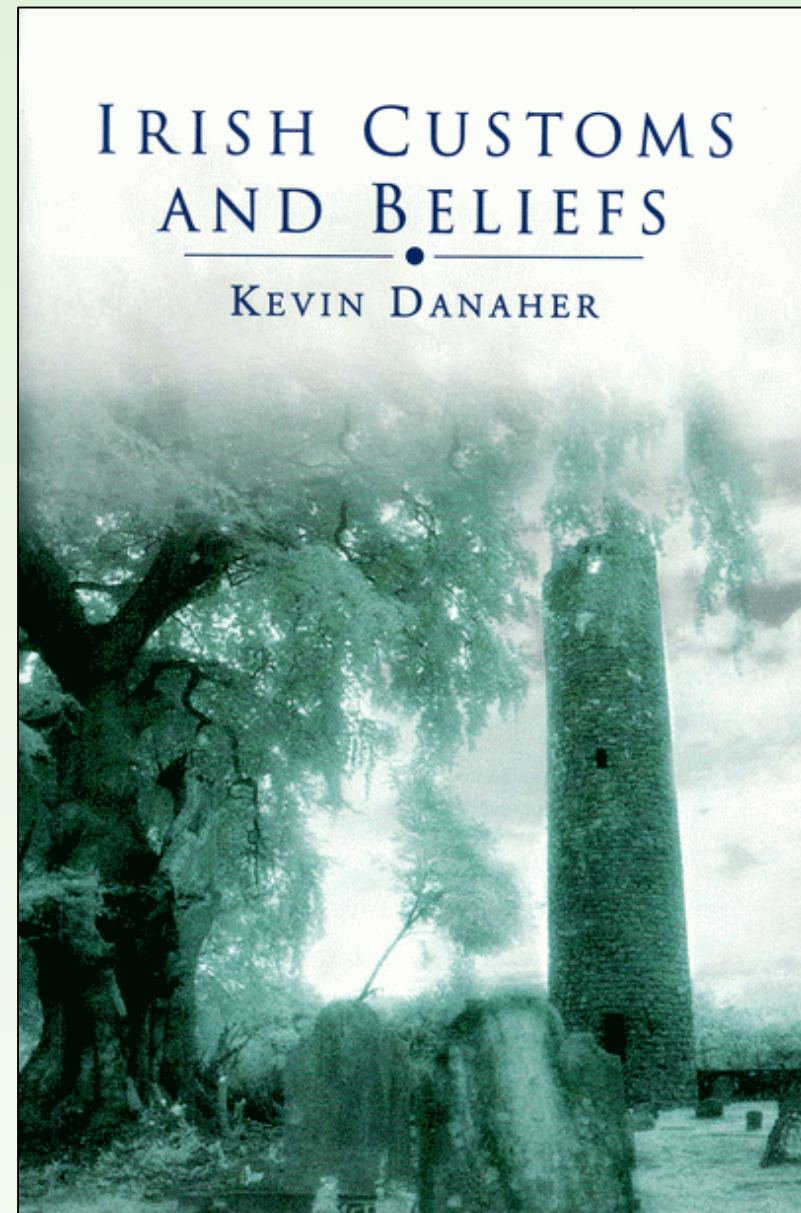
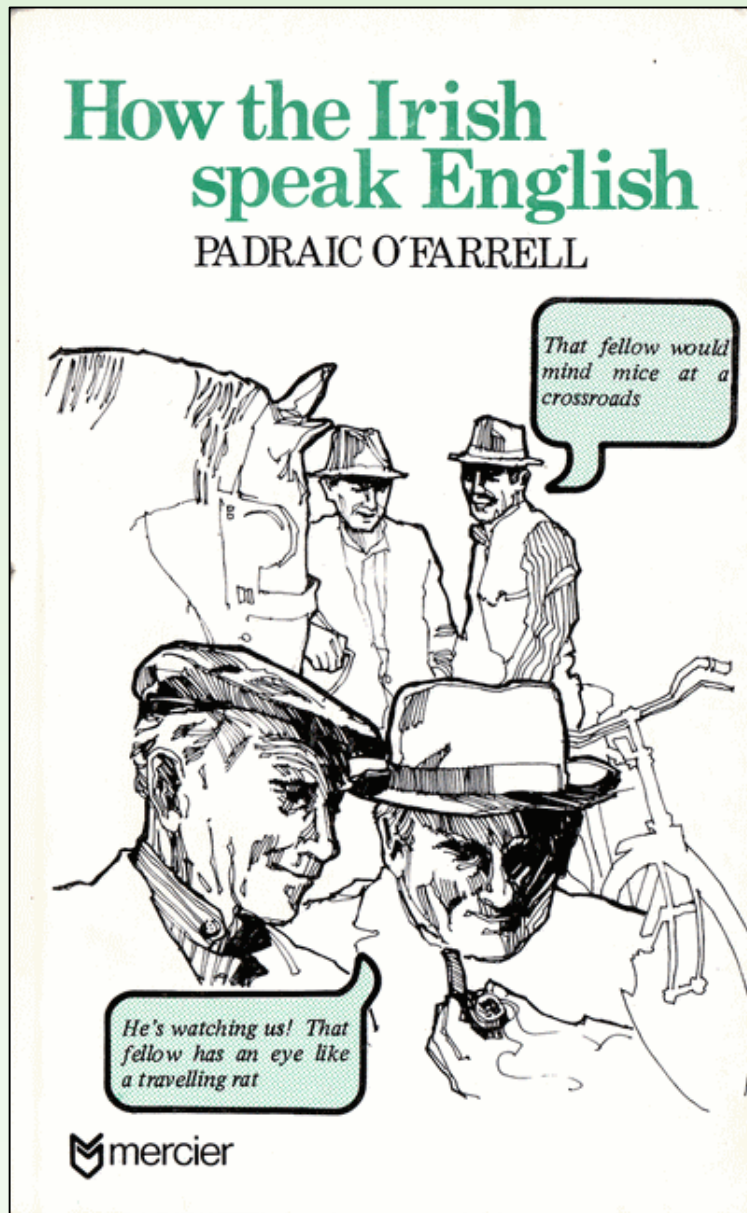
Just consider the following two books on American and British English.

Books about English spoken in Ireland (and published in Ireland)

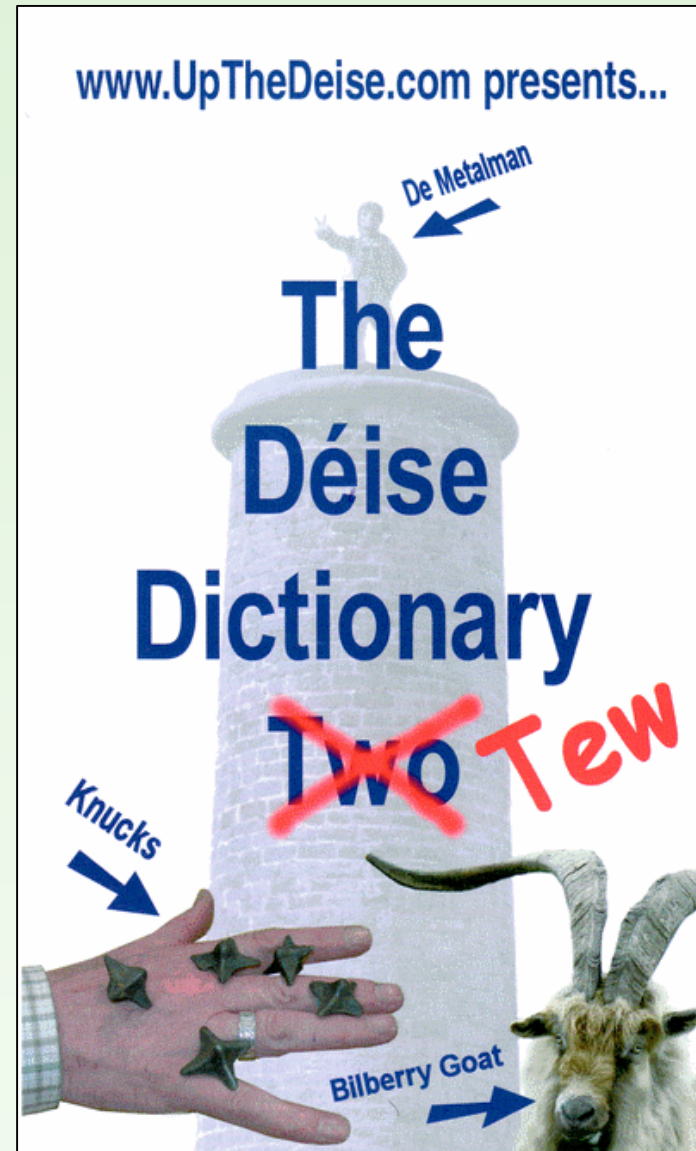
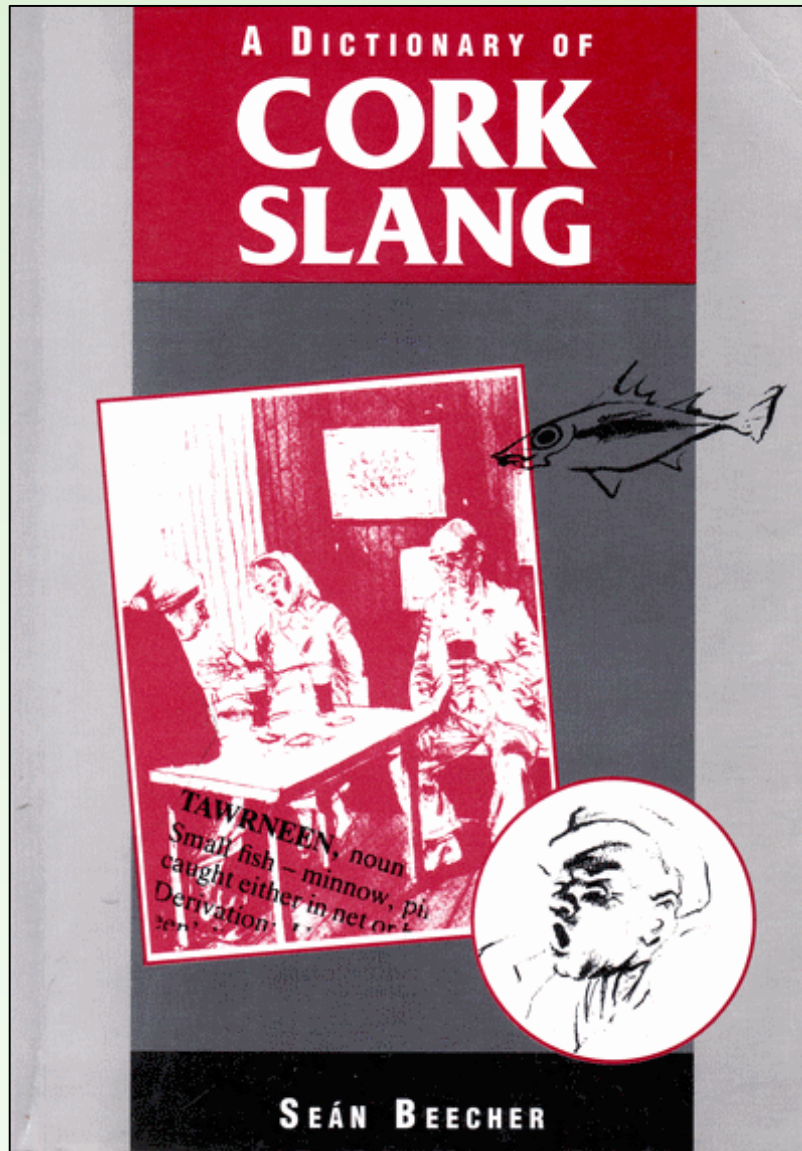
Slang and unconventional language



Works of a folklore nature

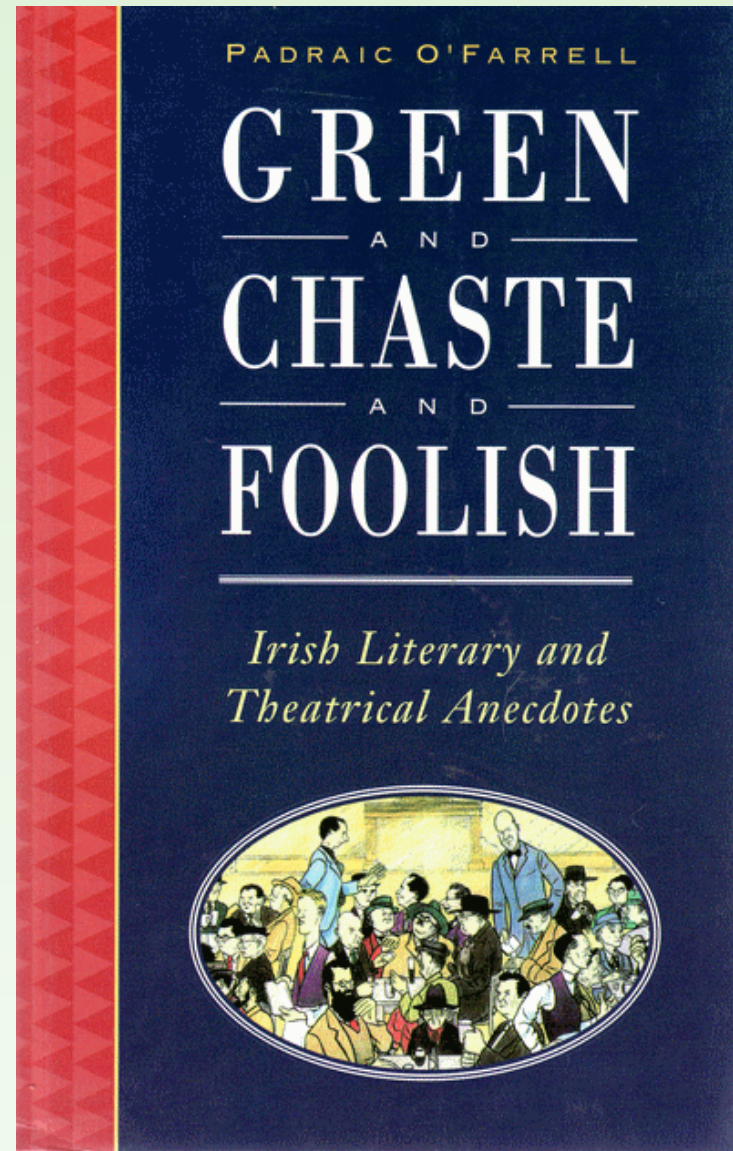
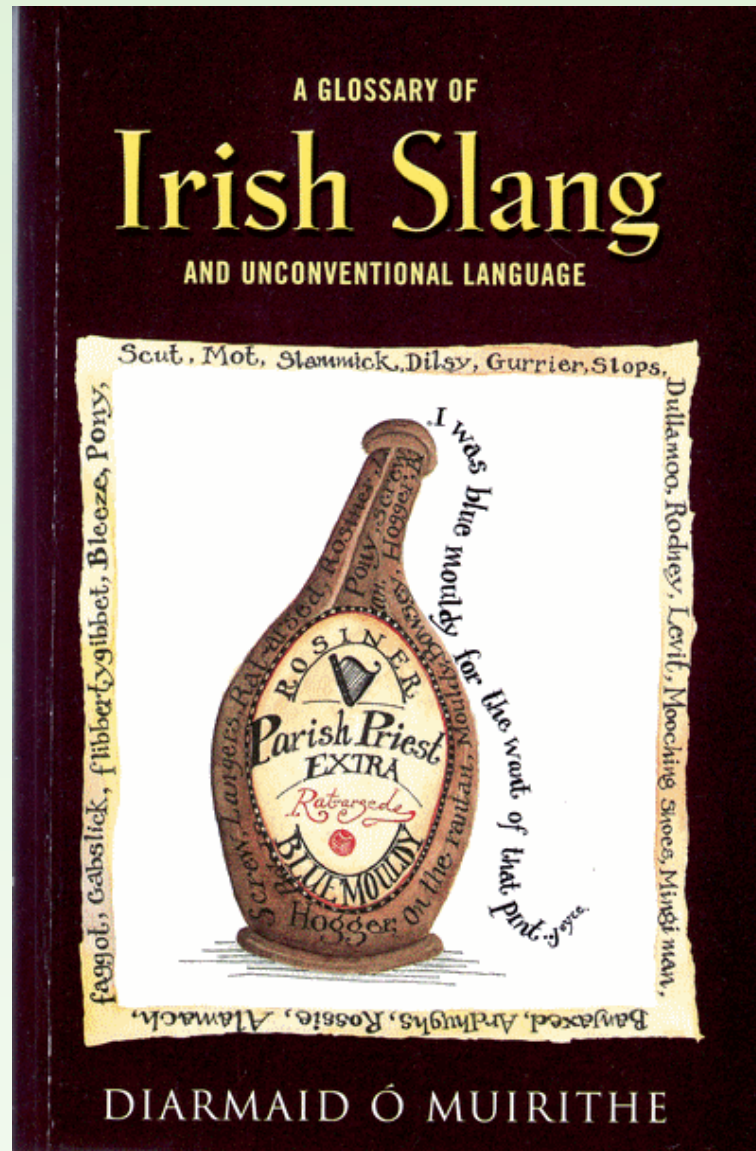


Studies of regional speech

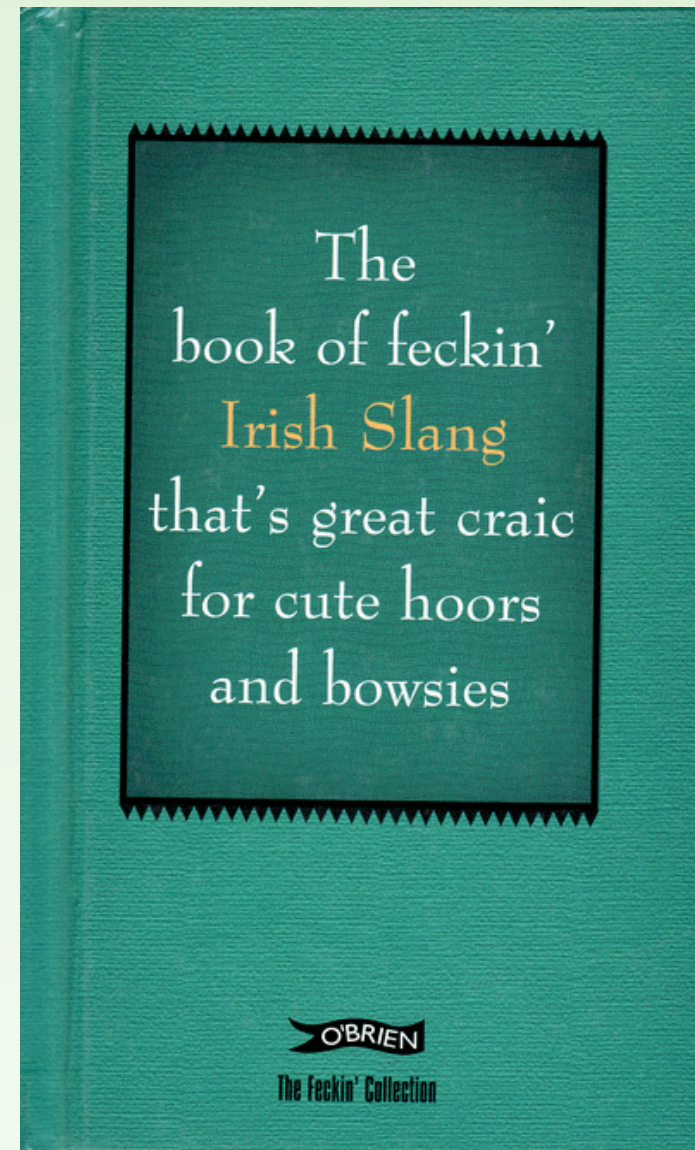
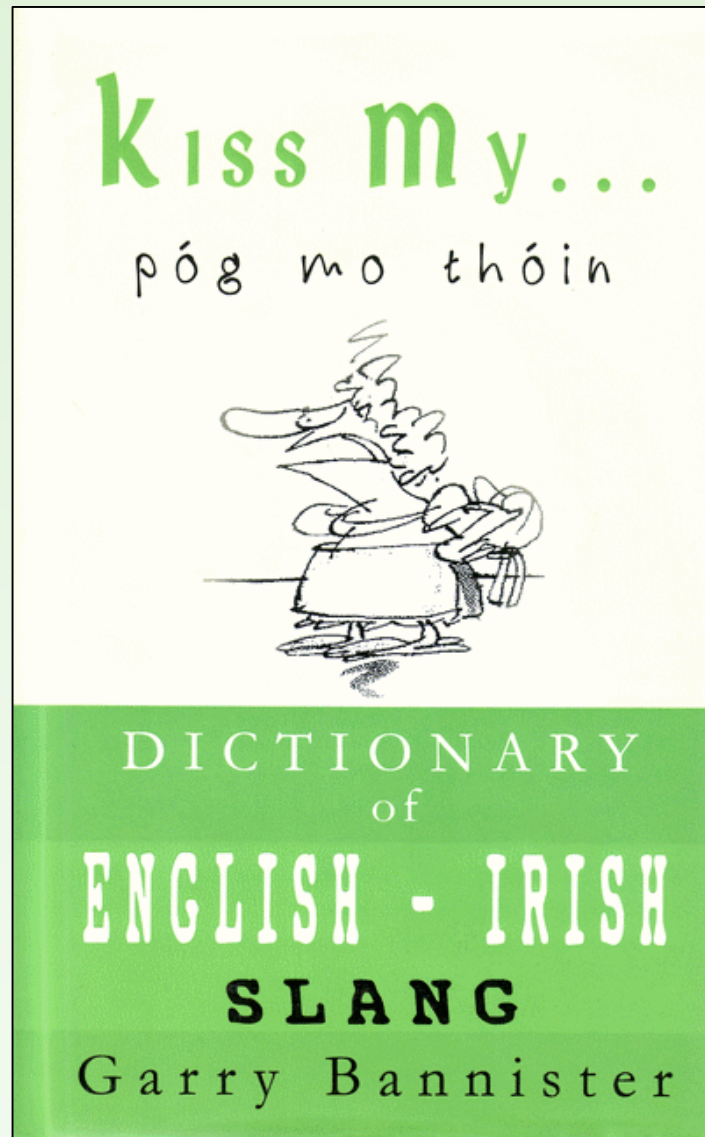


Slants in books on Irish English published in Ireland

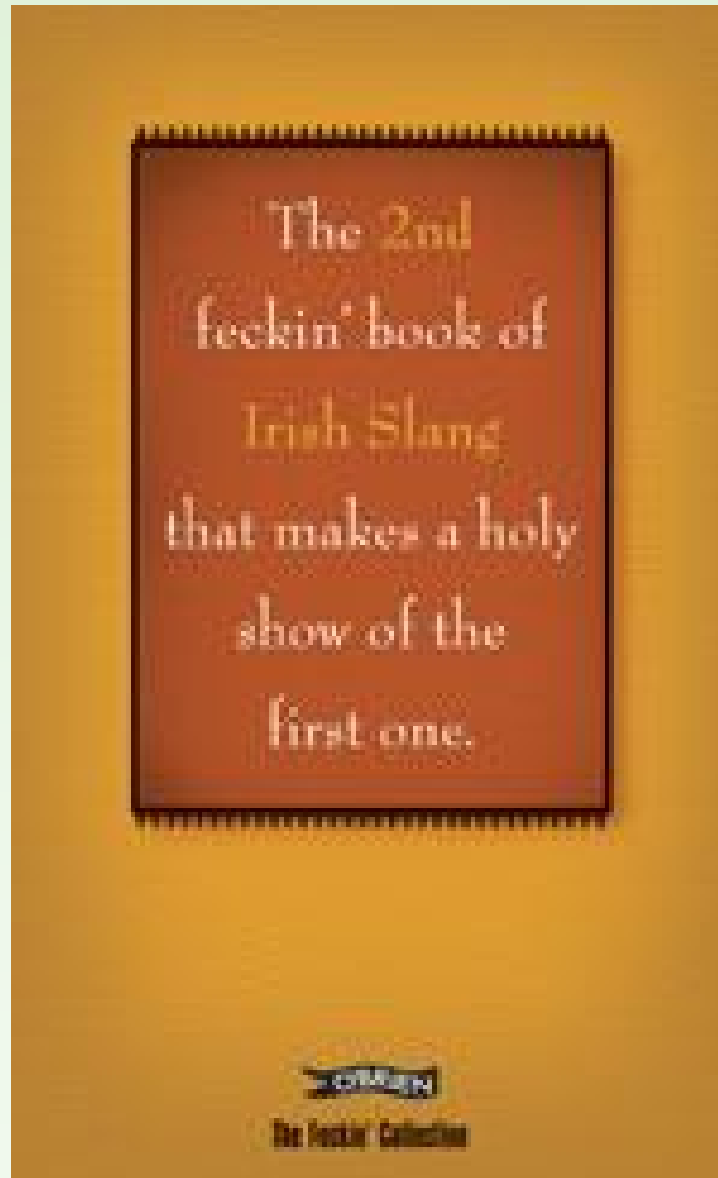
Priest-ridden, god-forsaken Ireland



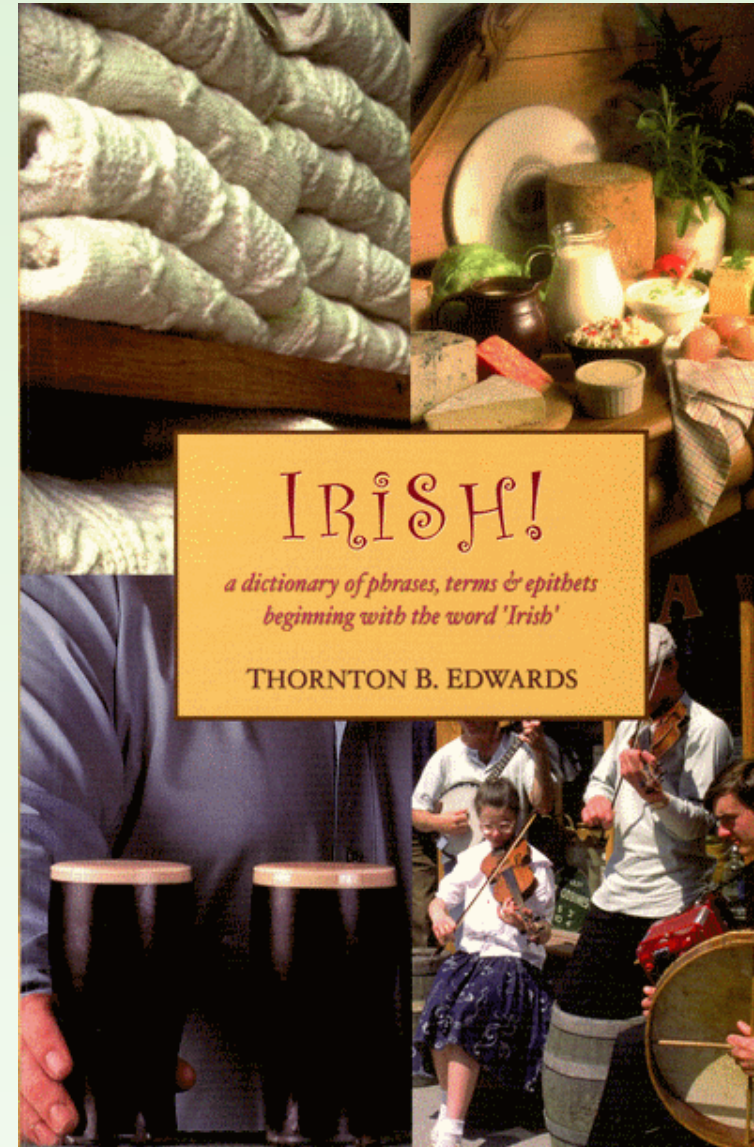
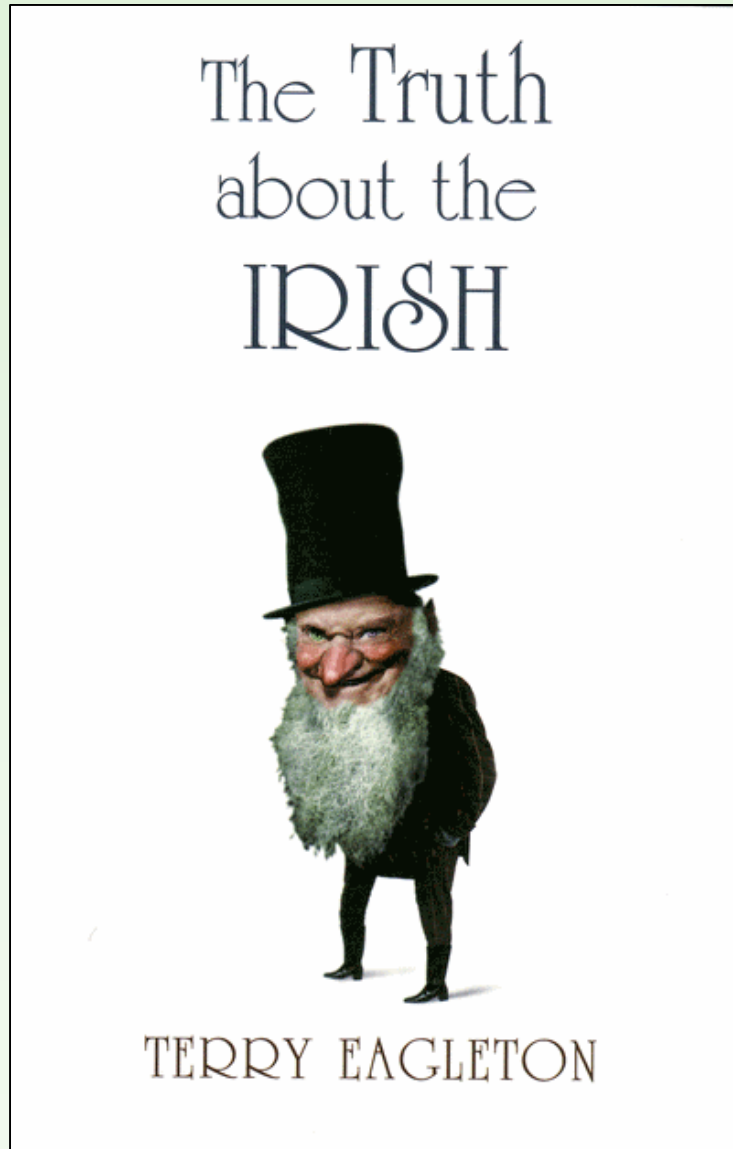
Vulgar rubbish



More vulgar rubbish ...

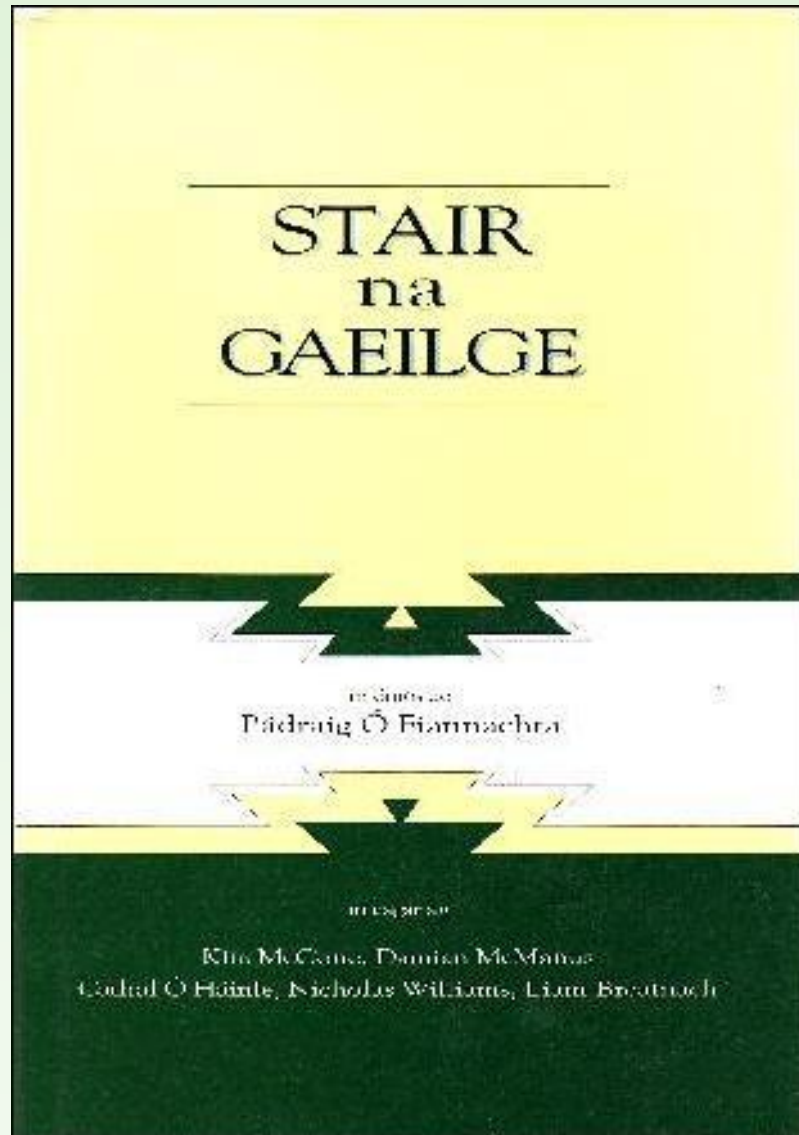


Tied up to the image of the Irish?

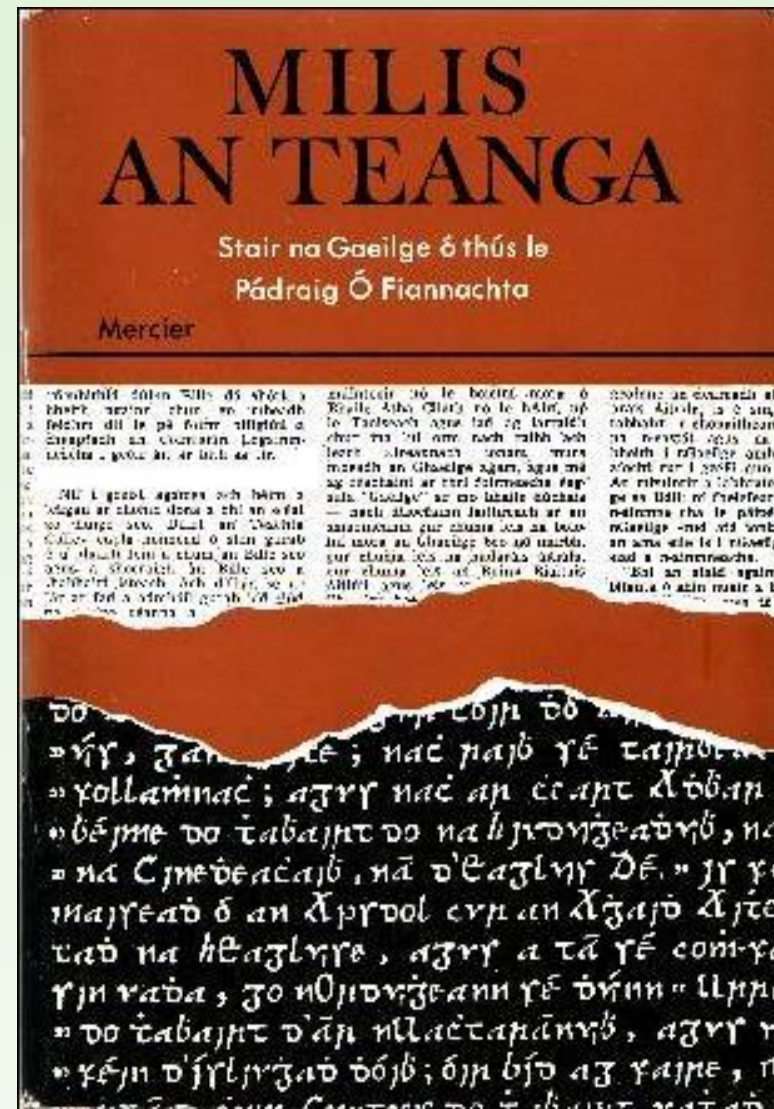


Works on the Irish language

Overviews of Irish

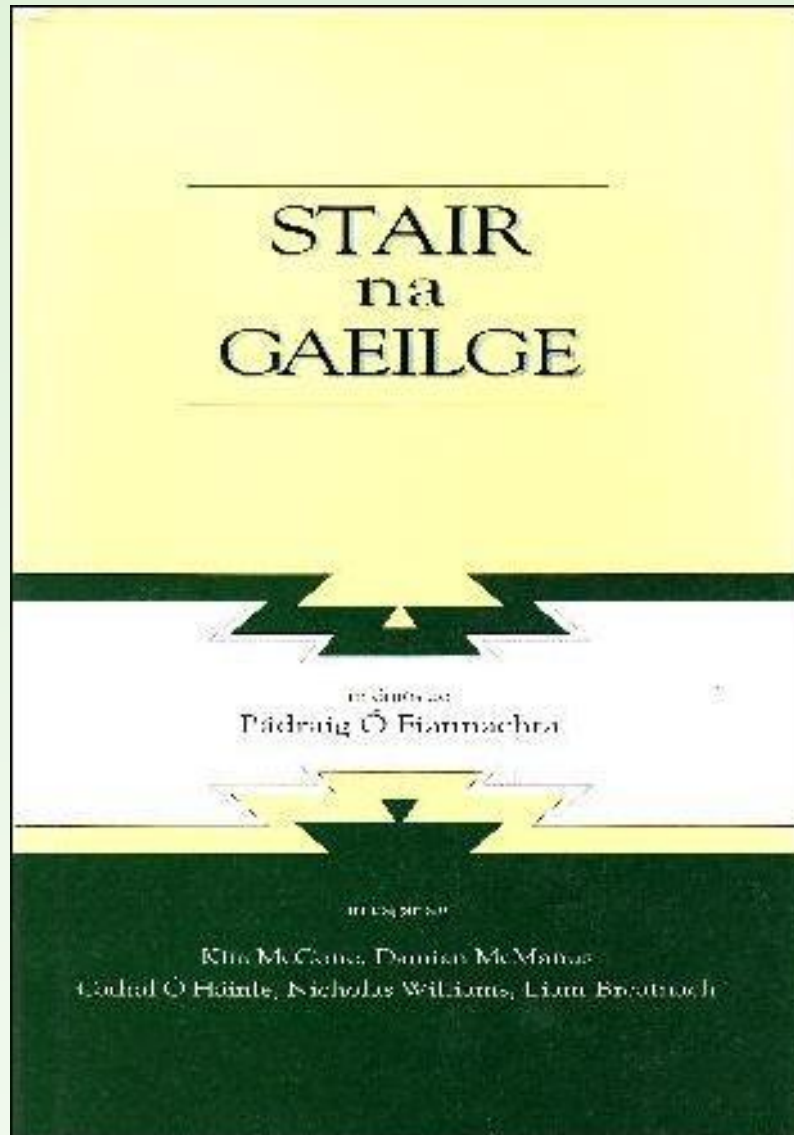


School books on the history of Irish

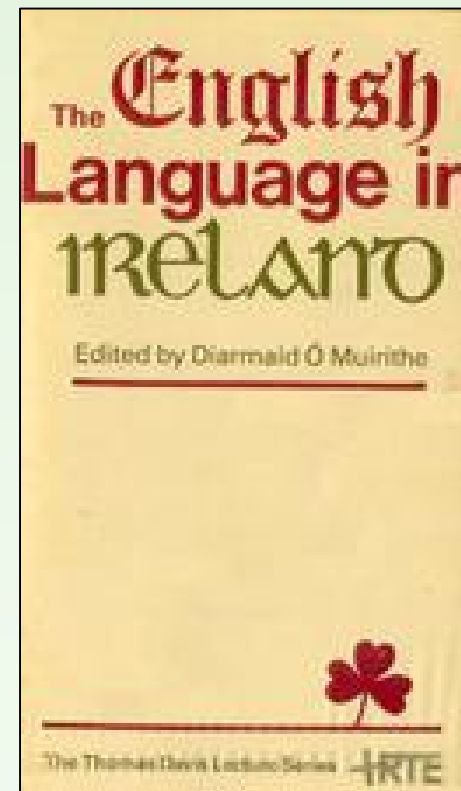


Disparity of scholarly attention paid in Ireland to Irish and to English

History of Irish: 905 pages



149 pages



Academic institutions and official support for Irish in Ireland

Quite apart from the universities of Ireland, which do not give recognition to the English language in Ireland, one could also mention the two non-university academic institutions of the country, the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies and the Royal Academy of Ireland, whose language projects are exclusively about the Irish language.

Language and identity

This issue has an historical and a contemporary dimension. The countries in which there is least tension in this area are those in which there is clear linguistic continuity so that the language people now speak and that of their forebears is the same, e.g. French for French people, German for Germans, etc.

Now consider that we live in the here and now but are linked back in time with the generations who preceded us. So we are grounded and balanced if we show continuity with our forebears and have a contemporary linguistic identity of our own.

Just consider two instances of linguistic minorities which have maintained this balance outside the main geographical area of the language they speak.

Language-maintenance scenarios

Swedish-speaking Finns

Loyalty to one's forebears: ✓

Contemporary identity: ✓

Loyalty maintained to their Swedish forebears by their speaking Swedish

Contemporary identity as Finns is assured by speaking a form of Swedish which is quite different from any variety in Sweden.

Language-maintenance scenarios

French-speaking Canadians

<i>Loyalty to one's forebears: ✓</i>	<i>Contemporary identity: ✓</i>
Loyalty maintained to their French forebears by their speaking French	Contemporary identity as francophone Canadians is assured by speaking a form of French (Québécois) which is quite different from European French.

Now what happens if there is a break in linguistic continuity?

Language-shift scenario: break in linguistic continuity

English-speaking Irish

<i>Loyalty to one's forebears: X</i>	<i>Contemporary identity: ✓</i>
Break with the language of forebears through language shift	Contemporary identity as Irish is assured by their speaking a distinct form of English which is quite different from any variety spoken in England.

The aftermath of shift

The lack of loyalty to our forebears is a source of tension for the Irish. We cling to the notion that Irish is still our “native language” and see it as the carrier of Irish culture. English is the language of the British and was foisted on us.

But by adopting English we got a huge trump card: we became native speakers of the world’s dominant language. Collectively, we now have a bad conscience about abandoning the language of our forebears.

And that is why the English-speaking Irish protest so vehemently about the importance of Irish. That is why there will never be official or academic support for the English language in Ireland. To do that would be to highlight in public the fact we all know but do not want to talk about: we abandoned Irish and adopted English because it gave us, and continues to give us, an enormous advantage in the world.

To put it in a nutshell, we swallowed the linguistic bait which the British held out to us.

Overcoming our uneasy relationship with English

But why can we not have both? Why not give formal recognition to both Irish and English as the two languages of Ireland, the first the heritage language and the latter the contemporary language?

A sign of maturity in our relationship to English would be if we ceased to regard support for English as a rejection of Irish. We should not regard the English language as somehow the possession of the English but just as much ours as theirs, in fact the language “belongs” to anyone who speaks it natively, be they Irish or Scottish or Australian or whatever.

And finally, 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, etc. and we could accept Irish English as the natural expression of our contemporary linguistic identity.

Scholarly studies of Irish English published outside Ireland

ÉTUDES IRLANDAISES
Irish English

VARIÉTÉS ET VARIATIONS / VARIETIES AND VARIATIONS

AUTOMNE 2006 NO 31.2



Diffusion
Septentrion
REVUE IRLANDAISE



Queen's University
Belfast

Language Links

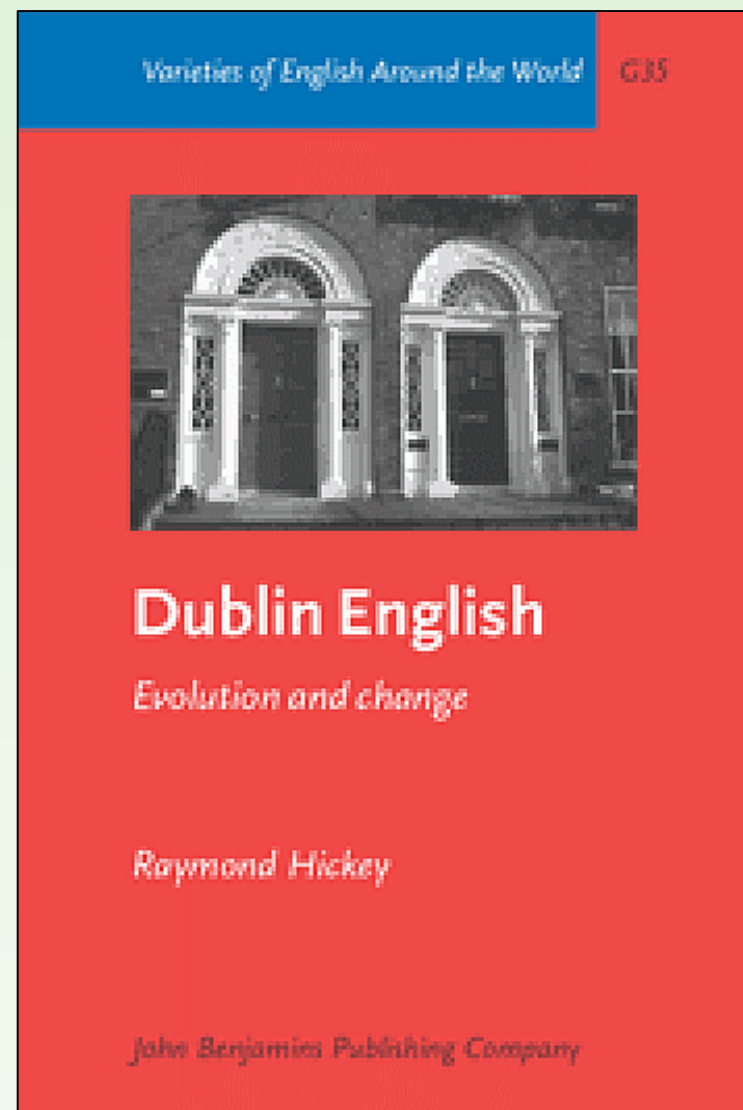
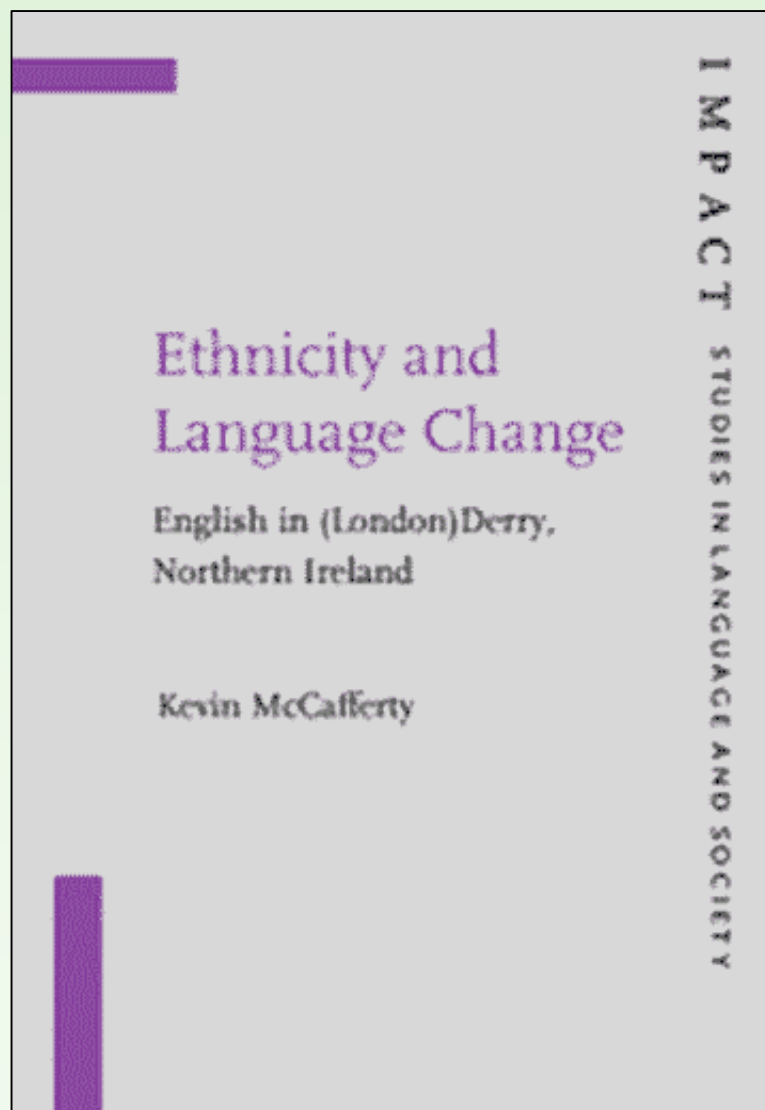
The Languages of Scotland and Ireland

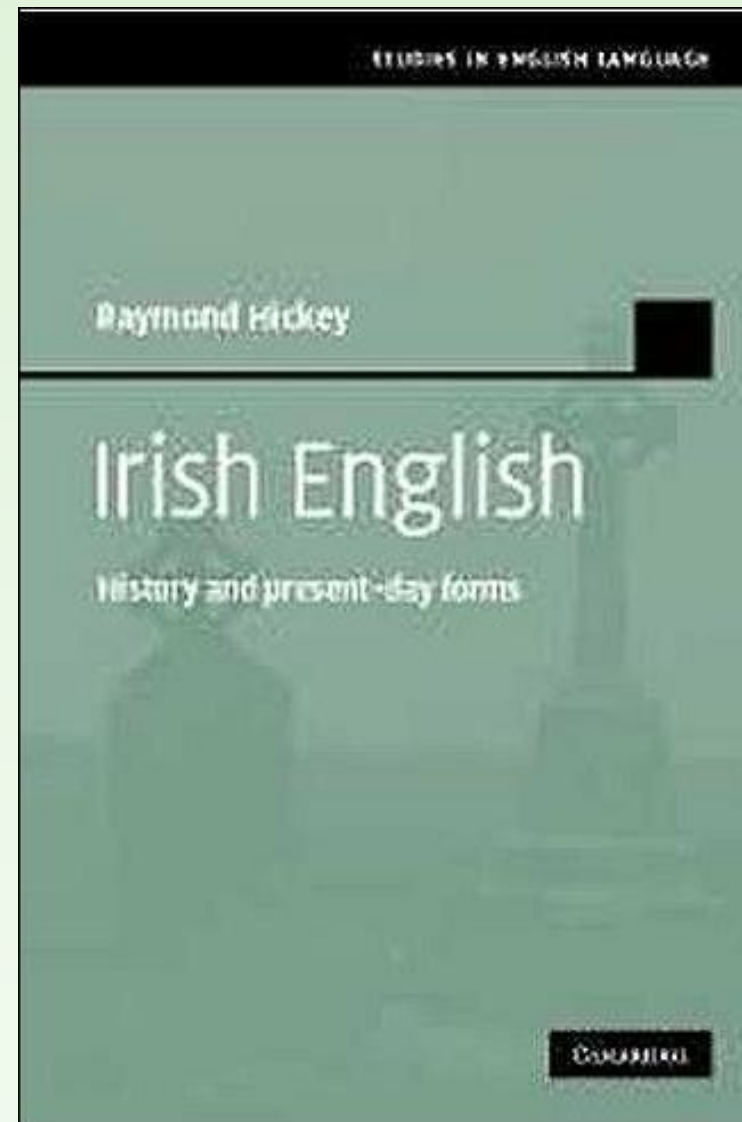


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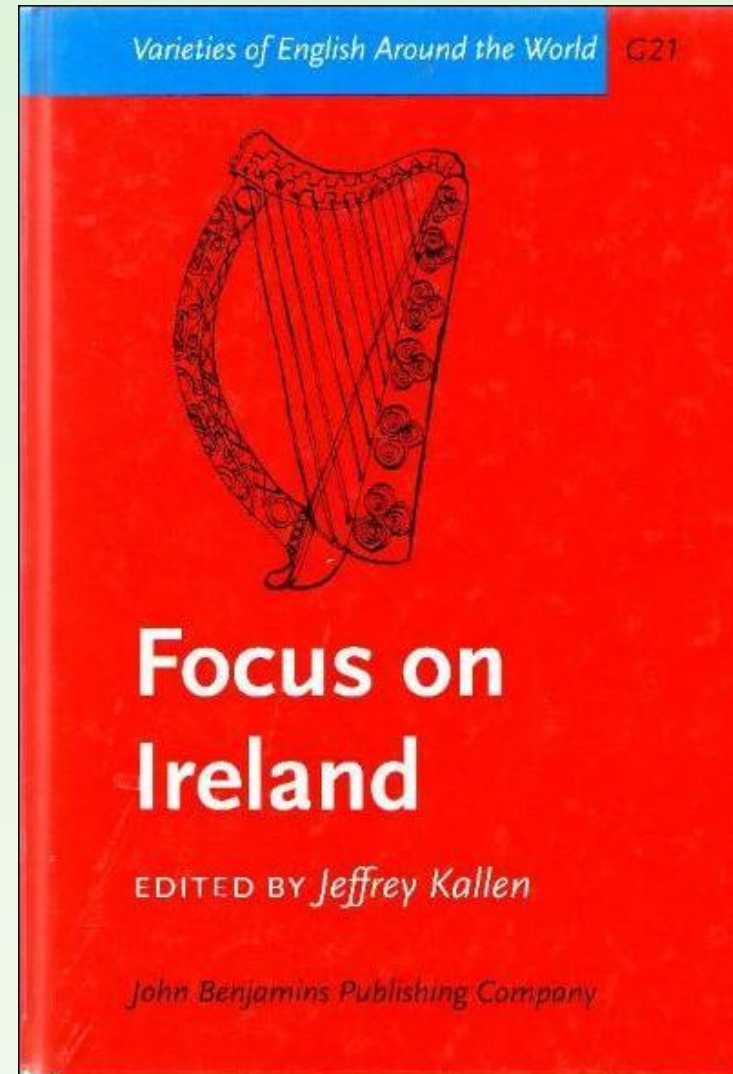
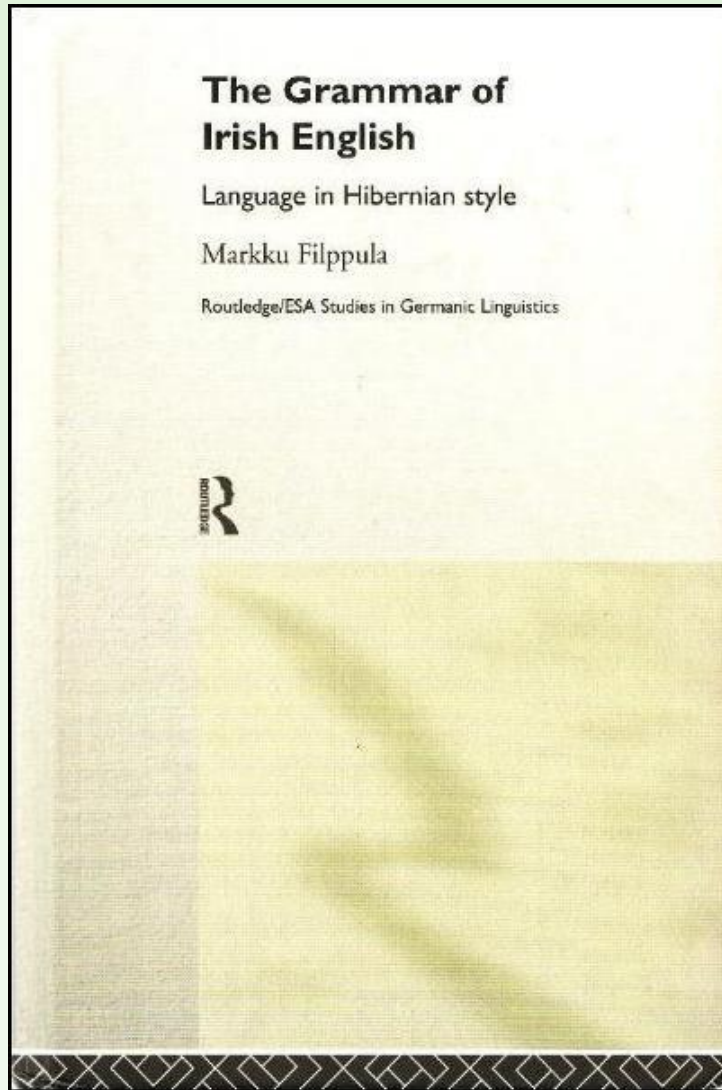
John M Kirk and Dónall P Ó Baoill

Belfast Studies in Language, Culture and Politics 2
www.bslcp.com

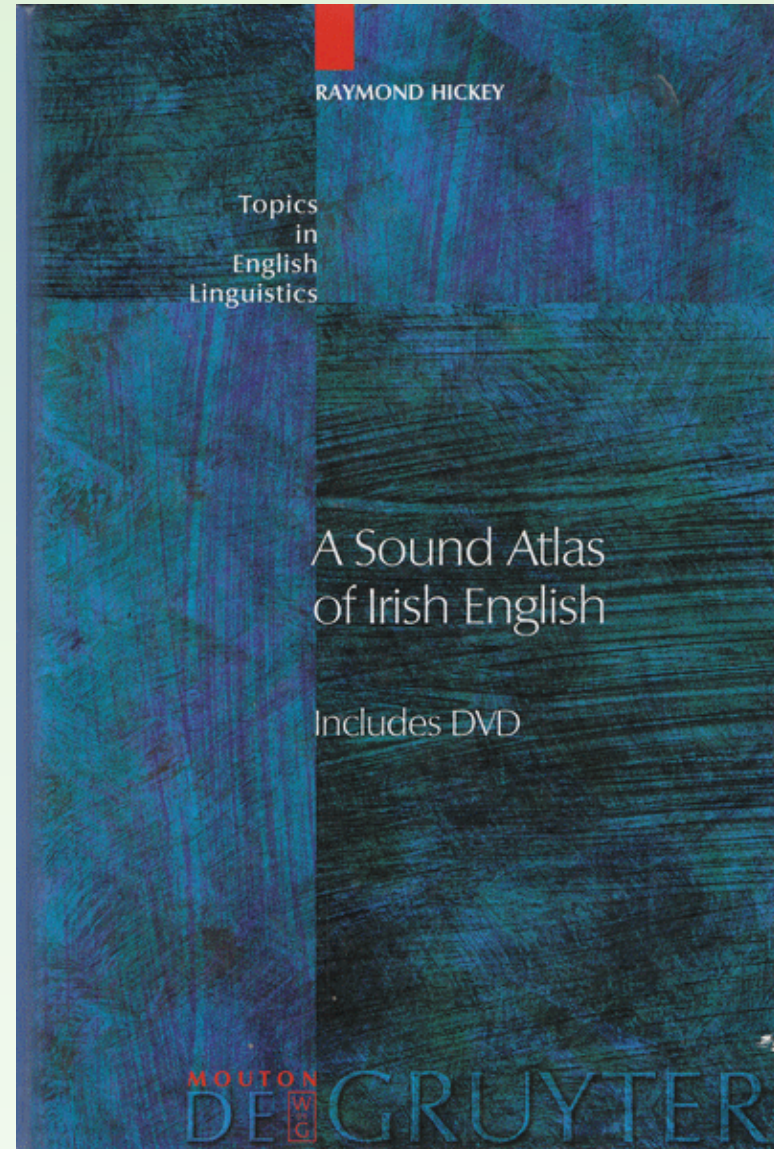
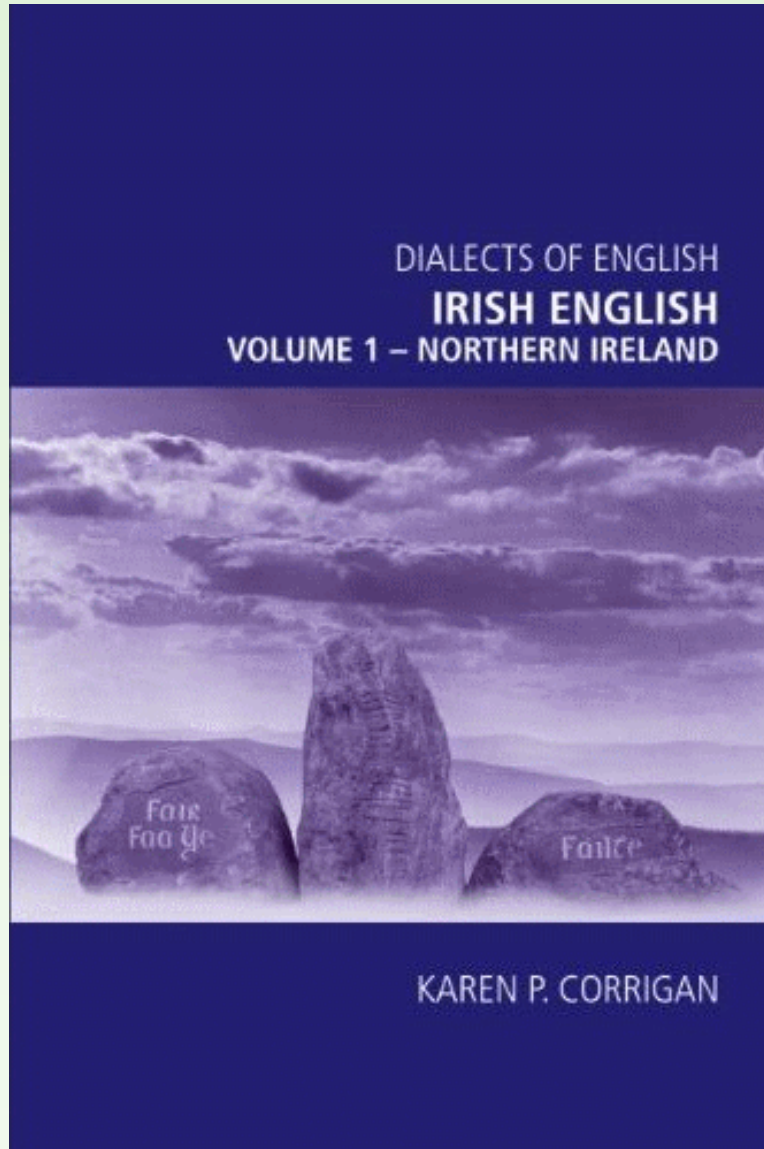




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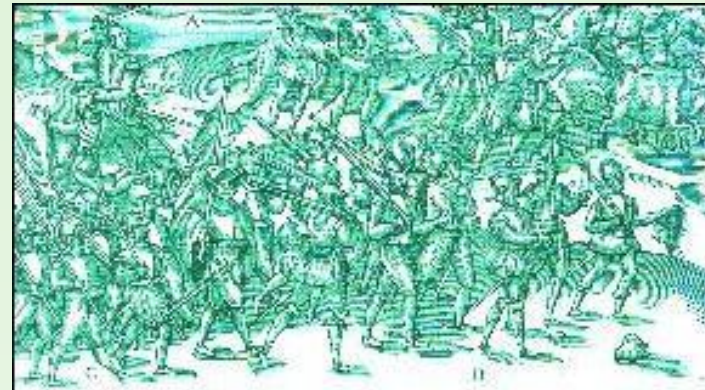


ANNE BARRON
KLAUS P. SCHNEIDER
(Editors)

Trends
in Linguistics

The Pragmatics
of Irish English

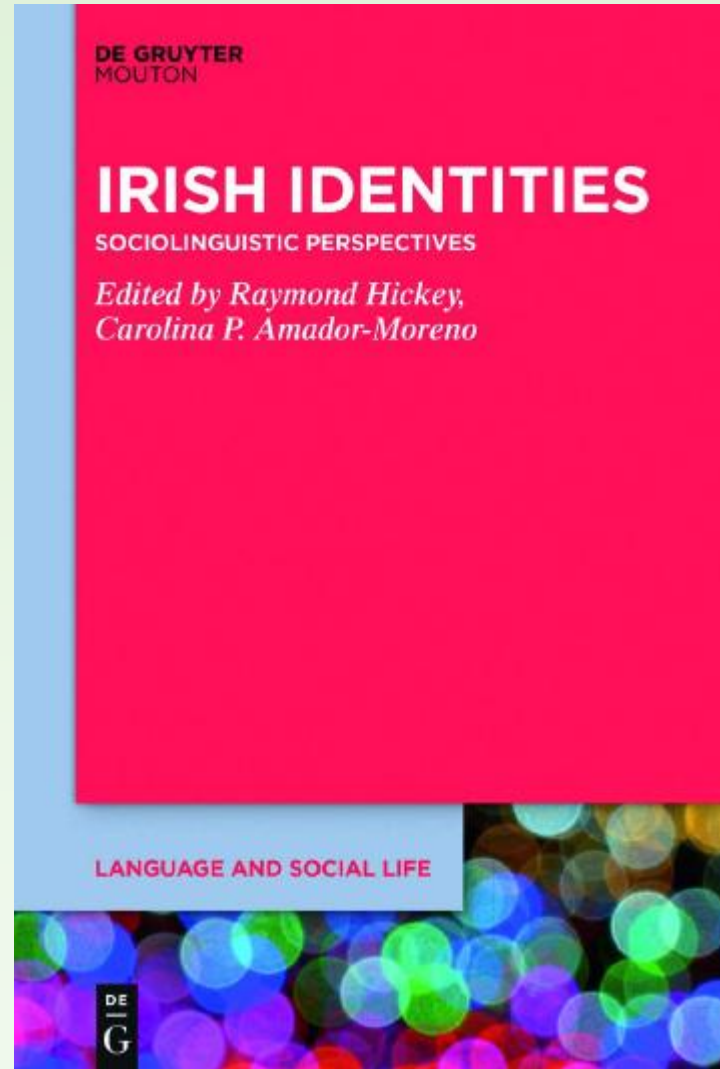
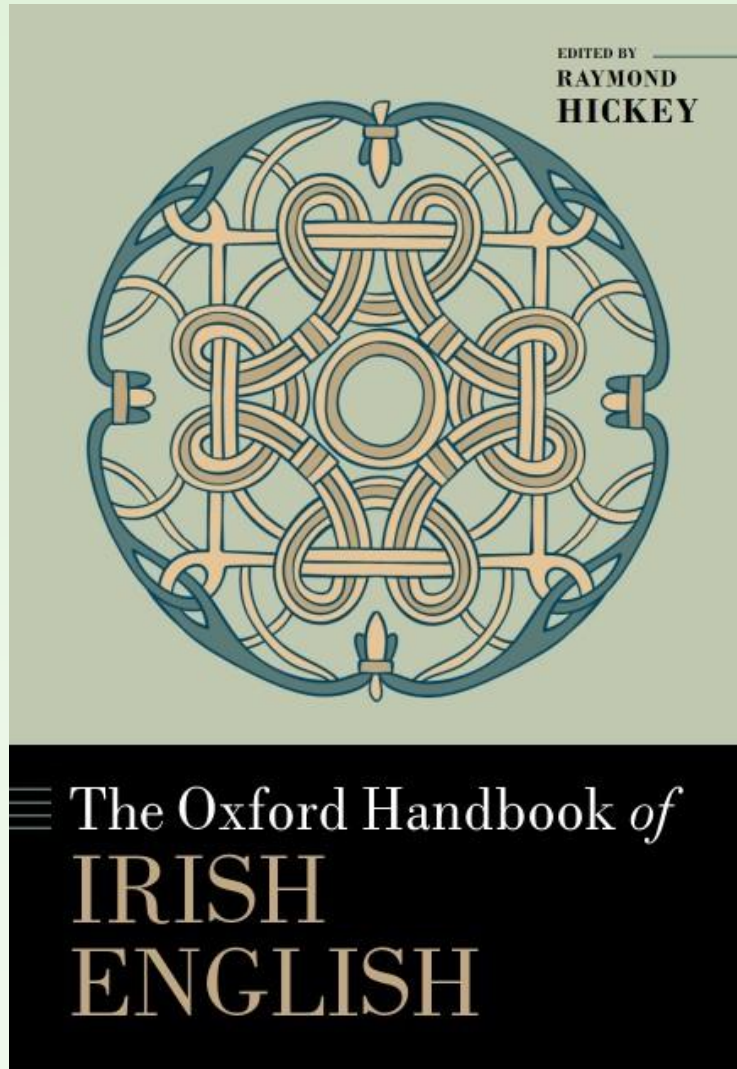
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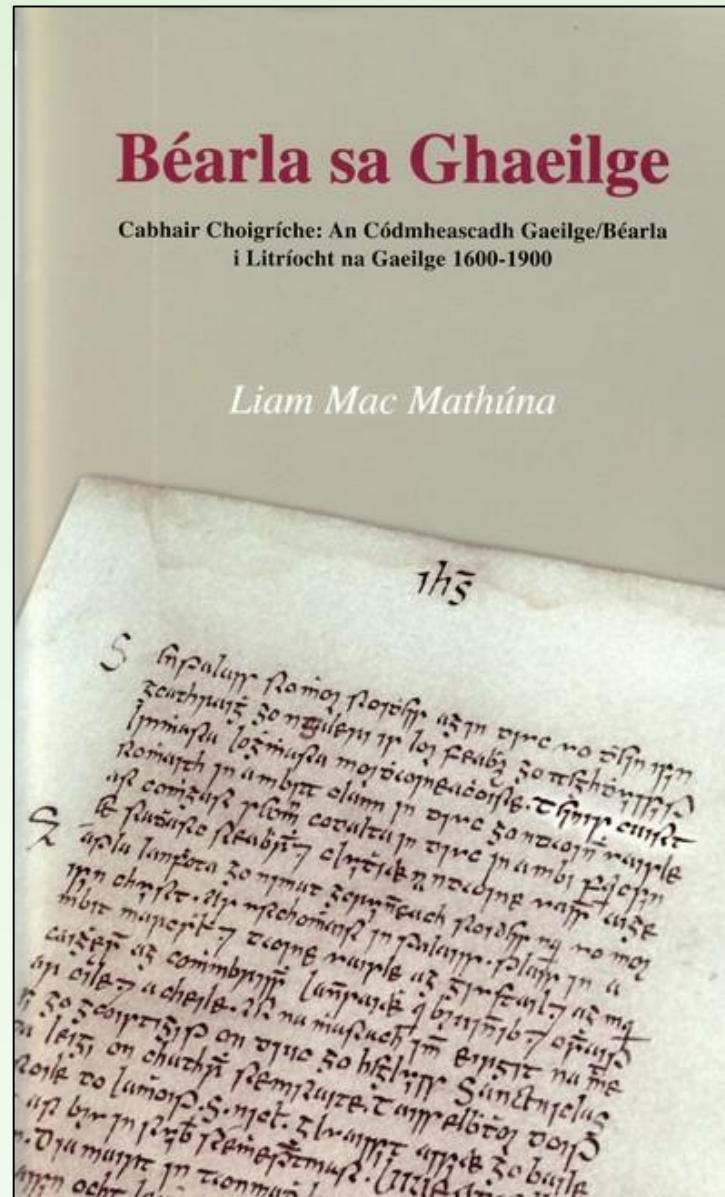
The Politics of
Language in Ireland
1366-1922

A SOURCEBOOK

TONY CROWLEY



Probably the only book published in Ireland about Irish and English together (in this case English in Irish)



Many thanks, I will gladly take any questions you might have.

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