

# **Northern Irish English: Historical and Sociolinguistic Developments**

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## **Abstract**

For a relatively small region, home to less than two million people, the linguistic landscape of Northern Ireland is remarkably diverse. This is not the result of chance: the richness of the input to Northern Irish English, which includes different languages and dialects, has contributed to it. Precisely, the focus of this paper will be the contextualisation of such origins, a vital step towards a better understanding of both the internal structure of this variety and the development of sociolinguistic attitudes.

As a result of the introduction of the English language in Northern Ireland in the twelfth century and later, more vigorously, in the seventeenth century through a series of plantations, Northern Irish English emerged in a context of colonisation and was influenced by the speech of varying communities, including Scottish settlers who brought with them varieties of Scots and English settlers stemming from the Midlands, who spoke various forms of Early Modern English. The mixing of the indigenous Irish language with transported forms of English created a complex picture and gave Northern Irish English the distinct, albeit heterogeneous, profile that characterises it. The political and economic hegemony achieved by the English-speaking newcomers also affected the emerging varieties during the period of contact, with new linguistic features arising as a result of the language shift from Irish to English.

However, it is not only the settlement history of Northern Ireland that makes it a compelling place to conduct (socio)linguistic research. The tumultuous twentieth century, which witnessed episodes such as the development and culmination of an ethnonationalist conflict, the industrialisation of Belfast and (London)Derry, and a trend of rural repopulation, provided opportunities to explore new linguistic processes and take different approaches. The relationship between linguistic variation and extralinguistic factors including gender, age, social class, or ethnicity, along with the intricate and sometimes problematic connection between language and identity, has been widely explored both in rural and urban settings since the second half of the twentieth century and offers plenty of possibilities for future work.

*Keywords:* Northern Irish English, substrate influence, sociolinguistic developments, Ulster plantation, contact and language shift.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Table of Contents.....	ii
List of Figures.....	iii
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Northern Ireland: Political, geographical, and linguistic boundaries .....	2
2.1. Politics and geography .....	2
2.2. The linguistic panorama.....	5
3. The origins and developments of English in Northern Ireland.....	9
3.1. Pre-Norman Northern Ireland and first period of contact between Irish and English .....	9
3.2. ‘Ulster plantation’: Introduction of superstratal varieties .....	13
3.3. Second period of contact and language shift.....	17
4. Sociolinguistic developments .....	20
5. Suggestions for future work.....	22
6. Conclusion .....	23
References.....	25

## List of Figures

Figure 1. The counties of Northern Ireland .....	3
Figure 2. Geographical location of Ulster and the Drumlin Belt.....	4
Figure 3. Varieties of English in Ulster .....	8
Figure 4. Highest acceptance figures (70%+) in ‘A Survey of Irish English Usage’ for the test sentence <i>What are youse up to?</i> .....	19
Figure 5. Possible sources of features in Northern Irish English.....	20
Figure 6. Mean rise alignment in the three dialect zones: Mid-Ulster English, South Ulster English and Ulster Scots .....	23

## 1. Introduction

I consider ‘Beowulf’ to be part of my voice-right. And yet to persuade myself that I was born into its language and that its language was born into me took a while: for somebody who grew up in the political and cultural conditions of Lord Brookeborough's Northern Ireland, it could hardly have been otherwise. (Heaney, 2000, p. xxiv)

These are the words of the Northern Irish writer Seamus Heaney, arguably one of the most representative figures in contemporary English literature. In the introduction to his 2000 translation of the Old English epic poem ‘Beowulf’, Heaney acknowledges what has been, in his own words, a “complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism” (p. xxx) between Ireland and England. Because of his Catholic and Nationalist upbringing in an ideologically fractured Northern Ireland, he lived through the complexities of the significance of being a speaker and writer of English whilst identifying as an Irish poet.

One can infer from the writer’s envisagement of an “unpartitioned linguistic country, a region where one’s language would not be a simple badge of ethnicity or a matter of cultural preference or official imposition, but an entry into further language” (p. xxv), that the manifold realities encompassed by language, including its intricate relationship with the sense of identity, should not be treated lightly when dealing with Northern Ireland. These issues, which lie at the core of its social and cultural schemes, have contributed to a remarkably diverse linguistic landscape for a relatively small region, home to an estimated 1.894 million people in 2019 (NISRA, 2019b). The aim of the present paper is thus to examine such diversity, contemplating particularly the forms of Northern Irish English spoken and locating them in their corresponding historical and social context.

The paper is organised as follows: in section 2, I provide a brief description of Northern Ireland’s political, geographical, and social situation, followed by an overview of the linguistic panorama in which I delimit the main varieties of English spoken and outline some central issues regarding linguistic policies and attitudes. Section 3 then examines the origins and developments of Northern Irish English. As this is the most comprehensive part, I have divided it into the two periods of contact between Irish and

English (twelfth–sixteenth century; seventeenth–nineteenth century) and a third subsection focused on the linguistic processes derived from the context in which English was learned during the second period. Section 4 presents relevant findings in relation to sociolinguistic developments occurred in Northern Ireland (henceforth ‘NI’) in recent times and, finally, my own observations and suggestions for future research are provided in section 5, followed by a conclusion.

## **2. Northern Ireland: Political, geographical, and linguistic boundaries**

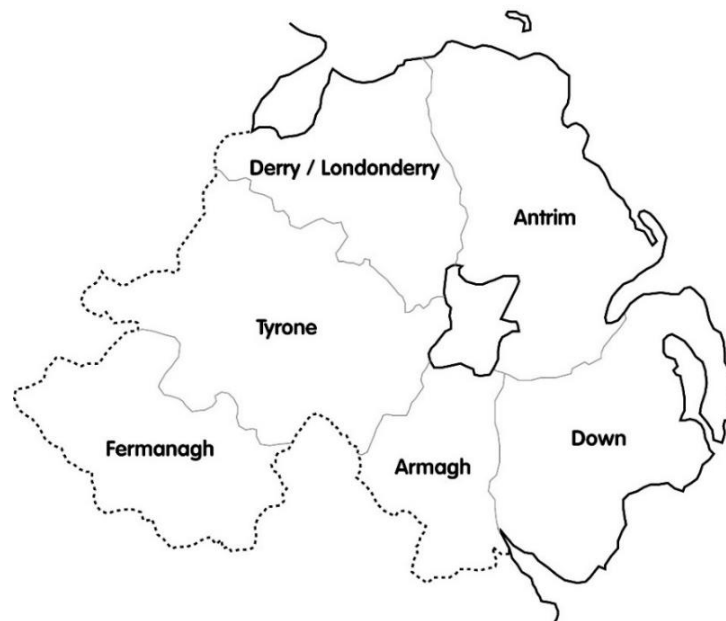
### **2.1. Politics and geography**

A familiarisation with the Northern Irish region should contribute to a better understanding of the linguistic realities it encompasses. From a political standpoint, NI is one of the four constituent countries of the United Kingdom –officially ‘the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland’– along with England, Scotland, and Wales. Such status came as a result of the partition of Ireland between Northern and Southern Ireland in 1920, enacted as the ‘Government of Ireland Act, 1920’. The latter would become the ‘Irish Free State’ in 1922 and eventually be declared a republic following the ‘Republic of Ireland Act, 1948’.

In relation to this, the Northern Irish society “remains divided on sectarian grounds” (Crowley, 2016, p. 214) due to intercommunity hostility between the two majority ethnic groups: Catholics/Nationalists and Protestants/Unionists. Indeed, “[t]he division between Catholic and Protestant in Northern Ireland has acknowledged ethnic nationalist, rather than religious, connotations” (McCafferty, 1999, p. 250), with Catholics identifying chiefly with the Irish Republic and Protestants preferring “national allegiance ... with Northern Ireland or the United Kingdom”. This division is approached more closely in the following sections, especially with regard to cultural practices including language, although it is important to “be aware of the amount of variation that can exist within an ethnic group” (O’Reilly, 1999, p. 4).

Moving on to the geographical characterisation, NI comprises six of the nine counties that integrate the historical province of Ulster: Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, (London)Derry, and Tyrone (see Figure 1), the other three Ulster counties being Donegal in the west and Cavan and Monaghan, both in the south. Even though this

territorial division does not correspond to the current administrative structures, it is nonetheless useful for the demarcation of boundaries and thus continues to be acknowledged. Moreover, as we will see in further detail, the political border between NI and the Republic of Ireland is not coterminous either with the distinction between Northern and Southern varieties of English, as there are “some areas of the Republic – e.g. Donegal– [which] speak [Northern Irish English], while some of the southern areas of Northern Ireland speak [Southern Irish English]” (Trudgill & Hannah, 2017, p. 104). For this reason, the varieties spoken in the north are sometimes grouped under the term ‘Ulster English’, as opposed to ‘Southern Irish English’ or ‘Hiberno-English’ –from *Hibernia*, the Latin name for Ireland–.



*Figure 1. The counties of Northern Ireland (McCool, n.d.).*

However, the political border does reflect some linguistic differences, for example, at the pragmatic level, as shown in Barron and Pandarova’s (2016) analysis of tag question use, which revealed that speakers in the Republic use more tag questions and more statement-question blends than speakers in NI, who were found to employ more statements. One of the possible factors that might contribute to linguistic variation across the North/South political divide is the physical landscape: according to Corrigan (2010), the Drumlin Belt south of Fermanagh and Armagh, which is an elongated hill formed by the movement of glacial deposits (see Figure 2), has been “a barrier to communication and a cultural divide ... since prehistoric times” (Aalen, 1997, as cited in Corrigan, 2010,

p. 14). This formation is thus an isogloss that separates the Scots-influenced dialect zones in the north from the areas where varieties of English provenance are spoken. Moreover, the peripherality of some regions has “greatly assisted” (Corrigan, 2010, p. 14) the maintenance of Scots in such communities, as has the high relief of zones such as north-eastern Antrim. It is also worth mentioning that the geographical proximity of the Northern Irish coast to that of Scotland<sup>1</sup> has for centuries facilitated the migratory movements between the two regions, which in turn account for the “very many similarities between Scottish ... and northern Irish English” (Trudgill & Hannah, 2017, p. 9). The linguistic and cultural implications of such settlement –and colonisation– pattern(s) are explored in more detail in section 3.2, as well as those stemming from contact with England.

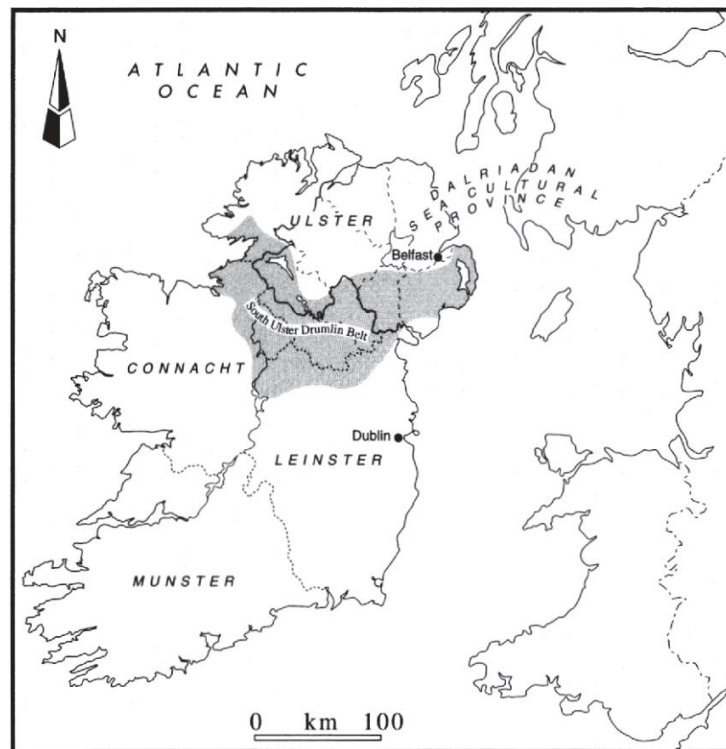


Figure 2. Geographical location of Ulster and the Drumlin Belt (Graham, 1997).

<sup>1</sup> Just 35 km. separate the Ards Peninsula in Down from the region of Galloway in southwestern Scotland, while the Fair Head mountain cliff, located in Antrim, is at a distance of 22 km. from the Kintyre peninsula at the other side of the North Channel (Corrigan, 2010).



The settlement and demographic patterns, including population density and its distribution, are also important factors for the study of the spatial diffusion of linguistic innovations that may elicit language change (Hernández-Campoy & Conde-Silvestre, 2005). In the context of the British Isles, NI is rather unique inasmuch as the trends of rural repopulation emerging in the 1970s have not evoked a simultaneous weakening of the urbanisation process (Corrigan, 2010). Moreover, as the development of large urban centres is not a “native settlement pattern” in the country, there remain more rural than urban settlements (Corrigan, 2010, p. 12). According to the New Settlement Classification of 2015, which is supported by data from the most recent census (2011), there are 93 settlements with a population of 1,000-5,000; 17 small towns (population 5,000-9,999); 10 medium towns (population 10,000-17,999), and 14 large towns (population +18,000) in NI (NISRA, 2015).

The city of (London)Derry, originally *Doire* ‘Derry’ but officially ‘Londonderry’ in recognition of the fact that “the region was to be colonised and developed by the [livery] companies of the City of London” in the early seventeenth century (McCafferty, 2001, p. 6), had a population of 83,125 in 2011, while the city of Belfast in Antrim is the largest settlement in NI with an estimated population of 289,070 in 2019 (NISRA, 2019a). The major expansion of Belfast as an industrial city is relatively recent, reaching back to the second half of the nineteenth century, and was triggered by the influx after the Great Potato Famines of the 1840s and the subsequent development of the shipbuilding and linen industries (Corrigan, 2010). One of the linguistic consequences of such expansion was the rise of an urban vernacular speech, which has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Albeit on a smaller scale than Belfast, the city of (London)Derry has followed a similar pattern of population growth and industrialisation (McCafferty, 1999). In view of all these demographic trends, the investigation of regional variation across the rural/urban divide is also prevalent in the context of Northern Irish English studies.

## **2.2. The linguistic panorama**

Although our focus is on English, an assessment of the linguistic landscape in NI should nonetheless consider the indigenous language. Irish is one of the six languages which integrate the Celtic language family: more specifically, it belongs to what in linguistic literature is referred to as ‘Q-Celtic languages’ along with Scottish Gaelic and Manx, both of which emanate from “transported forms of Irish taken to Scotland and the Isle of Man

during the first millennium” of the Common Era (Hickey, 2014b, p. 3). As the earliest recorded language on the island, Irish has been the native tongue of the Northern Irish population for centuries and continued to be spoken in the Glens of Antrim, the mountainous region of central Tyrone, and parts of south Armagh up to the early twentieth century (Hickey, 2014b).

Notwithstanding the indisputable relevance of Irish in understanding the English spoken in (Northern) Ireland, whether “at the level of cross-linguistic transfer or that of language attitudes and values” (Kallen, 1997, p. 18), the actual use and knowledge of the language is now reduced to a minority: in the 2011 census, 10.65 per cent of all usual residents aged 3 and over (184,898 people) reported some ability in Irish, while 6.05 per cent (104,943) claimed they were able to speak it (NISRA, n.d.). In this respect, another notable difference with earlier times is that Irish is seldom acquired as a mother tongue and no longer fulfils the role of a working language. In fact, the only historically continuous *Gaeltacht* (the official designation for Irish-speaking areas) remaining in Ulster is in Donegal (Hickey, n.d.), thus beyond national boundaries, though a smaller urban *Gaeltacht* in the Belfast area of Falls Road was established in the late twentieth century. It is important to note, however, that the revival of Irish in NI is no small achievement given its situation in the early twentieth century: “neglected, considered irrelevant and, in education particularly, treated as a foreign language of little use” (McKendry, 2007, p. 396).

The loss of (Ulster) Irish in context is examined in the following sections; for now, it suffices to know that the political and settlement history of the region has shaped the linguistic panorama to a large extent. Historical settlements in the Ulster area include a considerable influx of Scottish migrants, who in the seventeenth century brought with them varieties of Scots, the historic language of Lowland Scotland. These varieties developed with time into Ulster Scots, whose heartlands are rural settlements of Protestant majority in areas of the Ards peninsula, north Down, Antrim, and north Co. (London)Derry (Gardner, 2019). Despite the recognition of Ulster Scots as a language in the Council of Europe Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, scholars and interested parties often disagree about its linguistic status: Ulster Scots and English, both descendants from West Germanic, are to a high degree linguistically similar, so much that the former is regarded as a variety of English in most accounts of Northern Irish English. For this reason, this is also the position that I will adopt throughout this article.

There is agreement, however, that Ulster Scots had a more distinct profile in its earlier stages and was more widespread geographically and socially. The expansion of the road and rail networks, the industrialisation of Antrim and Down, and the counter-urbanisation trend are some of the factors that have contributed to the “breakdown of traditional social networks allowing the diffusion of more English-influenced dialects to penetrate into what were once exclusively Scots zones” (Corrigan, 2010, p. 15). The figures of the 2011 census, which was the first to include a question on Ulster Scots linguistic ability, indicate that 140,204 people, or 8’08 per cent of all usual residents aged 3 and over, have some ability (NISRA, n.d.).

As in the case of Irish, it is convenient to bear in mind the symbolic significance of Ulster Scots within the Northern Irish society. Ethnically associated with the Protestant community, it was subject to a revival in the context of sectarian tension, so for some people it came to represent a Unionist response to Irish in the cultural war (Gardner, 2019). Because of this, Ulster Scots remains controversial in NI, as Irish does, both being sometimes “reduced by various forces (some reactionary, some progressive) to little more than a marker of identity” (Crowley, 2016, p. 215). As such, there has been much discussion about the legal and political recognition of these languages. Given the lack of a comprehensive legislation on languages on the part of Westminster, the official document that more expressly grants such recognition is the ‘Belfast Agreement’, signed in 1998 to establish a series of arrangements aiming at “reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust” (p. 2). In the context of NI, that such document includes the following statement provides a clue to “the continuing social and political status of ‘the language question(s)’” (Crowley, 2016, p. 198):

All participants recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic minorities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland. (Northern Ireland Office, 1998, p. 24)

Moving on to a closer examination of Northern Irish English, it is conventional among scholars to distinguish between three main varieties, namely Ulster Scots, South Ulster English, and Mid-Ulster English (see Figure 3). Such distinction is predominantly based on historical and phonological criteria, due to NI’s “complex linguistic landscape

where each variety was influenced by other neighboring English dialects during the different immigration periods” (Moritz, 2016, p. 119).

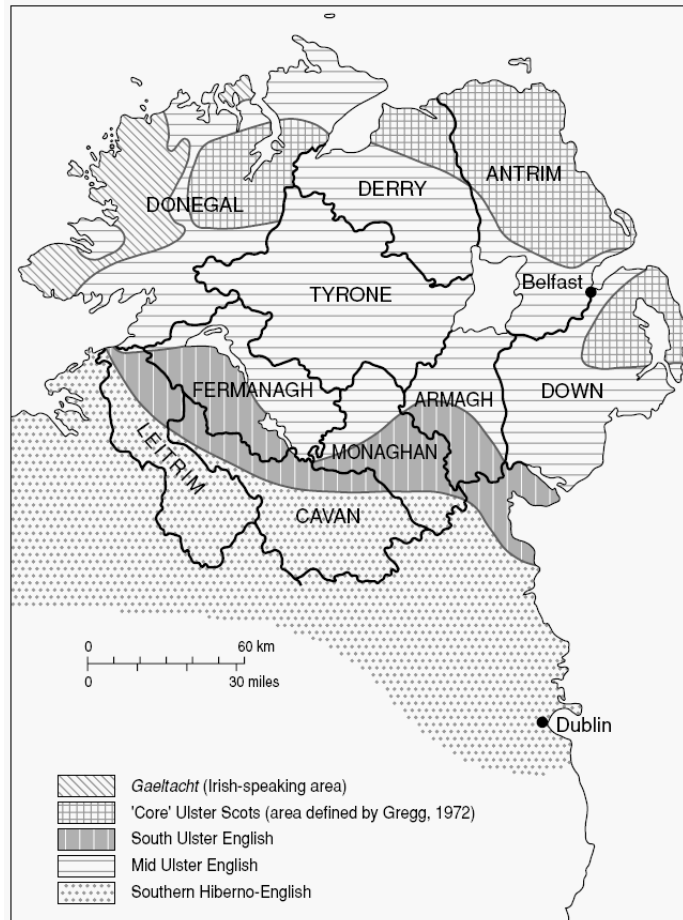


Figure 3. Varieties of English in Ulster (Hickey, 2007).

With respect to this, Ulster Scots varieties stemming from seventeenth-century Scottish settlers have not maintained the historical phonemic vowel length system of West Germanic. South Ulster English, restricted to rural areas around the Drumlin Belt, conforms the least extensive dialect zone, and consists of “transitional varieties between the north and south of Ireland” (Hickey, n.d.). Unlike Ulster Scots, South Ulster English has two sets of stressed vowel phonemes, one long and one short, following the West Germanic stress pattern (Corrigan, 2010). On the other hand, the predominant dialect region comprises forms of Mid-Ulster English, a cover term “used for varieties of English which stem from the northern English settlers ... from the seventeenth century onwards” (Hickey, n.d.). As these are geographically central varieties, contiguous to the other two dialect zones, Mid-Ulster English is “transitional with respect to vowel quantity” (Corrigan, 2010, pp. 17-18).

Lastly, the speech of Belfast and (London)Derry is often studied separately, despite both lying dialectally at the intersection of Ulster Scots and Mid-Ulster English. As the two largest urban centres in the country, both are points of convergence for a substantial number of speakers of diverse origins. For example, the population growth of (London)Derry “has been fed by the influx of workers from Donegal in the west and the surrounding areas of counties (London)Derry and Tyrone to the east and south” (McCafferty, 1999, p. 246). The industrialisation processes resulting from such influx favour the development of more or less uniform verbal repertoires. The urban vernacular speech of large cities preserves traditional features at the same time that it stimulates innovation: Belfast English, for instance, retains structures such as the *for to* infinitive, e.g. *I went to the shop for to get bread* (Henry, 1995, p. 83), which it shares with “other conservative dialects” (Henry, 1995, p. 7).

### **3. The origins and developments of English in Northern Ireland**

The present section provides a chronological account of the external and internal (i.e. linguistic) history of English in NI. It is divided in three subsections, each of which will contextualise the linguistic processes undergone by Northern Irish English and present some resulting features at the levels of phonology and morphosyntax. For reasons of space, the lexicon has not been considered in this paper. As an open class, this is the level which exhibits less transfer, for it “enjoys high consciousness among speakers” (Hickey, 2001, p. 18). The section, then, is organised as follows: in 3.1., I sketch out the first period of contact between Irish and English in NI, which lasted roughly from 1169 until the end of the sixteenth century, when the second period opened. 3.2. then presents the new forms of English introduced into the region during the seventeenth-century Ulster plantations. Finally, 3.3. provides an overview of the linguistic processes that took place during this second period of contact and the eventual language shift completed in the nineteenth century.

#### **3.1. Pre-Norman Northern Ireland and first period of contact between Irish and English**

As we will be dealing with the first centuries of contact between Irish and English here, this subsection will explore the interaction between these two languages, including

the substratal transfer from Irish. The reader should bear in mind, however, that the large-scale language shift from Irish to English in NI took place in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, so the question of Irish influence will also be addressed in 3.3.

In this issue, a convenient consideration from which to depart is that all varieties of (Northern) Irish English emerged, as McCafferty (2011) indicates, in a territory colonised by English-speakers. As a result, the contact between the indigenous language, Irish Gaelic, and the language of the new settlers (which, naturally, was not homogeneous) permeated all aspects of both the internal structure of the emerging variety and the development of sociolinguistic attitudes (Kallen, 1997). The issue of language contact is complex and needs to be considered accordingly. There is a variety of factors that can determine the type of contact between two speaker communities and its outcomes; these include the overall demographics, the timescale of the contact, the attitudes of speakers, and the structural compatibility of the two languages, among others (Maguire, 2018).

We know from the external history that during the language shift, the type of contact between Irish and English involved a power imbalance. In such a setting, the language of the coloniser is learned as the second language and acts as the superstrate or receiving language, while the language spoken before the settlement(s) provides substratal input. This scenario is recurrent in cases of colonisation which derive in a language shift, and the outcome is one in which the languages of the socially subordinate communities affect mostly the phonology and morphosyntax of the target language. However, because the notion of prestige is subject to change, it was not always the case that English was the most advantageous language to speak in (Northern) Ireland.

Prior to the arrival of the Anglo-Normans, closer links were established between the Irish and the Roman world, resulting in the introduction of Christianity on the island. With this, Latin began to function as the high-prestige language alongside written Old Irish whereas spoken Old Irish, common to the “vast majority of the Irish population”, was the low-prestige language (Corrigan, 2010, p. 108). Kallen (1997, p. 7) confirms that the “primary evidence of linguistic influence in the early pre-Norman period involves the use of Latin”.

While “trade and religious links had already been established with the Anglo-Normans” before the early Middle Ages (Corrigan, 2010, p. 109), it was not until the year

1169 that the so-called ‘Anglo-Norman invasion’ ensued. It is thus “conventional to associate the introduction of the English language” into Ireland with this date (Kallen, 1997, p. 6) although the contact in Ulster was “largely restricted to Antrim and Down”, especially in agricultural lowlands around which medieval urban centres were developed (Corrigan, 2010, p. 109). This initial interaction between the Irish and the English was characterised by an assimilation of the colonisers (conventionally labelled ‘Gaelicisation’) into the native culture and society, to the extent that English had practically disappeared by the sixteenth century. Concerned with this cultural assimilation, the Anglo-Irish government adopted various measures, including the Statutes of Kilkenny (1366). These, written in French –one of the high-prestige languages at the time–, ordained and established:

that every Englishman do use the English language, and be named by an English name, leaving off entirely the manner of naming used by the Irish; and that every Englishman use the English custom, fashion, mode of riding and apparel, according to his estate. (Irish Archaeological Society, 1843, as cited in Crowley, 2016, p. 199)

Despite the ineffectiveness of this legislative act of linguistic colonialism –the first passed by an Irish Parliament (Crowley, 2016)– and others such as Henry VIII’s 1537 ‘Act for English Order, Habit and Language’ in imposing the vernacular use of the English language, I share with Crowley (2016, p. 201) the view that their “significance lies precisely in [their] articulation of the link between cultural identity (the ‘manner of living’ that involves ‘tongue, language, order and habit’) and political allegiance”.

As to the influence of these events in the shaping of Northern Irish English, we know that a number of forms of English spoken predominantly in some rural areas including parts of Southeast Ulster, “between the urban strongholds of Carrickfergus and Newry” (McCafferty, 2003, p. 117), were later replaced (see sections 3.2. and 3.3.). Those which remained showed signs of the original settlement by English speakers from different dialect areas of England, mainly the west and south-west. A difficulty with respect to the analysis of linguistic structures from this period is the scantiness of documentation. As English occupied the low prestige domains in this plurilingual Anglo-Irish colony, its presence in documents is scarce (Kallen, 1997): actual evidence of the linguistic choices of the medieval Anglo-Norman society in the North is limited to either municipal records of various towns up to Carrickfergus, or to literary representations in

the guise of parody by English authors (McCafferty, 2011), thus not expected to be accurate.

Because of these issues, scholars generally agree that there is but one structure on the syntax of present-day Northern Irish English that can be attributed to direct Irish influence unquestionably, for “there is no model in other varieties or archaic forms of English which could have been an input” (Hickey, 2001, p. 3). The construction in question is the ‘hot-news’ perfect or ‘immediate perfect’, which is formed by combining a form of ‘be’ with the preposition ‘after’ and a continuous verb form. This structure is also used in the Republic, but Corrigan (2010, p. 61) notes a difference in the semantic function: in NI the temporal reading is “indeed restricted to the expression of recency”, while in the Republic it conveys a wider range of semantic functions for the perfect. Although there are different views with respect to the exact Irish prepositional construction from which this structure was borrowed, there is no doubt that “the syntactic productivity of the prepositional [tense/aspect] construction schema in Irish was among the crucial cognitive factors that conditioned” the replication (Pietsch, 2008, p. 213). An equivalent of this structure in the Irish language is provided in Pietsch (2008, p. 214):

- a. I am after going
- b. *Tá mé **tar éis** imeacht*  
is me after going

Matters are not less complicated with respect to the phonological level, since there are often conflicting views as to the origin of some features. Here I mention two examples, although this discussion is further contemplated in subsection 3.3. The consonants /t, d, n, l/ are dental in certain Mid-Ulster English and South Ulster English varieties, whereas in urban centres such as Belfast such realisation is regarded as a rural stereotype and thus recessive (Corrigan, 2010). While some authors attribute the dental realisation to substratal influence, a Scottish source is also plausible (McCafferty, 2007). Palatalised /k, g, n/ might also have a Gaelic influence, but their presence in regional varieties of British English and earlier metropolitan English could as well entail a superstratal influence (McCafferty, 2007). These realisations are common –albeit recessive– in South Ulster English and Belfast and remain “robust in (London)Derry ... and Lurgan ... especially among women” (McCafferty, 2007, p. 126).



### 3.2. ‘Ulster plantation’: Introduction of superstratal varieties

In the second half of the sixteenth century, a series of plantations<sup>2</sup> were undertaken throughout Ireland so as to quell rebellion and secure the English, Protestant throne. This model of colonisation involved the assignment of crown or commonwealth land to tenants, generally for their English nationality. In the 1570s, under Elizabeth I, private plantation schemes were launched in large areas of eastern Ulster, including most of Antrim and the north of Down (Hickey, n.d.). Despite the lack of success of some of these plantations in Ulster, which remained “heavily Gaelicised and Catholic” (Corrigan, 2010, p. 115), by 1600 “Scots had gained a foothold in the northeastern counties of Antrim and Down” (McCafferty, 2003, p. 117). Corrigan (2010, p. 112) argues that the idea of a plantation scheme itself “became a cornerstone of English policy in Ireland” and, indeed, the beginning of the seventeenth century saw a large-scale settlement that would transform the demography of NI and create an ethnic –and linguistic– division of Ireland on a north-south axis that is maintained to this day.

This series of plantations began under James VI of Scotland, who “instigated a new era for relations between Ulster and its British neighbours” (Corrigan, 2010, pp. 114-115) when he became James I of England in 1603. English and Scottish tenants began to relocate in Ulster in 1606, mainly in the northern rim (Antrim, north Co. (London)Derry, and coastal Down). The ‘Flight of the Earls’, an episode involving the departure in 1607 of a number of Irish leaders without King James’s permission, led to the confiscation of their vast states in counties Armagh, (London)Derry, Fermanagh and Tyrone (Corrigan, 2010), which were subject to further plantations. McCafferty (2003) points out that there were more plantations following the 1640s. Since the aim of this large-scale plantation was to “concentrate the British planters around new towns or garrisons, which they were to establish” (Corrigan, 2010, p. 117), the urban areas became focal points for the use of English. Furthermore, measures were implemented to ensure the pre-eminence of the British at the expense of the geographical and social marginalisation of the Irish, such as a ban on taking Irish tenants on and selling land to members of Gaelic houses (Corrigan,

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<sup>2</sup> The plantation period lasting from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century was crucial for the Anglicisation of Ireland. In the lands seized from the native landowners, the English Crown sought to “plant’ or settle loyal subjects ... so as to extend English rule” (Hickey, 2007a, as cited in Corrigan, 2010, p. 112).

2010). The large number of English-speaking newcomers and the imbalance in economic and political power (see section 3.3.) marked the beginning of the decline of Irish. According to Maguire (2018), it is likely that by the second half of the seventeenth century more than 40 per cent of the population of Ulster spoke English or Scots.

As for the origin of the settlers, the Scottish came from the south and southwest regions of Scotland and brought with them Early Modern varieties of Central, Southwest and South Scots, whereas most of the English, whose presence was prominent in central and southern Ulster, came from the Midlands and spoke various forms of Early Modern English, including the standard (Maguire, 2018). What this brought about was a mixing of dialects and languages that contributed to the heterogeneity and the peculiarities of Northern Irish English. Corrigan (2010, p. 121) points out that “there is evidence of dialect contact throughout the region that is roughly contiguous with contemporary [Mid-Ulster English]”<sup>3</sup>, which received input from Scots and, especially, from the archaic dialects of Midland English. On the other hand, a smaller degree of communication with English settlers on the part of Scots settlers in Antrim and north-east Down implied a steadier maintenance of their original varieties (Corrigan, 2010), which remained more distinctive.

As mentioned above, a further consequence of the plantation was the replacement of the forms of English introduced during the first period, a view known as the ‘discontinuity hypothesis’. Indeed, most of the exported features of modern-day Northern Irish English stem from the plantation period. I have decided to list some of these features which have attracted considerable attention in the literature, although this account does not attempt to be comprehensive:

- The agreement system known as the ‘Northern Subject Rule’ produces a distribution whereby all present-tense verbal forms can take the -s ending provided that they are non-adjacent to one of the personal pronouns *I*, *you*, *we*, or

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<sup>3</sup> Although the boundaries between varieties are of primary definitional importance, I would like to emphasise that the dialect zones here mentioned are by no means uniform. Mid-Ulster English, being the most extensive one, includes “such distinctive varieties as the urban vernacular of Belfast, the rural traditional dialects of west Ulster, and Standard Northern Irish English”, but it is oftentimes used as a covert term because its major contributions stem from northern English settlers and thus it is “readily distinguishable from Ulster Scots to the north ... and from Southern Irish English to the south” (Maguire, 2018, p. 486).

*they* when these function as their subject (Corrigan, 2010), as in *the bird sings*, *they sing*, and *they only sings*. In the case of this feature, there is “evidence of social differentiation ... with respect to age, gender and class” in both rural and urban zones (pp. 59-60) including Belfast. McCafferty (2003) traces its origin to both Scotland and the North and North Midlands of England, where it is also common.

- Double modals, e.g. *He might could come after all* (Hickey, n.d.). This British import is shared by Modern Scots and northern British Englishes such as Tyneside, although it is becoming obsolete in NI (Corrigan, 2010).
- The occurrence of *need* with a passive participle as its object, as in *My hair needs washed* (Trudgill & Hannah, 2017, p. 99), has been attested in northern British varieties. In NI, it was introduced by Scots settlers and is also rare nowadays (Hickey, 2016).
- The use of *whenever* as a subordinating conjunction in reference to a one-time event rather than to a periodic one, e.g. *Whenever he came back in* for ‘When he came’ (Kallen, 1994, p. 190), is another contribution made by Scots.

Archaic or dialect forms of English also contributed markedly to the morphology and syntax of Northern Irish English (especially in the mid-Ulster area, where some of these retentions are still ubiquitous):

- In Belfast English and other varieties, inversion of the verb and the subject can occur in imperatives, e.g. *Go you away*. Henry (1995, p. 51) observes that the postverbal subject has a “slightly emphatic or contrastive effect” and that this inversion is generally only allowed with verbs of motion which have telicity as a property. This pattern has been attested in earlier stages of standard British English.
- The co-occurrence of wh-elements (except for *whether*) with *that* (e.g. *I don’t know when that he’s going*), retained in Belfast English and other conservative dialects, is another feature found in earlier standard British English (Henry, 1995).

As far as segmental phonology is concerned, it would be impossible to describe here all the contributions of Scots and earlier English to its formation, but I will attempt to give an overview. Scots has, for instance, provided a substantial amount of input to the

quality and lexical distribution of various vowels that have “spread to other varieties spoken outside the Ulster Scots core areas” (Hickey, 2014a, p. 324) and whose variation is in most cases socially significant. Maguire (2018) lists the following, among others:

- The KIT vowel is often centralised and lowered, so that “speakers vary along the continuum [ɪ]–[i̯]–[ɛ̃]–[æ̃]” (Corrigan, 2010, p. 35). The lower realisations, e.g. *something* [sʌmθɛ̃n] and *thing* [θæ̃n], are associated with working-class speakers in Belfast and (London)Derry as well as with conservative Ulster Scots varieties.
- Notwithstanding the prevalence of the [ɛ] realisation in most of the region, the DRESS vowel can be lowered to [a-æ] in Ulster Scots (as in *dress* [dræs]) and in Belfast working-class speech, where it can undergo further variation (Corrigan, 2010).
- The TRAP lexical set displays significant allophony. Maguire (2018) reports that it is usually backed to [ɑ(:)], especially in voiced contexts, as a result of Scots input. According to Corrigan (2010), it is usually [æ] before /p, t/ and otherwise [a] in most of NI, but it can also be realised as [ɛ(:)] (e.g. *bag* [bɛ:g]) in some environments in Belfast, (London)Derry, and Ulster Scots varieties.
- In certain dialects, there are two different forms for the PRICE diphthong depending on the phonetic environment, with [a(:)e] or [a(:)ɪ] being preferred pre-vocally, and [əi(:)] before a voiceless consonant. In final position, these realisations are phonemic and thus create minimal pairs, e.g. *lie* ‘fib’ /ləi:/ and *lie* ‘recline’ /la:e/ or /laɪ/ (Wells, 1982, as cited in Corrigan, 2010, p. 38). McCafferty (1999) identified [eɪ] and [ɛɪ] as being more frequent among working-class speakers and [aɪ] and [ʌɪ] occurring in formal settings in his research on the speech of (London)Derry.
- In Ulster Scots and some varieties of Mid-Ulster English there is a lack of distinction between the LOT and the THOUGHT vowels, which are realised as [ɔ:], as in [stɔ:k] for *stock* and *stalk*. In South Ulster English, the LOT vowel is realised as [ɒ] (Corrigan, 2010).
- The vowel /u(:)/ in the GOOSE lexical set is realised as a fronted vowel [ʉ(:)], e.g. *goose* [gʉ:s]. A fronted allophone is used in many words in the FOOT lexical set (Maguire, 2018) as well, as in *put* [pʉt]. Amongst middle-class speakers in the

Ulster Scots and Mid-Ulster dialect zones, this pronunciation “has become near-categorical” (Corrigan, 2010, p. 35).

Other phonological traits stemming “from the speech of the original Lowland Scots” (Hickey, 2014a, p. 324) include:

- In syllable-final position, the /r/ is realised as the retroflex approximant [ɹ], as in *car* [kɑ:ɹ].
- Syllable-final /l/ is vocalised or even deleted in Ulster Scots, e.g. *fall* [fɑ:] (Hickey, 2007, p. 115).
- The deletion of intervocalic /ð/ as in *northern* [nɒ:əɪn] is “a common northern feature” also frequent in Scotland (Hickey, 2016, p. 258). Corrigan (2010) reports this phenomenon as being socially significant in Belfast and (London)Derry.

Finally, one feature that identifies Scots-influenced dialects effectively is vowel length, which is not intrinsic but determined by the phonetic environment of the vowel in question. This phenomenon is known as the ‘Scottish Vowel Length Rule’ (SVLR) or ‘Aitken’s Law’ and predicts that “stressed vowels are lengthened before a morpheme boundary, voiced fricatives, rhotics, hiatus or inflectional suffixes” (Moritz, 2016, p. 119), creating minimal pairs such as *brood* [brʊd] and *brewed* [brʊ:d]. This applies to all monophthongs except for /ɪ/ and /ʌ/, which are always short. While both Mid-Ulster English and Ulster Scots incorporate the SVLR “with a slight difference in duration values”, South Ulster English retains the West Germanic type vowel length system (Moritz, 2016, p. 121).

### **3.3. Second period of contact and language shift**

The hegemonic position of the British newcomer population, who swiftly secured a monopoly of economic and political power, translated into an increasing geographical and social diffusion of the English language. From the seventeenth century onwards, Gaelic-English bilingualism began to spread from the northeast around Belfast (McCafferty, 2003), and even in the rural areas “one can assume ... a functional bilingualism in which the Irish learned some English as adults from their dealings with English speakers” (Hickey, 2016, p. 12). We see, then, that bilingualism in (Northern) Ireland was uneven from the earlier stages, with the role of the English language being

dominant in the realms of politics and commerce. Even though a portion of the British and British-descendant population spoke Irish, for the native population it was becoming “increasingly necessary to use some English for communication within what was now becoming the ‘wider society’” (Kallen, 1997, p. 16), so that in the first decades of the eighteenth century “significant linguistic change was underway” (Crowley, 2016, p. 202). It is estimated that only 19 per cent of the population of Ulster spoke Irish by the late eighteenth century, a figure that is reduced to 11,5 per cent if we only consider the six Northern Irish counties (Maguire, 2018). At this point, Irish had been relegated to low-prestige domains on the whole island of Ireland, while English “had come to occupy both the domains of vernacular speech and H functions”<sup>4</sup> (Kallen, 1997, p. 15).

An additional critical factor precipitating the shift to English was emigration for religious and economic reasons, chiefly to the New World and Britain (Hickey, n.d.). The failure of crops resulting in a series of famines, including those of 1728-1729 and 1741, had severe effects especially on the rural poor and established emigration as a way of life. These circumstances persisted throughout the following century, which witnessed the ‘Great Famine’ of the 1840s. This was responsible for a notable population drop in Ulster and “affected Irish-speaking districts most heavily” (Kallen, 1997, p. 17). Moreover, the institution in 1831 of the state-funded national school system, which taught in English exclusively, delivered the conclusive blow to the Irish language, whose use in Ulster had collapsed to under 4 percent by the 1860s (Fitzgerald, 1984, as cited in Maguire, 2018).

The interaction between English and the Irish-speaking population underlies some linguistic processes that were instrumental in the internal development of the (Northern) Irish varieties of English. Among these is analogical levelling, whereby adult speakers of Irish switching to English searched “for equivalents in the target to categories they [were] familiar with” (Hickey, 2007, p. 135). Features of Irish which appear to have been subject to this process include the distinction between second-person singular and plural personal pronouns –and, analogically, possessive pronouns–. It appears that the first speakers shifting to English felt the need to transfer this productive feature from Irish, with

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<sup>4</sup> Certain bilingual scenarios are characterised by the concurrence of two languages/varieties: a L(ow) variety, used in the domestic sphere and ordinary conversation, and a H(igh) variety which functions in higher domains such as public life, the media, and education. This situation is known in sociolinguistic literature as ‘diglossia’ (Hickey 2014a, p. 96), a notion related to that of prestige and introduced by Charles A. Ferguson.

different results arising. *Youse* and *yez* derive from applying the analogical plural formation to *you* and *ye*, the latter being the form used in earlier stages of English (Hickey, 2007). These words were not attested until the nineteenth century and continue to be in use, so the sentence *What are youse up to?* received high acceptance rates in a survey (see Figure 4) conducted by Hickey (2007).

County	Score	N	Total	County	Score	N	Total
Antrim	98%	40	41	Dublin	78%	160	205
Down	95%	36	38	Monaghan	78%	7	9
Cavan	94%	16	17	Kildare	76%	19	25
Donegal	93%	39	42	Wicklow	76%	16	21
Meath	92%	34	37	Carlow	75%	6	8
Belfast	91%	29	32	Fermanagh	75%	3	4
Derry	89%	16	18	Louth	72%	23	32
Tyrone	86%	6	7	Wexford	72%	21	29
Armagh	79%	15	19	Longford	70%	7	10

Figure 4. Highest acceptance figures (70%+) in ‘A Survey of Irish English Usage’ for the test sentence *What are youse up to?* (Hickey, 2007).

An additional notion which ought to be considered when reconstructing historical forms is convergence, for some structures exist “in both substrate and superstrate and [are] made more prominent in the new version of the target as a result of contact” (Corrigan, 2010, p. 56). There are many examples of this, including perfect constructions such as the ‘extended now’ (*They’re gone now*), the ‘indefinite anterior’ (*I never heard any name on it*), and the ‘resultative’ (*I’ve the book read*). The latter, for instance, has been considered as a transfer from Irish, where it has an equivalent, but also as a retention of an older English perfective construction. Pietsch (2009, as cited in McCafferty, 2011) made a case for it being a ‘reinvention’: after falling into disuse, it then reappeared in the nineteenth century “modelled on a parallel Irish perfective construction” (McCafferty, 2011, p. 21). Another popular example is the aforementioned *for to* infinitival construction, which showed the highest acceptance rates in Belfast, Armagh and Antrim (Corrigan, 2010).

Turning now to the phonological level, we have the example of epenthesis, especially vocalic (e.g. [filəm] for *film*), often assumed to be a substratal feature (Corrigan, 2010, p. 40). In a recent publication, Maguire (2018, p. 504) argued against this view, claiming that “at most, [Irish] played a reinforcing role in the transmission of

epenthesis from English and Scots”. There are other pronunciations that can be traced to either Irish, superstratal Scots/English, or both, such as a rounded [ɔ:] in the STRUT lexical set and the clear /l/ realisation (i.e. [l]) in all positions, which has been suggested to be conditioned by social factors including age, regionality, social network type, or gender (Corrigan, 2010). With respect to these two features, there appear to be parallels in the substratal as well as in the superstratal input, so both explanations have been advocated (Maguire, 2018).

From the previous sections, then, it can be seen that the origin of Northern Irish English is complex, as there are various possible sources to consider. On combining the input languages with the processes deriving from the context in which English was learned, one can build up an image that accounts for the remarkable diversity in Northern Irish English. Such image can be summarised in the following list (see Figure 5), drawn up by Hickey (2007) for the case of Hiberno-English and to which I have added Scots.

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1. Transfer from Irish
  - 2a. Dialect forms of English
  - b. Archaic forms of English
  3. Forms of Scots
  4. Features deriving from the context in which English was learned
  5. Features with no recognisable source (independent developments)
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*Figure 5. Possible sources of features in Northern Irish English. Adapted from Hickey (2007).*

#### **4. Sociolinguistic developments**

The roots of Irish English studies can be traced back to an ancient interest in the gathering of lexical material (Hickey, 2016). Ever since the late eighteenth century, the complex background of English speakers in the north of Ireland has stimulated research on specific local features. As a prime example we have David Patterson’s 1860 publication on the ‘provincialisms of Belfast’, written from a rather prescriptivist approach. Most works on Northern Irish English account for regional particularities in the spoken varieties or have a historical component. However, with the development of sociolinguistics as a distinct field of study in the second half of the twentieth century, attention also began to be devoted to the relationship between the existing variation in



language and extralinguistic factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, social class, style, or social networks.

To illustrate this, for instance, the speech of the small locality of Coleraine, in Co. (London)Derry, was studied by Kingsmore in 1995. According to Corrigan (2010), Kingsmore's results show variation along gender lines with regard to different variables, including the alveolar [ŋ] realisation of /ŋ/ in verbal *-ing* forms such as *talking* being more frequent in females; the phenomenon of *t*-glottalisation being an “uncorrected rural form and ... a social marker of female identity” (Corrigan, 2010, p. 43), as opposed to the [d] and [zero] variants used by male working-class speakers and the polite glottalised /t/ variant [tʔ]; and clear /l/ being preferred by females as opposed to the more frequent dark /l/ urban variant [ɫ] (as in *pull* [pʌɫ] or [pʊɫ]) in the speech of males (Corrigan, 2010). This matter has been more widely examined in the speech of Belfast. For example, Douglas-Cowie et al. (1995) and Lowry (2002) note a correlation between prosodic features and gender, with males employing more rising nuclear patterns in declaratives (as cited in Corrigan, 2010). In addition, the aforementioned use of *whenever* to denote a single definitive event, as well as negative concord (e.g. *I didn't feel nothing*), were common in the speech of middle-class female schoolchildren in a 1986 study (Kallen, 1994).

Social class has also been proved to determine the realisation of different variants. The 1986 exploration of the speech of Belfast schoolchildren showed “a strong relationship between social class and the use of vernacular variants” (Kallen, 1994, p. 190), including the *for to* infinitive structure appearing only among working-class male speakers. Another prominent example involves a “distinctive accentual feature” of Northern Irish English (Corrigan, 2010, p. 37), i.e. the [əʊ, aʊ, ɔʊ] realisation of the MOUTH diphthong. In locations such as Belfast and Coleraine, the degree of fronting of the first element is diagnostic of class status, so that working-class speakers prefer more fronted realisations such as [ē].

Finally, the ethnic division between Protestant and Catholic communities in NI has been for decades “a particularly salient one culturally and socio-politically” (Corrigan, 2010, p. 27). Kevin McCafferty (1999), who carried out thorough analyses of the speech of (London)Derry, remarked that “the study of Catholic/Protestant ethnicity is a neglected aspect of [Northern Irish English] studies” (p. 251), with most publications not including “explicit analysis of the ethnic factor”. Naturally, one must consider the depth of the social fracture that we are talking about, to the extent of deriving in a sectarian

armed conflict. However, we do have some information on the differences in language use along ethnic lines. We know, for example, that the realisation of the dark /l/ is more common in formal styles amongst Catholics in Belfast and Tyrone (Corrigan, 2010). In (London)Derry, a city of Catholic majority, Catholics favour the [ɪ] realisation of the FACE vowel while Protestants tend towards the Belfast vernacular [iə] (McCafferty, 1999), e.g. *place* [pliəs] (Corrigan, 2010, p. 34). In Belfast, the palatalisation of /k, g/ as in *cap* /kjap/ and *gap* /gjap/, often viewed as a rural feature, appears more commonly amongst Catholic communities, as does the dental realisation of /t, d, n, l/, as in *banter* [bæntəɹ] (Corrigan, 2010, p. 42). When dealing with this ethnic divide, territorial differences can also provide useful data, for these communities have remained both spatially and socially segregated for decades.

## 5. Suggestions for future work

English in NI is sometimes treated homogeneously and limited to an analysis vis-à-vis Hiberno-English. Previous work has failed to address all the possibilities of inter-regional and intra-regional variation within national boundaries, as a number of areas have not been extensively explored, including that of pragmatics and the analysis of discourse strategies (Corrigan, 2010). As Barron & Pandarova (2016) claim, “[s]tudies of regional pragmatic variation on a more subordinate level, as for instance, ... across the rural/urban divide represent a research desideratum” (p. 113). Such approach might suggest other directions for further research to follow, for example, at the level of suprasegmental phonology. In a recent study, Moritz (2016) found significant variation between the three main varieties of Northern Irish English with regard to intonation in declarative sentences. As opposed to most English dialects, including Hiberno-English, rising tones are neutral in Northern Irish English whilst falling tones are “largely reserved for echo questions and exclamations” (Corrigan, 2010, p. 47). However, Moritz’s findings reveal inter-dialect divergence: while Mid-Ulster English and Ulster Scots display a high rising terminal –with a difference in the shape of the final contour–, South Ulster English has a falling contour (see Figure 6). The researcher hypothesised that these results might be related to the Scottish Vowel Length Rule, given that the lengthening of vowels due to SVLR “leads to a larger pitch excursion and the rising pitch pattern is positively correlated to the lengthening of vowel duration in [intonation phrases]” (Moritz, 2016, p. 121), but further research is needed to offer a conclusive explanation.

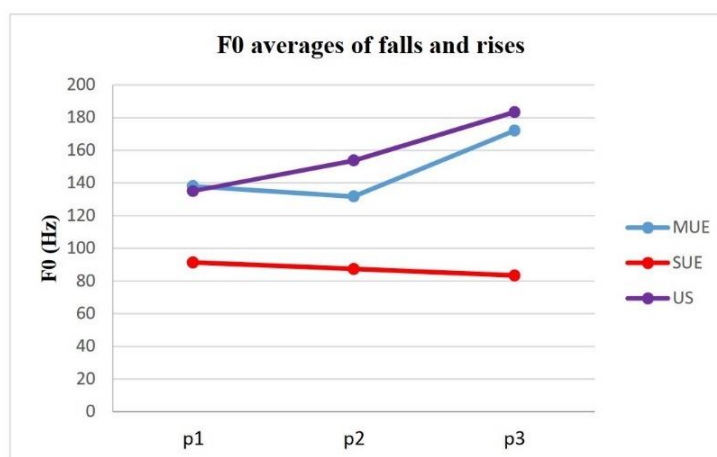


Figure 6. Mean rise alignment in the three dialect zones: Mid-Ulster English, South Ulster English and Ulster Scots (Moritz, 2016).

## 6. Conclusion

As we have seen, the study of the English language in NI can be addressed from varying approaches. Throughout the present paper, I have attempted to prove that the heterogeneous input which gave rise to varieties of English in this region, including Irish, Scots, and dialectal/archaic English, as well as the developments it has undergone in later centuries, make NI a compelling place to conduct linguistic research. In effect, scholarship in the area of Northern Irish English studies has a rich and enduring tradition, and the intricate relationship between language and sociopolitical identities offers a number of possibilities for further investigation.

This paper has argued that Northern Irish English emerged in a context of language contact following colonisation and in a matter of 200 years replaced almost completely the indigenous language. While the economic predominance of the British, among other factors, can account for an urge to learn English, it does not sufficiently explain the rapid loss of Irish as far as the native population is concerned. For that, one would have to address an issue which has remained relevant in contemporary NI, i.e. the cultural status attached to the English language (Crowley, 2016). The construction of such cultural hegemony was strengthened by the incorporation of the country into the United Kingdom and lies at the foundations of a social conflict which also took place on cultural grounds.

While this is not the place to delve into the nature of the conflict, it is fair to emphasise the symbolic importance of language as a marker of identity in NI, something

which has been widely acknowledged across disciplines such as sociology and anthropology. As Corrigan (2010, p. 27) observes, “there has been much discussion of the extent to which religious affiliation and its concomitant traits, including social disadvantage and the ethno-sectarian geography of NI, have linguistic implications”. The recent revival of Irish, especially –though not exclusively– among Catholics, and Ulster Scots among Protestants, is without doubt related to the deliberate politicisation of these languages in the discourse of the leading voices in the conflict (O’Reilly, 1999). A further –less desirable– consequence of this cultural nationalism and identity politics involves a scenario in which language became a weapon in the cultural war, so that “the Irish language was used to pit Irishness against Englishness” (Crowley, 2016, p. 209).

Before concluding, it is my wish to establish a connection between these issues and Heaney’s experience in the introduction. To have a native speaker of English admit that it took a while to persuade himself that he was “born into” the English language and the English language was born into him (Heaney, 2000, p. xxiv) has, in my view, significant implications, not the least of which is the recognition of a cultural identity crisis rooted in the sociopolitical divide in question. As I suspect that this sentiment is echoed by a wider portion of the Northern Irish population, I think that it would be productive to direct more attention to it in linguistic studies. Now that the Catholic and Protestant communities are less isolated and more than twenty years have passed since the signing of the Belfast Agreement, opportunities for future research include exploring if linguistic norms have begun to converge among these communities or, as McCafferty observed in 1999, Catholics remain oriented towards local forms –often regarded as rural and/or archaic– and lead in promoting local innovations while Protestants are more inclined to use generalised Northern Irish English patterns. Whatever the case might be, it is clear that “ethnicity is an important factor in studies of [Northern Irish English]” (McCafferty, 2001, p. 4) and, as such, it deserves to be discussed more widely. Despite the limitations of this article, I hope I have been able to offer some insight into such discussion and a broader one on Northern Irish English, as well as to give an approximation of the diverse linguistic panorama existing in Northern Ireland, a region where one’s language can always be, in Heaney’s own words, “an entry into further language” (Heaney, 2000, p. xxv).

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