IRISH DIALECT CLASSIFICATION

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Abstract

The Irish language is among the oldest vernaculars spoken in Europe, but Ireland's history and the language shift to English led to the almost complete demise of traditional Irish in Ireland. The current dialects areas – South, West and North – are the remnants of a much greater geographical distribution of Irish throughout the country. The major differences in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, which can be observed in Irish today, probably go back to the early classical period. The standard dialect survey of Irish is Heinrich Wagner's comprehensive atlas (1958-1964); there are also many individual studies which document the language in the early twentieth century. Southern Irish refers to a few areas in the southern province of Munster (Co. Kerry, Co. Waterford), Western Irish refers to forms of Irish spoken west of Galway and on the Aran Islands and Northern Irish is spoken in pockets of West Ulster (Co. Donegal).

Keywords: dialect classification, documentation, distinctive features, Irish

Name: an Ghaeilge   **Language code:** ISO 639-1: ga, ISO 639-2: gle

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CLASSIFICACIONS DIALECTALS DE l'IRLANDÈS

Resum

La llengua irlandesa és una de les llengües vernacles més antigues d'Europa, però la història d'Irlanda i el canvi lingüístic a l'anglès van provocar la desaparició gairebé completa de l'irlandès tradicional a Irlanda. Les àrees dialectals actuals (sud, oest i nord) són les restes d'una distribució geogràfica molt més gran de l'irlandès en tot el país. Les principals diferències de pronunciació, gramàtica i vocabulari, que es poden observar en l'irlandès actual, probablement es remunten al període clàssic primerenc. L'enquesta dialectal estàndard de l'irlandès és l'atles complet d'Heinrich Wagner (1958-1964); també hi ha molts estudis individuals que documenten la llengua a començament del segle XX. L'irlandès del sud fa referència a algunes zones de la província meridional de Munster (comtat de Kerry, comtat de Waterford), l'irlandès occidental es refereix a les formes d'irlandès parlat a l'oest de Galway i a les illes Aran i l'irlandès del nord es parla a la zona de l'Ulster occidental (comtat de Donegal).

Paraules clau: classificació dialectal, documentació, trets distintius, irlandès

RANGÚ CANÚINTÍ NA GAEILGE

Teibí

Is teanga fíorstairiúil í an Ghaeilge agus ceann de na teangacha labhraithe is aosta san Eoraip. Mar gheall ar an t-aistriú teangan a thit i rith na staire chuaigh an Ghaeilge thraidisiúnta in éag beagnach go hiomlán. Níl sna réigiúin canúna nua-aoiseacha – sa ndeisceart, san iarthar agus sa dtuaisceart – ach iarsmaí de roinn níos forleithne sa dtír ar fad. Is as an aois chlasaiceach a bhaineann na príomhdhifríochtaí idir na nuachanúintí i dtaobh fhoghraíochta, ghramadaí agus fhoclóra. Is í an phríomhobair taighde sna canúintí ná an mór-atlas a theaglamaigh agus a d'fhoilsigh Heinrich Wagner idir 1958 agus 1964 ina aice lena staidéair aonánaigh a rinne taifead ar na canúintí i rith na fichiú haoise. Gaeilge na Mumhan a tugtar ar canúintí i gcontae Port Láirge agus Ciarraí, Gaeilge an Iarthair ar canúintí i gcontae na Gaillimhe agus ar Oileáin Árann, agus Gaeilge Tír Chonaill ar canúintí i gcontae nDún na Gall.

Eochairfhocail: aicmiú canúna, doiciméadú, saintréithe fóinéimeacha, an Ghaeilge

1. Introduction

The Irish language is among the oldest vernaculars in Europe, documented from the seventh century onwards. The language belongs to the Q-branch of the Celtic languages, along with Manx and Scottish Gaelic, both of which are historically derived from Irish. More distant are the P-branch languages, Welsh, Cornish and Breton, which did not share certain key features in the early development of the insular Celtic languages, notably the retention of the velar stop /k$^{(w)}$/, inherited from Indo-European precursors. This sound was shifted to /p/ in the Brythonic languages in the southern part of Britain, of which Welsh is the largest remaining survivor. Key words in

distinguishing the two modern branches are, for instance, Irish *ceann* 'head' and *mac* 'son' with a velar stop, etymologically related to Welsh *pen* and *mab* with a labial stop respectively.

Contact has been a constant feature of language history in Ireland. Already with Christianisation in the fifth century one finds Latin borrowings into Irish from the ecclesiastical sphere, e.g. *lebor* /lʲevər/, later /lʲaur/, from *liber* 'book', *sacart* /sagart/ from *sacerdos* 'priest'. In the late eighth century, the Vikings arrived in Ireland and began a long period of influence from Old Norse on the Irish language e.g. *margadh* /margað/ later /marəgə/ from *markaðr* 'market', *fuinneog* /fɪnʲoːg/ from *vindauga* 'window'. With the arrival of the Normans in Ireland in the late twelfth century a period of French loans into Irish was initiated, cf. bagún from *bacun* 'bacon' or *buidéal* from *botel* 'bottle'. These loans form a considerable part of Irish vocabulary today, the influence on the language being comparable with that of Anglo-Norman on English in the Middle English period, consider such common words as *páiste* 'child' from *page*, *garsún* 'boy' from *garçon*. The linguistic effects of contact with Norman were greatest in the south of Ireland, but many loans later spread to the other dialects and are now found in all regions, e.g. *coláiste* 'college' or *séipéal* 'chapel'.

1.1 The decline of Irish

The fortunes of the Irish language changed considerably in the late sixteenth century when the native lords of Ulster were defeated by the English. This led to their departure from Ireland (in the Flight of the Earls from Lough Swilly in 1607) and to the widespread settlement of Ulster, chiefly by Lowland Scots encouraged to do this by their compatriot, King James I of England (1603-1625).

The political vacuum caused by the Flight of the Earls was filled by the Scottish and English in Ulster. The system of plantation which was promoted by the English government of the time (Dudley Edwards, 2005 [1973]: 158-161) meant that the better lands of Ulster and much of the south of Ireland was reserved for English-speaking settlers and the Irish were banished to the poorer parts of the country, such as the area

of the Sperrin Mountains in Central Tyrone where Irish survived into the twentieth century (see maps below).

When the old Gaelic order came to an end at the beginning of the seventeenth century the system of patronage for Irish poets and scholars also declined rapidly. With that the use of a classical standard of written Irish declined as well and in the course of this century traces of dialects appear more and more in Irish documents (Williams, 1994: 447). It is certain that Irish had already become dialectally diverse but because of the nature of the textual record, features of the dialects did not appear in writing.

Map 1. Counties of Ireland (CC0)

The exclusion of Irish from public life resulted from the Penal Laws, a collective term for anti-Catholic, i.e., anti-Irish, legislation which greatly diminished the standing of the language and its speakers in Irish society. With further developments of the seventeenth century, notably the campaigns and expulsions by Oliver Cromwell in the

late 1640s and early 1650s, the language shift from Irish to English was accelerated. This was a process which was never to be reversed. Other major demographic events, especially the Great Famine of the late 1840s and subsequent mass emigration, led to a serious drop in the numbers of Irish speakers so that by the late nineteenth century the Irish-speaking districts were fragmented into three major areas, Cork-Kerry-Clare, Galway-Mayo and Donegal with a few other small enclaves, e.g., in West Waterford.

But above all it was the attitude of the Irish themselves to their native language which accelerated the dramatic shift to English in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The association of the Irish language with poverty and backwardness, indeed with famine, and the ever-increasing necessity for competence in English both in Irish society and for those wishing to emigrate meant that the end beckoned for Irish as a living language across the entire country. The revival movement (Ó Súilleabháin ed., 1998) which arose in earnest at the end of the nineteenth century and which is associated with such major culture figures as Douglas Hyde (Dubhghlas de hÍde, 1860-1949, the founder of Conradh na Gaeilge, The Gaelic League, and the first president of the Irish Free State 1938-1945) was powerless to halt this large-scale demographic movement away from the language, although the movement did succeed somewhat in stemming the tide.

1.2 Reconstructing historical distributions

The census of 1851 was the first to register language use in Ireland. The data which was gained in this census must be treated with caution, however. Because of the negative image of the Irish language in Irish society in the nineteenth century, and especially in the aftermath of the Great Famine (1845-1848) there was considerable underreporting of the ability to speak Irish. The census officers were working for the English government which was at best apathetic to the Irish language and at worst aggressively against a language which was seen as backward. To claim a knowledge of Irish did nothing to improve one's chances of advancement in society in Ireland. The general antipathy to the language can be seen in the stance of the English authorities

adopted in the primary school system which had been established in the 1830s and which did not offer the native population instruction in the Irish language or of other subjects through the medium of Irish.

There is a further reason why the 1851 census most likely does not represent a realistic picture of language use in the mid-nineteenth century. Consider the following remarks which Fitzgerald made while commenting on the census for the years 1851, 1861 and 1871.
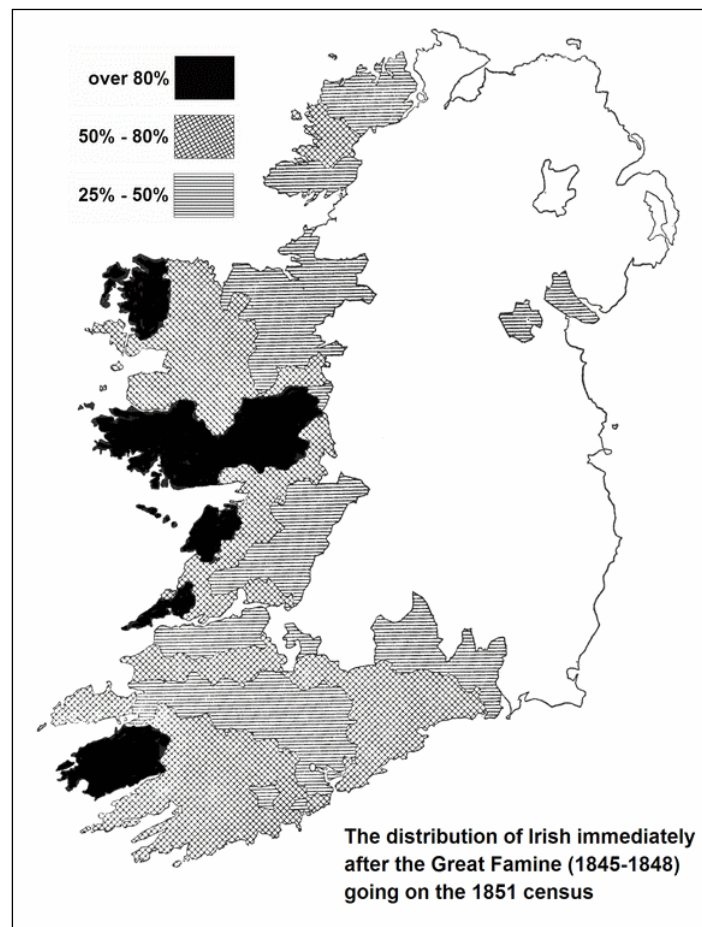
Map 2. Irish after the Great Famine (Ó Cuív 1951)

Hence both the structure of the initial censuses with the language question and underreporting because of the negative image of Irish meant that these censuses reported fewer speakers than there were at the time. However, one can assume that the general picture which arose showed a valid, if reduced, distribution as can be seen in the following map.

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Distributions which more accurately reflect the linguistic situation in the immediately pre-Great Famine period have been reconstructed by Garret Fitzgerald in a number of studies which he published in the past two decades or so (Fitzgerald, 1984, 1990, 2003). The following map shows his reconstruction on the basis of data in the 1911 census for speakers born just before the Great Famine (1845-1848).
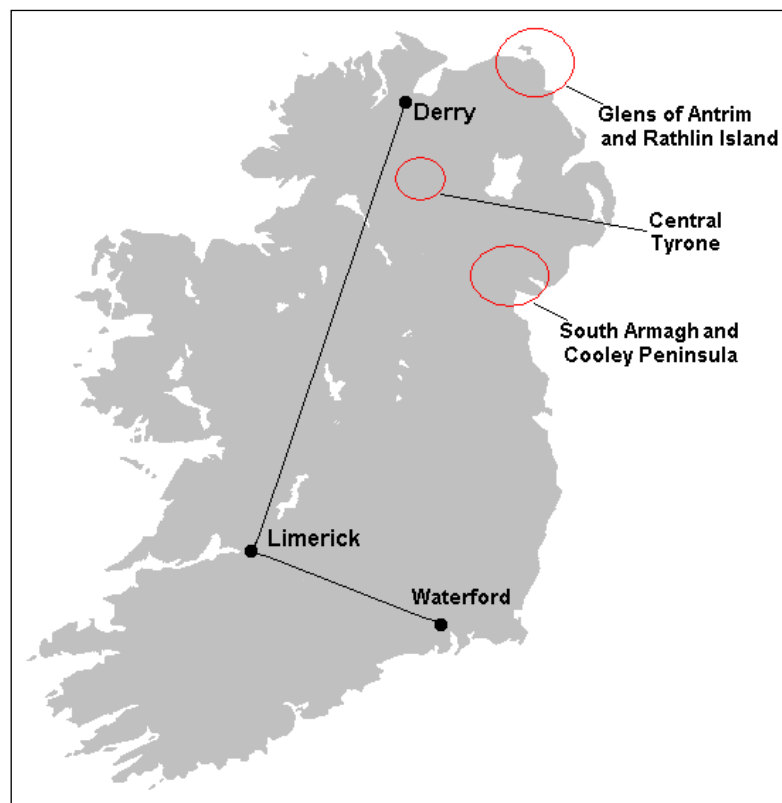
Map 3. Retreat of Irish

The entire West and South-West behind the lines from Derry to Limerick and Limerick to Waterford respectively show a high concentration of Irish speakers which increases towards the coast, i.e., the further one moves away from the east of the country.

The three enclaves in the North which still showed a concentration of native speakers are areas which did not experience active settlement by Scots and English people in the seventeenth century (the so-called Ulster plantations, Robinson 1994

[1984]). Indeed, it is known that the native Irish, i.e. Irish speakers, were banished to the mountainous area of Central Tyrone, Na Speiríní, the Sperrin Mountains, as a consequence of land redistribution during the seventeenth century. The Glens of Antrim, in the extreme North-East, and South Armagh (again a mountainous area around Sliabh gCuilinn, Slieve Gullion) along with Leithinis Chuaille, the Cooley Peninsula (especially the area around Omeath, Irish Ó Méith, on the north side of this peninsula), were further marginal areas which were not affected by the seventeenth-century plantations (Whelan 2011[1997]).

There would thus seem to be a direct relationship in Ulster between plantations (Andrews 2000) and the survival of the Irish language, at least those plantations which involved considerable numbers of planters led to a displacement of Irish speakers to more remote areas. However, this did not hold for the sixteenth-century plantations in Munster (McCarthy-Morrogh 1986) which failed because of the limited numbers of English settlers there. This meant that the Irish-speaking population of virtually all of Munster, i.e. the area to the south and west of the Limerick-Waterford line in Map 3 was unaffected by the settlement efforts of the English, hence the relative strength of the Irish population there well into the nineteenth century.

Apart from Ulster there remains a large area east of the Derry-Limerick line (Map 3) which in all calculations for the nineteenth century shows very low numbers of Irish speakers. In general, one can say that the east of the country reveals the greatest influence of English. In the medieval Pale (Duffy et al. eds. 1997: 36-39; Dudley Edwards 2005 [1973]: 80-82) English was present in the towns and spread to the countryside in the centuries after the initial Anglo-Norman settlement (late twelfth century). The large midlands area was the hinterland of Dublin and both the spread of English and the decline of Irish was furthered by easy access.

The pockets of Irish which survived in Ulster into the early twentieth century were largely in mountainous areas, i.e. places which showed little movement of population and which were generally inaccessible. Indeed, these two characteristics are highlighted by dialect investigators as favourable to the survival of Irish in general. Consider the following comment by Heinrich Wagner about the few informants he could find in Leitrim (a transition area to South Ulster):

Pt. 63: Slevenakilla, County Leitrim. In this mountain district, east of Lough Allen, I met two old men who were able to remember some words and phrases of their native dialect, which they must have spoken in their childhood, probably to their grandparents, who knew Irish only. (Wagner 1958-1964, e.g. Vol. I, xix).

The disappearance of Irish from the midlands by the early nineteenth century is obviously connected to the fact that this area consists of a large and easily accessible plain into which English spread more quickly than the high-lying parts of the country. In general, accessibility plays a role in the survival of Irish. The present-day Irish-speaking areas confirm this. North-West Donegal lies on the coast to the west of the mountain range in the centre of the county. The South-West is also out on the far edge of a hilly peninsula. In the South a similar situation holds. The Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht[1] is at the tip of the mountainous Dingle Peninsula. The Connemara Gaeltacht is not mountainous but it lies well to the south of the major connecting road between Galway and Clifden, the major town to the west of Galway city. Indeed, this Gaeltacht area is to a large part on islands or peninsulas – both Ceantar na nOileán 'the district of the islands', Oileáin Árann 'The Aran Islands' along with An Cheathrú Rua, Ros Muc, Camas and Iorras Aithneach (all peninsulas).

1.3 Formation of the dialects

The current dialects areas – South, West and North – are the remnants of a much greater geographical distribution of Irish throughout the country. The major differences in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, which can be observed in Irish today, probably go back to the early classical period. However, these differences were masked by the use of an artificial written standard which was maintained into the seventeenth century, especially by Irish poets (Williams 1994: 447). The language shift from Irish to

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[1] The term 'Gaeltacht' is a collective reference to the officially recognised Irish-speaking areas in Ireland. However, when preceded by a geographical qualifier, as in the present case, it refers to a specific area.

English (Hickey 2007: Chapter 4; Ó Ciosáin 2005) meant that the geographical distribution of Irish throughout Ireland became intermittent. The dialect areas along the western seaboard were probably more or less contiguous up to the middle of the nineteenth century. But with the decline of the Irish-speaking population due to the Great Famine of 1845-8 (de Fréine 1966, 1977) and ensuing mass emigration, the numbers of native speakers in rural Ireland declined very rapidly. Those who still survived into the second half of the nineteenth century continued the shift to English which had been initiated by preceding generations.

Nonetheless, at the beginning of the twentieth century Irish was still found in a number of rural areas, such as Central Tyrone, West Clare or North Waterford, as can be seen from Map 4.
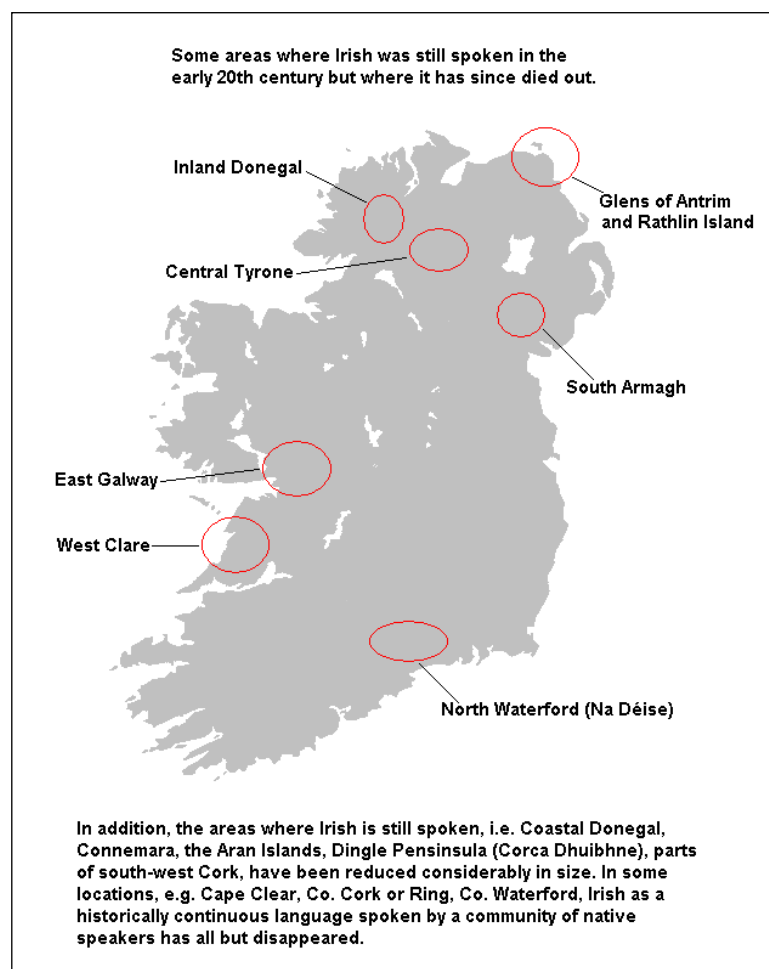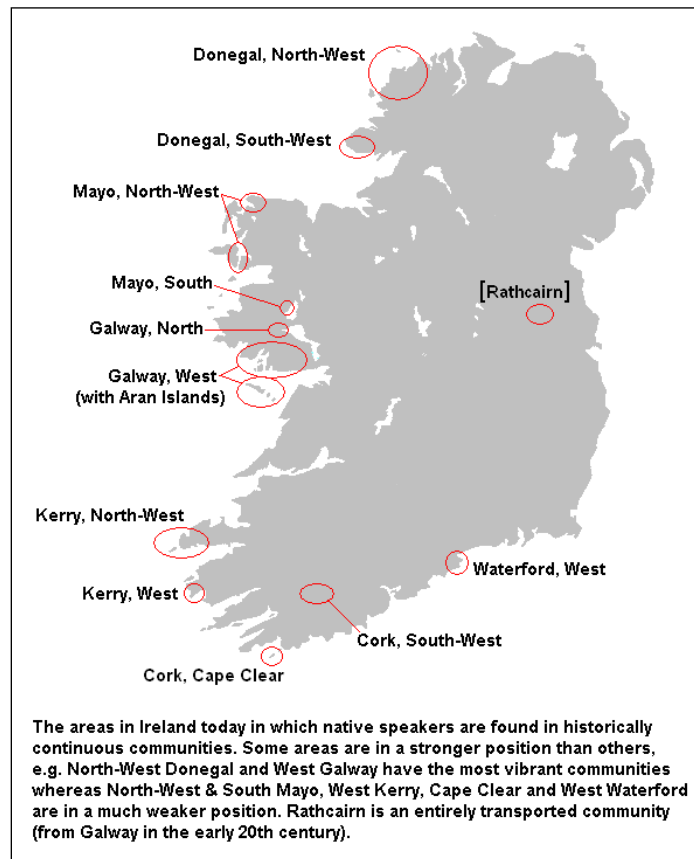

Map 4. Areas in which Irish was still spoken in the early twentieth century but where it has since disappeared.

1.4 The Doegen Tapes

There is a collection of tape recordings made of native speakers by the German scholar Wilhelm Doegen between 1928 and 1931. The tapes in questions have been digitised and a selection of them are available at the following address: http://www.nuacht.com/colm/recordings.html. They provide invaluable insights into the nature of Irish about a century ago and help to fill in certain gaps of our knowledge of areas which no longer contain any native speakers, e.g. Co. Clare, an important transition area between Munster and Connacht. More information on the tapes from Ulster is available at http://www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/~oduibhin/doegen/index.htm (provided by the Scottish Gaelic College, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig).

2. Classification of Irish dialects today

The term for an Irish-speaking area is Gaeltacht 'Irish region' (Ó Riagáin, 2007: 224). In present-day Ireland a distinction is made between two types of Gaeltacht, depending on the numbers of Irish-speakers living there: (1) *Fíor-Ghaeltacht*, lit. 'true Irish-area' refers to those areas with a high-percentage of speakers (though the threshold for this has not been officially defined) and (2) *Breac-Ghaeltacht*, lit. 'part Irish-area' which has considerably fewer Irish speakers. Occasionally, the English-speaking areas are referred to collectively as *Galltacht* 'region of the non-Irish', the stem *Gall-* meaning 'foreign(er)'.

The areas in Ireland today in which native speakers are found in historically continuous communities. Some areas are in a stronger position than others, e.g. North-West Donegal and West Galway have the most vibrant communities whereas North-West & South Mayo, West Kerry, Cape Clear and West Waterford are in a much weaker position. Rathcairn is an entirely transported community (from Galway in the early 20th century).

Map 5. Present-day Irish-speaking regions

The standard dialect survey of Irish is Heinrich Wagner's comprehensive atlas (see Wagner, 1958-1964). But even when this was being compiled in the mid twentieth century the speakers were older males whose Irish was frequently moribund. The situation today is that large tracts of both halves of Ireland have no historically continuous Irish-speaking areas any more. There are no such areas in Northern Ireland or in Leinster. In Munster there are remnants in Ring in Co. Waterford and in Muskerry in Co. Cork. along with a more robust community at the end of the Dingle peninsula in Co. Kerry. The community on Clear Island off the south-west coast of Cork contains virtually no native speakers, see Ó Buachalla (2003) for a treatment of this dialect.

Irish in Mayo receded dramatically in the second half of the twentieth century, so that the studies of de Búrca (1958) and that of Mhac an Fhailigh (1968) are now of largely historical interest. The areas in coastal Co. Galway and on the two minor Aran

Islands, as well as that on Tory Island in Donegal and the mainland opposite it, represent the most vibrant communities today.

In the following sections, the main phonological differences between the dialects of Irish, as recorded in the available literature, are given in summary form. The references are to individual studies. More general literature is also available, from the mid-19th century grammar by O'Donovan (1845) to the influential study by O'Rahilly (1932) to later works like Ó Cuív (1951) and Ó Siadhail (1989). The main differences between the dialects are to be found among vowels which is why it is so difficult to arrive at a common pronunciation for all three main dialect areas (but see Ó Baoill, 1986 and Ó Baoill (ed.) 1990). Most general works on Irish often fudge the issue by not giving pronunciations (the official standard does not either). One or two are based on a particular dialect, such as Ó Siadhail (1980) which relies on Western Irish pronunciation.

2.1 Southern Irish

This refers to a few areas in the southern province of Munster. The main one is the end of the Dingle Peninsula (Irish: Corca Dhuibhne), see Ó Sé (2000). The others comprise a small area on the Iveragh Peninsula, an inland area in Co. Cork, the island of Cape Clear as well as the area of Ring in West Waterford.

For all dialects areas, the reflexes of historical vowels before former geminate sonorants play an important role in differentiation. In Southern Irish the following realisations are found: /i/ > /ai/ *cinn* 'heads', /o/ > /au/ *trom* 'heavy', /a/ > /au/ *crann* 'tree'. The following features are also important in delimiting Southern Irish from forms in the west and north.

Southern Irish: main features:

1) *The realisation of <ao>* This is pronounced /eː/, e.g. *glaoch* /gleːx/ 'call'. See O'Rahilly (1932: 27-38) for an overview in all the dialects including Scottish Gaelic.

2) *Sonorants* A two-way distinction is found for *N* and *L*. Velar stops are retained in post-nasal position, i.e. *teanga* is [tʲæŋgə] 'tongue'.

3) /v/ before a back or low vowel is realised as [v].

4) *The realisation of coronal stops* These are realised with very slight palatalisation. The non-palatal stops /t/ and /d/ are alveolar.

5) *Word stress* Long vowels in non-initial syllables attract stress, e.g. *cailín* /kaˈlʲiːnʲ/ 'girl'. This may be the result of Anglo-Norman influence (in the south-east) after the 12ᵗʰ century as older authors like O'Rahilly seem to think (1932: 86-98) and certainly applied to many French loanwords, e.g. *buidéal* /bəˈdʲeːl/ 'bottle'. See Hickey (1997) for further discussion.

2.2 Western Irish

This refers to forms of Irish spoken west of Galway and on the Aran Islands. Irish is still a daily language for most of the population in Cois Fhairrge diately west of Galway city) and the areas around An Cheathrú Rua (Carraroe), Ros Muc, Cill Chiaráin, Carna (on the peninsula known in Irish as Iorras Aithneach) further along the coast. This is encompasses the area known as Ceanter na nOileán 'district of the islands', especially because the largest of these, Leitir Móir 'Lettermore' is a strong Irish-speaking area. Western Irish also includes the two smaller Aran Islands (in Galway Bay), Inis Meáin and Inis Oírr as well as the main island Inis Móir, especially outside the main town of Cill Rónáin. Western Irish would also include the area of Tuar Mhic Éadaigh (Tourmakeady) in south Mayo.

Western Irish: main features:

1)   *Reflexes of historical vowels before former geminate sonorants:* /i/ > /iː/ *cinn,* 'heads', /o/ > /uː/ *trom* 'heavy', /a/ > /aː/ [ɑː] *crann* 'tree'.

2)   *The realisation of <ao>* This is generally pronounced /iː/, e.g. *glaoch* /gliːx/ 'call'.

3)   *Sonorants* A three-way distinction is found for *N* and *L*, i.e. /nˠ – n – nʲ/ and /lˠ – l – lʲ/. Velar stops are not retained in post-nasal position in Cois Fhairrge, i.e. *teanga* is [tʲæŋə] 'tongue', but these are found in this position further to the west.

4)   /v/ before a back or low vowel is realised as [w].

5)   *The realisation of coronal stops* These are realised in western Irish as true palatals without noticeable affrication. The stops /t/ and /d/ are dental.

6)   *Word stress* Initial stress applies to virtually all words with the exception of one or two loanwords such as *tobac* /təˈbaːk/ 'tobacco', but see the discussion in Hickey (2021).

2.3 Northern Irish

Up to the early twentieth century there were still remnants of Ulster Irish spoken in central Tyrone (in the Sperrin Mountains), in the Glens of Antrim and on Rathlin Island (both in the extreme north-east of Ireland). Somewhat earlier still Irish could be found in south Armagh and on the Cooley Peninsula in Co. Louth.

Today the Irish language is spoken in Ulster in two main areas on the coast of Co. Donegal. The first is in the south-west of this country (Wagner 1979 [1959]) and the second and larger area is in the north-west, particularly the region around Gaoth Dobhair. Irish is also spoken on Tory Island off the north-west coast. The Irish term for the Donegal Gaeltacht is Tír Chonaill ('country of Connell'). The region in the vicinity of Gaoth Dobhair is often referred to as Cloich Cheannfhaola ('Kineely's stone').

Northern Irish: main features:

1) *Reflexes of historical vowels before former geminate sonorants:* /i/ > /i/ *cinn* 'heads', /o/ > /ɔ/ *trom* 'heavy', /a/ > /a/ *crann* 'tree'.

2) *The realisation of <ao>* This is pronounced as a retracted high front vowel: /ɨ:/, e.g. *glaoch* /glɨ:x/ 'call'. The degree of retraction for this vowel is greatest in the north of Donegal.

3) *Other vowels* There is a general fronting of vowels in northern Irish. The /u:/ is pronounced as a high rounded vowel, much as in the rest of Ulster (an areal feature covering both Irish and English), e.g. *cúl* [kʉ:l] 'rear'. The long low vowels, pronounced [ɑ:] in western Irish, is often fronted to a value nearer [æ:] or [ɛ:], e.g. *tá* [tæ:, tɛ:] '(it) is'. A lowered and retracted variant of /e:/ is found as the reflex of /a/ and a velar fricative, e.g. *slaghdán* [slˠɛdˠənˠ] 'cold (illness)'. The mid back vowel /o:/ is also lowered, e.g. *pósta* [pɑ:stə] 'married'.

4) *Sonorants* A three-way distinction is found for *N* and *L*, i.e. /nˠ – n – nʲ/ and /lˠ – l – lʲ/. Velar stops are variably retained in post-nasal position, i.e. *teanga* is [tʲæŋ(g)ə] or [tʲæŋ(g)i] 'tongue'.

5) /v/ before a back or low vowel is realised as [w].

6) *The realisation of coronal stops* These are realised in northern Irish as palatals with audible affrication. The stops /t/ and /d/ are dental.

7) *Word stress* Stress is on the first syllable though there is considerable shortening of post-initial long vowels (as opposed to western Irish), e.g. *sceireog* 'fib, lie' /ˈsʲkʲɛrəg/.

The Mayo dialects in the north-west of this county, which are spoken by very small numbers today, are not simply transitional between the central Western and the Northern dialects. They show a large number of Ulster features due the resettlement of people from Ulster in north-west Mayo in the 17th century. The Irish of this region has been studied, in particular in Erris (North-West Co. Mayo) by Mhac an Fhailigh (1968) and in Achill (West Co. Mayo) by Stockman (1974). See Ó Dochartaigh (1987) for a general overview.

2.4 Overview of main dialectal differences

This module offers an overview of the main phonetic differences between the three chief dialects of Irish, in the north (Co. Donegal), west (Co. Galway) and south (Co. Kerry) of the country. The recordings were gained from native speakers from the individual areas as part of the project *Samples of Spoken Irish* (Hickey 2011).

1) Realisation of inherited <AO> vowel
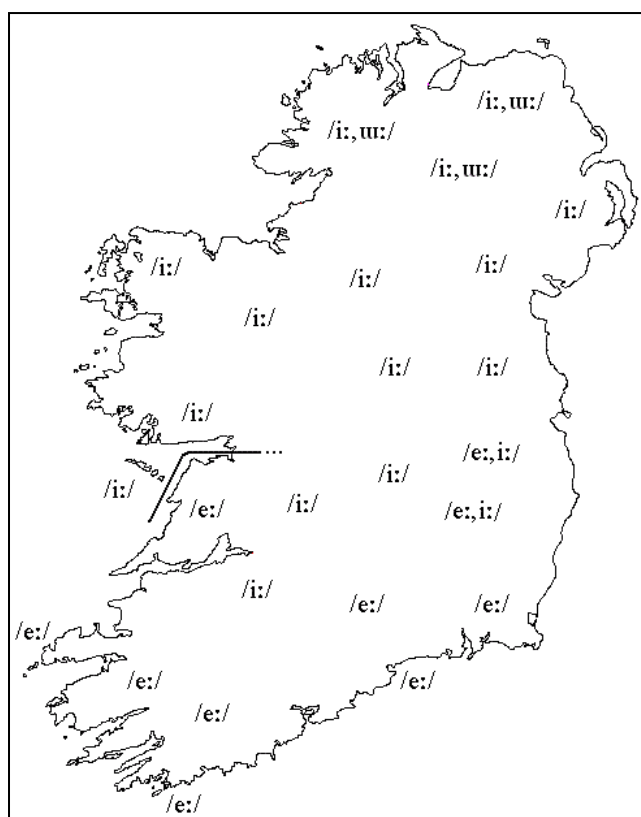

Map 6. Realisation of the <AO> vowel

Context	Northern	Western	Southern	Sample
<ao>	i:	i:	e:	baol 'danger'

Notes

(i)   In Co. Donegal, e.g. Tory Island and the adjacent mainland, a retracted version of /i:/ is common, e.g. *aon* [ɯːn] 'one'. This is a feature which it shares with Scottish Gaelic.

(ii) In some dialects there are lexicalised exceptions to the realisation of <ao> as a long monophthong: a few words show the diphthong /ai/ here, e.g. *faoileán* /failʲɑ:n/ 'seagull'.

2) Stressed vowel reflexes before word-final sonorants
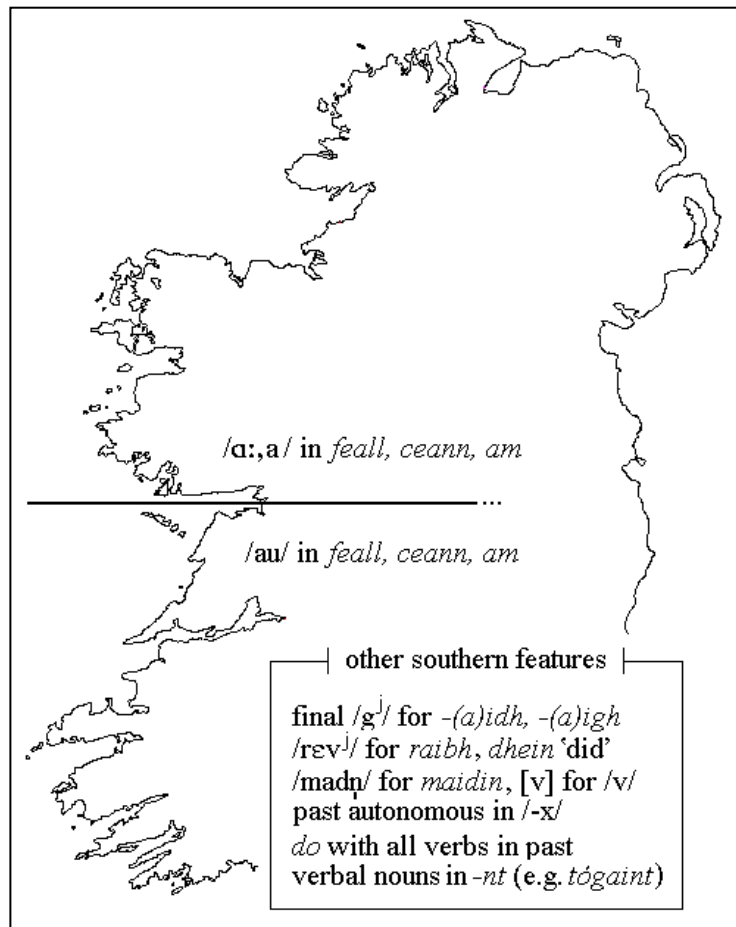
Map 7. Vowels before sonorants

Context	Northern	Western	Southern	Sample
<ill#>	i	ai	i:	*maoill* 'delay'
<im#>	i	i:	i:	*im* 'butter'
<inn(C)#>	i	i:	ai	*roinnt* 'some'
<all#>	a	ɑ:	au	*meall* 'charm'
<am#>	ɑ:	ɑ:	au	*am* 'time'
<ann#>	a	ɑ:	au	*peann* 'pen'
<airC(V)#>	a:	ai	i:	*airde* 'height'
<oll#>	ʌ, ɔ:	au	au	*poll* 'hole'
<om#>	ʌ	ʌ	au	*trom* 'heavy'
<onn#>	ʌ	u:	au	*fonn* 'wish'
<ong#>	ʌ	ʌ	ʌ, u:	*long* 'ship'
<orC#>	ɔ:	au	o:	*bord* 'table'
<orr#>	ɔ	au	ʌ	*corr-* 'occasional'

Notes

(i)   The symbol '#' indicates a word boundary. 'C' stands for a consonant, 'V' for a vowel.

(ii)   The diphthongisation of stressed /a/ before a final nasal is greatest in the east of Munster, e.g. in Ring (Co. Waterford), *rang* 'class' is /rauŋg/. The diphthongisation is also found in unstressed, non-final position, e.g. *Breandán* /bʲrʲaunˈdɑ:n/ (first name).

(iii)   In Corca Dhuibhne (Co. Kerry) a final velarised /ɫ/ may be realised as /x/, e.g. *mall* [maux] 'slow'.

(iv)   There are cases where the low vowel /a/ is retracted to /ʌ/, e.g. *ceann* [kʲʌn] 'head' (Northern Irish). This is also found in Western Irish (in other contexts), e.g. *cat* [kʌt] 'cat'.

3) Long vowels and diphthongs deriving from vocalised fricatives

Context	Northern	Western	Southern	Sample
<agh>	ɛi	ai	ai	*laghad* 'least'
<abh>	o:	au	au	*leabhar* 'book'
<amh>	ʉ, aʉ	o:	au	*amhrán* 'song'

Note

(i)   Historically, the fricatives (lenited stops) *gh, dh* /ɣ/, *bh*, /v/ *mh* /ṽ/ were absorbed into the vowels which preceded them, that is they migrated from the coda of the syllable to its nucleus. This caused a lengthening of the syllable vowel because a short vowel plus a vocalised consonant led to a long vocalic element, thus maintaining the overall length of the syllable rhyme (nucleus and coda). The phonetic result could have been either a long vowel or a diphthong, see the different reflexes in the above tables.

4) Short vowel + long vowel in disyllabic words

Context	Northern	Western	Southern	Sample
<aCá>	ˈa + a	ˈʊ + ɑː	ə + ˈɑː	*scadán* 'herring'

Note

(i)   Both Western and Northern Irish have initial stress so that when the first vowel of a word is short and the second long a tension arises between the stressed short vowel and the unstressed long one. In Northern Irish the situation has been resolved by the shortening of the second vowel so that such words now consist of two short vowels. In Western Irish the first vowel is raised to /ʊ/, but the short + long sequence remains. In Southern Irish, which has variable stress, the long vowel of the second syllable attracts stress and remains long.

5) Realisation of unconditioned long vowels
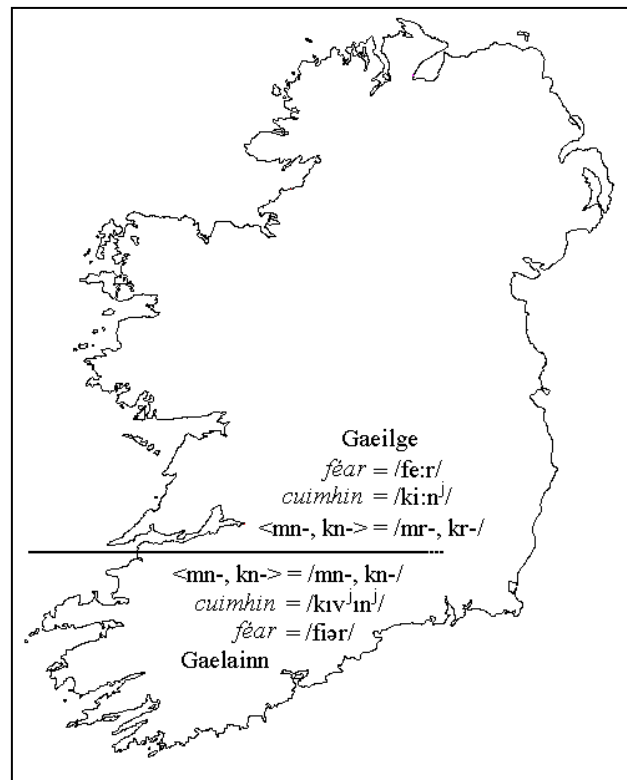
Map 8. Delimitation of Southern Irish

Context	Northern	Western	Southern	Sample
<-í#>	i:	i:, ai	i:	*luí* 'lying'
<éC>	e:	e:	i:	*éan* 'bird'
<á>	æ:, ɛ:	ɑ:	ɑ:	*áit* 'place'
<eo, ó>	ɔ:	o:	o:	*beo* 'alive'
<ú>	ʉ:	u:	u:	*fiú* 'even'

Note

(i) The front realisation of /a:/ in Donegal Irish leads to a shift of a preceding /ɣ/ to [j]. A similar fronting, though not quite as advanced, is found in the Muskerry district of south-west Co. Cork.

6) Realisation of alveolar palatals in onset of stressed syllables
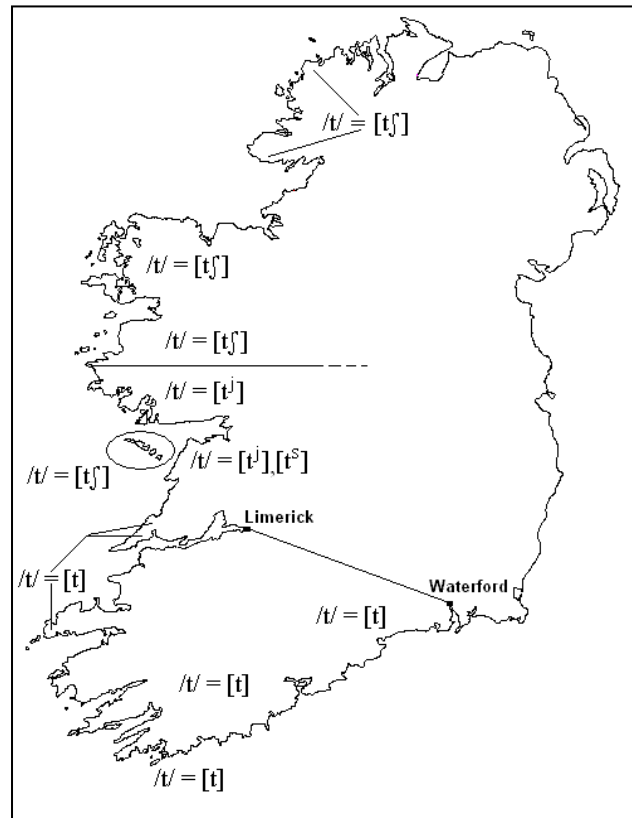
Map 9. Realisation of palatal segments

Context	Northern	Western	Southern	Sample
<t-, d->	tʃ	tʲ	t	*teach* 'house'

7) Realisation of /-x/ in word-final position

Context	Northern	Western	Southern	Sample
<-ch#>	Ø	x	x	*gach* 'every'

8) Realisation of syllable-final /-x/ in covered position

Context	Northern	Western	Southern	Sample
<-chC>	r	x	x	*slacht* 'polish'

3. Conclusion

Broadly speaking, the dialects of Irish fall into three groups today: Southern, Western and Northern. These areas are the remainders of much larger regions which emerged in the early modern period (Williams, 1994). However, given the considerable reduction in their size they are no longer joined together and have developed separately during the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. For the areas along the western seaboard (see Map 5) there are recordings for parts where no traditional speakers are left, e.g. Co. Clare immediately south of Co. Galway, and there are studies of dialect regions around the island of Ireland going back to the second half of the nineteenth century.

The future of the three remaining dialect areas is uncertain at present. Irish in the south, in the Dingle Peninsula of Co. Kerry, is not represented by as robust a speech community as is Irish in South Connemara and the Aran Islands (Co. Galway, Western Irish) or along the west and north-west coast of Co. Donegal (Northern Irish). Irish in the few other officially designated Gaeltacht areas, e.g. the area around An Rinn/Ring in Co. Waterford is quite weak and is supported more by the Irish college there than by a vibrant community using Irish as an everyday language.

As has been pointed out by so many authors, e.g. O'Rourke and Walsh (2015), Walsh and O'Rourke (2018) and Walsh (2020), the future of Irish lies in second language varieties, largely spoken by urbanites who are all native speakers of English. The cities of Ireland have not been Irish-speaking for centuries so there are no lines of historical continuity between traditional rural Irish language communities and the groups in the cities who have chosen to embrace Irish. Nonetheless, in one respect the dialect areas are of relevance to second-language Irish today. This has to do with the pronunciation which English-speaking language learners adopt. Depending on the part of the country where they live, or are learning Irish, they will choose a pronunciation from the South, West or North, given that there is no unified standard pronunciation for Irish, despite the efforts of some linguists, see Ó Baoill (1986). This fact has the unintended effect of ensuring that the dialects continue to be of relevance in present-day Ireland.

Within the traditional dialect areas there are issues concerning the survival of the language as these areas are continually exposed to English in all areas of modern life. The bilingualism, which is characteristic of all dialect areas, is shifting towards a state where English is the primary language of many young people growing up in the Gaeltacht regions with the consequence that traditional dialectal Irish, with its wealth of words and phrases, is not being passed on to young people to anything like the extent to which it was in previous generations. It remains to be seen what the twenty-first century brings in terms of dialect survival given the pressures of modern society which all speakers are exposed to.

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