‘Delicious brogue’

Features of 19th century Irish English and their later loss

Raymond Hickey, Essen University

ICAME 27, Helsinki, 26 May 2006

Irish English website: www.uni-essen.de/IERC

What is this presentation about?

The concern of this presentation is with an historical process in which a number of features of Irish English disappeared during the 19th century. Some of these were lost entirely, some were relegated to vernacular varieties, some became conditioned realisations, some were involved in a lexical split. It is hoped that a consideration of feature loss and shift in 19th century Ireland can throw light on general processes of socially motivated language change and so be relevant to developments beyond Ireland which can possibly be re-examined and re-interpreted in the light of the Irish English data.

What is supraregionalisation?

Supraregionalisation is an historical process whereby varieties of a language lose specifically local features and becomes less regionally bound. The upper limits of supraregionalisation depend on a number of external factors, such as the state in which the set of varieties is spoken. If this state was historically a colony of another country, then there may be an (unconscious) wish within this state to maintain some linguistic distinctiveness vis à vis the varieties of the former colonising country.

Supraregionalisation is not motivated by internal change in a local speech community. It is a clear instance of ‘change from above’, imposed by non-vernacular speakers.

Sources of non-standard features

A consideration of the history of English in Ireland shows that there was not only 1) internal change within the English brought to the country as of the late 12th century and 2) influence from Irish during the long period of language shift from the 17th through to the 19th century but also 3) a large degree of superimposition or adoption of more standard forms of English due to considerable exposure to forms of British English. This superimposition has led to layering in Irish English where remnants of former distributions, such as the presence of unshifted ME /eː/ (in the MEAT lexical class) or /ʊ/ (in the STRUT lexical class), have become confined to certain registers and/or are indicative of strongly localised varieties (such as those in Dublin).

Role of supraregional varieties

Superimposition of more standard forms has led in its turn to the process of supraregionalisation. The question, which is of particular linguistic interest, is whether generalisations concerning this process can be made. Supraregionalisation must be carefully distinguished from dialect levelling or the formation of compromise forms. Because a supraregional variety is not locally bound it can never serve the identity function which the vernacular fulfils for members of social networks. For that reason supraregional varieties tend not to show the degree of phonological differentiation present in the vernaculars to which they are related. For instance, in local forms of Irish English, both urban and rural, there is a distinction between short vowels before historic /r/, i.e. the vowels in *term* and *turn* are distinguished: *term* [tɛrm] versus *turn* [tʌrn]. In the supraregional variety, however, a single vowel is found in both cases, namely shwa [ə].

The triggers for supraregionalisation

In Ireland, and presumably in other European countries, the main trigger for supraregionalisation was the introduction of universal schooling and the rise of a native middle class during the 19th century. We have the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829 and shortly afterwards primary schools were introduced and schooling for Catholic children in Ireland became compulsory and universal. The experience of general education for the generation after this increased their acceptance in the higher classes of Irish society (Daly and Dickson eds 1990). A native middle-class came into existence with all that this meant in terms of linguistic prejudice towards vernacular varieties of English. It is thus no coincidence that the disappearance of certain features of Irish English is located in the 19th century.

Replacement of features

These features were replaced by the corresponding mainland British pronunciations. An instance is provided by unshifted ME /aː/ which was a prominent feature up to the 18th century. George Farquhar in his play *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707) has many of the stereotypes of Irish pronunciation, including this one: *Fat sort of plaace* (= [plaːs]) *is dat saam* (= [saːm]) *Ireland?* 'What sort of place is that same Ireland?' Somewhat later, Swift used end-rhymes which indicate that for him words like *placed* and *last* rhymed. At the end of the century, Thomas Sheridan criticised the Irish use of /aː/ in *matron*, *patron*, etc. But by the mid 19th century there are no more references to this. Dion Boucicault, who does not shy away from showing phonetic peculiarities in his dramas, does not indicate unshifted ME /aː/ when writing some eighty years after Sheridan.

Replacement of features applied in a number of cases. For instance, SERVE- lowering appears to have died out during the 19th century and by the beginning of the 20c the feature had all but disappeared.

Table 1 Occurrences for *serve, service, deserve, certain* with SERVE-lowering among 19th and 20th century authors

	Total	Percentage
John and Michael Banim (1820s), one story (6,000 words) *sarve* (2); *desarve* (2); *sart(a)in* (8)	12	0.2%
William Carleton (1830s), one story (20,000 words) *sarve* (13); *sarvice* (3); *desarve* (7); *sartin* (6)	29	0.15%
Boucicault (1860s), three plays (56,500 words) *desarve* (2); *sarvice* (1); *sarched* (1); *sartin* (1)	5	0.01%
Shaw (1904), *John Bull's Other Island* (33,500 words) *sarve* (1)	1	0.00%

Synge (early 1900s, 6 plays), Gregory (1890s, 4 plays), O'Casey (1920s, 4 plays) and Behan (1950s, 2 plays) have no instances of SERVE-lowering.

How supraregionalisation proceeds

Supraregionalisation is a type of language change. It too is subject to the phases of actuation, propagation and conclusion. The actuation is probably triggered by a consciousness of the provinciality of one's own language and the presence of more mainstream varieties, be these extranational or not.

For the propagation phase there are two competing views of how the process takes place. The elimination of local features may be lexically abrupt with the substitution of local feature X by supraregional feature Y in all words in which it occurs. This corresponds to the Neogrammarian view of change. But equally a scenario is conceivable in which a local feature is replaced by a supraregional feature, if not word by word, at least not across the entire lexical board in one fell swoop. Lexical replacement of this kind would correspond to lexical diffusion model of language change.

How supraregionalisation proceeds, 2

An example of this would the following. In the south of Ireland the only remnants of the widespread diphthongisation of historical /oː/ before velar [ɬ] + /d/ are *old* and *bold*. But historically, this pronunciation is recorded for many other words, like *cold*, *hold*, *sold*. The pronunciation would seem to have applied previously to all words which matched the phonetic environment and to have been replaced by the more standard /oː/ or /oʊ/ (RP: /əʊ/) by a process of lexical diffusion. Furthermore, the words with the /aʊ/ pronunciation (with deleted final /-d/) have retreated into more colloquial forms of speech so that now there is a lexical split between *old* /aʊl/, /oːld/ and *bold* /baʊl/, /boːld/: the form /aʊl/ for *old* implies a degree of affection and /baʊl/ for *bold* a sneaking admiration as in *Nothing beats the* /aʊl/ *pint*; *The* /baʊl/ *Charlie is some crook* (the adjectives in these senses only occur attributively).

How supraregionalisation proceeds, 3

The conclusion of supraregionalisation is somewhat difficult to pinpoint. To establish whether a change has been completed it is necessary to recognise the goal, so to speak. But what would the goal be in the Republic of Ireland? Surely not the wholesale adoption of RP. Indeed, the maintenance of differential linguistic features can be equally viewed as a goal vis à vis extranational varieties of English. This view would see the supraregional variety of the south of Ireland as the standard of the Republic of Ireland. An essential part of being a native speaker of Irish English lies in knowing what features are part of the supraregional variety and what are not.

The features of a supraregional variety are not immutable but at any given time speakers know what belongs to the standard: features may be added, such as the raised back vowels or retroflex /r/ of recent Dublin English. Equally, speakers know what does not belong to the supraregional variety: *h*-dropping, or syllable-final deletion of /r/, for instance.

Paths of supraregionalisation

Apart from the question of actuation, propagation and conclusion, the paths which supraregionalisation can take are of linguistic interest. In the Irish English context the following paths are attested.

1) *Entire replacement of vernacular features*

A number of archaic pronunciations are still to be found in early modern documents of Irish English. For instance, the word for *gold* still had the pronunciation *goold* /guːld/ (as did *Rome*) in late 18c Ireland (criticised by Walker 1791). *Onion* /ʌnjən/ had /ɪnjən/, an older pronunciation still found in the late 19c. It was recorded by the Nathan Bailey in 1726 (*Universal Etymological English Dictionary*) but was not typical of mainstream pronunciations as Walker notes (late 18c).

Vowels before /r/ provide further instances where Irish English was out of step with developments in England. *R*-lowering did not occur in words like *door* /duːr/, *floor* /fluːr/, *source* /suːrs/, *course* /kuːrs/, *court* /kuːrt/ which, according to the Appendix to Sheridan's *Grammar* (1781: 137-55), were typical Irish pronunciations. This means that the southern mainland English lowering of back high vowels before /r/ had not occurred in Ireland by the late 18c but was introduced by lexically replacing those pronunciations which conflicted with mainland British usage, probably in the course of the 19c.

2) *Restriction to a specific phonetic environment*

When a local feature is being removed from a supraregional variety then there may be a phase in which the feature goes from being unconditional to conditional. This is recognisable if the conditional realisation is still attested. Consider the case of short E-raising. This is recorded in many environments in historical documents but later texts shows a restriction to pre-nasal environments (as found nowadays in south-west and mid-west varieties of Irish English). Another instance is the metathesis of a vowel and /r/. In the 19c and earlier it is attested in stressed syllables but later only in unstressed ones.

Table 2 Restriction of vernacular features as of 20th century

Feature	*Pre-20th century*	*20th century and later*
/ɛ/ to /ɪ/ raising	unconditional *togither, yis, git*	only before nasals (south-west) *pen* [pɪn], *ten* [tɪn]
Metathesis	in stressed syllables *purty* [ˈpəːti] 'pretty'	only in unstressed syllables *modern* [ˈmɔdrən]

2) *Restriction to a specific phonetic environment, continued*

One explanation for the survival of features as conditional variants is that these are less salient than unconditional ones. If a feature like short E raising is restricted to a pre-nasal position, a preferred environment for this raising, then it is automatic (for the variety which has this raising) and so less salient for speakers. Similarly, if metathesis is confined to unstressed syllables then it is less acoustically prominent and again less salient and hence less likely to be removed by supraregionalisation.

The same argument could be used for the shift in occurrence of S-palatalisation from all syllables positions to just the end of a syllable, i.e. one previously had cases like *shelf* 'self' and *shin* 'sin' but now, if at all, only instances like *best* [bɛʃt], *past* [paːʃt] occur, which in fact involves the further restriction that the syllable be closed by a following stop.

3) *Relegation to colloquial registers*

Although the supraregional form of English is the native style of many speakers in Ireland, they may deliberately manipulate salient features and adopt a vernacular pronunciation, for example for the purpose of caricature or when style-shifting downwards. Simple instances of this are the replacement of *ye* by *youse*, the use of [lɛp] for *leap* [liːp] or the high vowel in *get* as in *Get* [gɪt] *out of here!*, all typical of colloquial registers of Irish English.

In the course of its development, Irish English has evolved a technique for attaining local flavouring. This consists of maintaining two forms of a single lexeme, one a standard British one, adopted during supraregionalisation, and another an archaic or regional pronunciation which differs in connotation from the first. This second usage is always found on a more colloquial level and plays an important role in establishing the profile of vernacular Irish English. The following are some typical examples to illustrate this phenomenon.

3) *Relegation to colloquial registers, continued*

Eejit [ˈiːdʒət] for *idiot* has adopted the sense of a bungling individual rather than an imbecile.

Cratur [ˈkreːtər] shows a survival of the older pronunciation and denotes an object of pity or commiseration. Indeed for the supraregional variety of the south, unraised /eː/ automatically implies a vernacular register. Other words which, colloquially, still show the mid vowel are *Jesus*, *decent*, *tea*, *queer* (represented orthographically as *Jaysus*, *daycent*, *tay*, *quare*). This situation is quite understandable: the replacement of an older pronunciation by a more mainstream one has led to the retreat of the former into a marked style, here one of local Irishness.

Fellow has final /oʊ, oː/ in the supraregional standard. But a reduction of the final vowel to /ə/ is historically attested in Irish English as in *yellow* [jɛlə]. There is now a lexical split with the first word such that the pronunciation [fɛlə] means something like ‘young man, potential boyfriend’ in colloquial Irish English.

Implicational scale for vernacular features

Supraregionalisation has meant that grammatical features have also been relegated to the vernacular. These features can be arranged as an implicational scale in which the occurrence of some features implies the occurrence of others. In the following this is shown in an ascending order of standardness in Irish English.

Implicational scale for syntactic features of Irish English

1	habitual (*do(es) be*) > (*She does be worrying about the children*)
2	immediate perfective (*after* V-*ing*) > (*He is after breaking the glass*)
3	resultative perfective (O + PP word order) (*They have the work done*)

Hypercorrection

In the Ireland of the 18c, and probably the 19c, when the features discussed above were not confined to specific styles, hypercorrection was common. Both Sheridan (1781) and Walker (1791) remark on the fact that the Irish frequently say *greet*, *beer*, *sweer*, unaware that these words had /e:/ rather than /i:/, the normal realisation of the vowel in words like *tea*, *sea*, *please*, in British English.

Sheridan also has /ʌ/ in the words *pudding* and *cushion*. This could be explained, not only as hypercorrection, vis à vis mainstream English but also with regard to local Dublin English which now, and certainly then, had /ʊ/ in these and all words with EME /ʊ/. Indeed, according to Sheridan, /ʌ/ was found in *foot*, *bull*, *bush*, *push*, *pull, pulpit*, all but the last of which have /ʊ/ in (southern) Irish English today.

Hypercorrection appears to die away with supraregionalisation. This stands to reason: if local features are replaced by more standard ones, then later generations master the correct distribution of sounds immediately.

Data sources used for this investigation

A Corpus of Irish English (some 80 texts covering the history of Irish English from the late Middle Ages to the early 20th century). Included in Raymond Hickey 2003. *Corpus Presenter. Software for Language Analysis.* John Benjamins: Amsterdam. See also the following website: www.uni-due.de/CP

Novels from early 19th century Irish writers, notably Maria Edgeworth, Gerald Griffin, John and Michael Banim as well as William Carleton.

A series of emigrant letters from the first half of the 19th century. These are in the archives of the National Library of Ireland, Kildare Street, Dublin and a selection of them has been collected by myself as a corpus for the purpose of linguistic analysis.

References

Daly, Mary and David Dickson (eds) 1990. *The Origins of Popular Literacy in Ireland: Language Change and Educational Development 1700-1920.* Dublin: Anna Livia.

Hickey, Raymond 2005. *Dublin English. Evolution and Change.* John Benjamins: Amsterdam.

Hickey, Raymond 2007. *Irish English. History and Present-Day Forms.* Cambridge: University Press.

Hickey, Raymond (ed.) forthcoming. *Ideology and Change in Late Modern English*.

Milroy, James 1981. *Regional Accents of English: Belfast*. Belfast: Blackstaff.

Sheridan, Thomas 1781. *A Rhetorical Grammar of the English Language Calculated Solely for the Purpose of Teaching Propriety of Pronunciation and Justness of Delivery, in that Tongue*. Dublin: Price.

Walker, John 1791. *A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language*. Menston: The Scolar Press.

Irish English website: www.uni-essen.de/IERC