

The Dialects of Irish

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The Dialects of Irish

Study of a Changing Landscape

by

Raymond Hickey

De Gruyter Mouton

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Preface

This book is intended as an overview of present-day dialects of the Irish language for both scholars and students who are interested in Irish but do not necessarily have prior experience of the language. There are many reasons why this subject should be given treatment in book form. Irish is a language split into dialects, three main ones with further subdivisions. These dialects are related to each other but in their development over centuries they have diverged considerably. So both the relatedness of the dialects and their apparent differences are of linguistic interest. The dialects offer evidence for pathways of phonological and grammatical change which could be of interest to scholars beyond the field of Celtic studies.

Any treatment of the sound system of Modern Irish is of necessity a study of its dialects. In this respect Irish is essentially different from other languages such as French, German or Russian which are available as codified standards and which can, and have been, treated independently of the existing dialects of these languages. However, in the literature on Irish the issue of the spoken dialects is often ignored. Pronunciations are all too frequently not given in works on Irish, for instance, in grammars and introductions to the language. Even the major contemporary Irish-English dictionary, Ó Dónaill (1977), contains no indication of pronunciation or indeed any mention of regional differences among the lexical items it lists (however, Mac Cionnaith (1935) is an early lexicographical work which did give information on basic dialect differences). Today this means that both students and scholars are often unsure about how words are actually pronounced. They must learn about the pronunciation of Irish in the different dialects from teachers or through visits to Irish-speaking areas and either or both of these options may not be available to them.

Dialect study is about registering detail but also about reaching generalisations across, and establishing correspondences between the different dialects. The text of this book seeks to draw the contours of the dialects while much detail pertaining to realisations in individual dialects can be gleaned from the footnotes. An explicit approach has been taken towards the presentation of information and translations for all Irish words are given including placenames, something which may be seen as superfluous by Irish colleagues but which is necessary for those beyond Ireland who may have occasion to study the material in this book. What is also apparent is that to illustrate various aspects of Irish phonetics words may have been chosen which are not perhaps part of the active vocabulary of traditional

speakers, i.e. so-called ‘learned’ words have been used on occasion. However, this has been kept to a minimum to ensure that the illustrations from Irish are words common in everyday usage in the dialect areas.

The data on which the statements in this book are based stem from a project called *Samples of Spoken Irish* which I carried out from 2004 to 2009. Over 200 speakers from the different Irish-speaking regions took part in this survey and the recordings of their speech are on the accompanying DVD to be found on the inside of the back cover of this book. It is essential to consult the DVD when reading the book as it contains the actual realisations of various dialect forms and thus gives an accountable record of pronunciations found across the areas where Irish is still spoken today. In particular, readers should refer to the two modules, *Features by category* and *Features by locality*, which contain hundreds of sound files illustrating key features of Irish dialects. The software on the DVD also allows users to listen to different realisations of lexical sets by clicking on transcriptions in maps and provides access to many more sound samples and feature illustrations than could be dealt with in the text (for reasons of space). For the placenames discussed in this book the main source of information has been the Placenames Database of Ireland, *Bunachar Logainmneacha na hÉireann* (URL: <http://www.logainm.ie>).

In preparing this book I received much assistance from colleagues working in the field of Modern Irish. Of these I would like to give special mention to Dr. Brian Ó Catháin, National University of Ireland Maynooth, who shared many of his insights concerning Irish dialects with me and who is not to be associated with any shortcomings of this book. The editorial team at Mouton de Gruyter, in particular Birgit Sievert and Angelika Hermann, also deserve thanks for their professional help in the production of this book. Furthermore, the University of Duisburg-Essen provided a generous contribution towards the printing costs for which I am grateful. Last but not least I would to thank all the individuals in the Irish-speaking districts who helped by sharing their knowledge of the Irish language with me and by making the collection of the database for this book such a rewarding experience.

Raymond Hickey
June 2011

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I Introduction

1. The Irish language today

Before the arrival of the first English settlers, over 800 years ago, Irish was the language of the native population of Ireland.¹ The Irish had successfully assimilated other ethnic groups, such as the Vikings and were to do so with the Anglo-Normans after the twelfth century. Irish survived in a dominant position in Ireland up to the seventeenth century, after which the language came to be replaced more and more by English, both in the North and South of the country. Given this situation, the Irish language is regarded by the great majority in the Republic of Ireland (Hickey 2009) as their linguistic heritage and as the bearer of native Irish culture.

The language is called *Gaeilge*, or *An Ghaeilge* when preceded by the definite article. The present-day dialects of Irish have different pronunciations² of this name: in the North it is pronounced [ge:l^hik^h], in the West and in spelling pronunciations of the standard written form it is [ge:l^hg^hə]. In the South and South-West of the country the variant *Gaelainn* [ge:l^hin^h] is found.

The position of Irish is anchored in the Irish constitution from 1937:

Article 8 of the Constitution of Ireland

1. *Ós í an Ghaeilge an teanga náisiúnta is í an phríomhtheanga oifigiúil í.*
2. *Glactar leis an Sacs-Bhéarla mar theanga oifigiúil eile.*

[1. Because Irish is the national language, it is the primary official language.

2. English is accepted as another official language. – RH].

Despite this constitutional support, English is in effect the language of public life and around 99% of Ireland's four million people speak it as a native language. Nonetheless, Irish has a special status in Ireland. Although perhaps not more than 1% of the population today are native speakers, the language looms large in the minds of the Irish as the carrier of their cultural heritage, given that it was formerly the native language of the majority of the population (Ó Riagáin 1997). Many people claim that Irish is their

¹ If not otherwise specified, the term 'Ireland' refers to the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland is referred to by using just this term.

² The transcriptions in this book follow largely the conventions of the International Phonetic Association (IPA). For details of how this corresponds to other systems used for Irish, see Appendix 3. *The Transcription of Irish*.

‘native language’ even though their knowledge of the language may be poor.³ This attitude is to be found in public life as well. Government bodies have Irish names, signposts are bilingual, official letters often contain an opening and a salutation in Irish. Indeed a knowledge of Irish was a requirement for the civil service in Ireland until 1974.

Television announcers sprinkle a few words of Irish in their commentaries or news broadcasts. Politicians may claim that Irish is their native language, reading a few words of Irish, usually with a pronunciation heavily influenced by Irish English.

1.1. Irish and the government of Ireland

Given the primary status of Irish in the Constitution of Ireland the Irish government is formally committed to supporting and furthering the Irish language in all areas of society. The two government departments which are concerned most intensively with language questions are the department of education and skills (*An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna*) and that for the Gaeltacht.⁴ The official title of the latter is now *An Roinn Gnóthaí Pobail, Comhionannais agus Gaeltachta* ‘The Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs’. This government department is not exclusively responsible for the Gaeltacht but has a broader brief as its mission statement specifies: ‘To promote and support the development of communities and to advance the use of the Irish language’ (source: www.pobail.ie).

In July 2003 the *Official Languages Act* became law. This act was designed to provide a statutory framework for the provision of public services in the Irish language. It regulated a number of issues such as the use of Irish in official announcements and advertisements and specified the obligations of the government regarding the Irish language. The act also provided for *An Coimisinéir Teanga* ‘The language commissioner’, an independent official appointed by the President of Ireland and head of *Oifig Choimisinéir na dTeangacha Oifigiúla* ‘The Office of the Commissioner of

³ The use of the term ‘native’ by non-linguists may have more to do with identity than with actual competence in the language.

⁴ The term ‘Gaeltacht’ is used as a collective reference to Irish-speaking districts which are now geographically discontinuous and have been at least since the early twentieth century. To refer to an individual Irish-speaking district the term ‘Gaeltacht’ is used with a qualifying geographical label before it, e.g. the ‘Conamara Gaeltacht’.

Official Languages'. The task of the commissioner is to supervise the implementation of the official languages act and to protect language rights.⁵

1.2. Irish and the European Union

The European Union offers official support to the minority languages within its borders through the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* which was drafted some years ago and adopted by both the Irish and British governments in 2001.⁶ The articles of the European Charter oblige the British and Irish governments to support, among other things, the minority languages found in the island of Ireland. These are Irish and Ulster Scots. For the latter there is a separate institution *The Ulster-Scots Agency/ Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch* (Hickey 2007: Chapter 3) and for the Irish language there is a corresponding institution called *Foras na Gaeilge*. (lit. 'The Irish foundation'). According to its own description it is

the body responsible for the promotion of the Irish language throughout the whole island of Ireland ... In the Good Friday Agreement, it was stated that a North/South Implementation body be set up to promote both the Irish language and the Ulster Scots language. Under the auspices of this body, Foras na Gaeilge will carry out all the designated responsibilities regarding the Irish language. This entails facilitating and encouraging the speaking and writing of Irish in the public and private arena in the Republic of Ireland, and in Northern Ireland where there is appropriate demand, in the context of part three of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. (source: www.gaeilge.ie).

1.3. Irish as an official language

On 1 January 2007 the Irish language attained status as an official language of the European Union. The practical implications of this change are many. Irish persons can now be employed in offices of the EU, where two official languages are required, by specifying knowledge of Irish and English. A further consequence of the new status is a great increase in the amount of EU publications which are available in Irish as is the right of people to use

⁵ The offices of the commissioner are located in An Spidéal/Spiddle in the Conamara Gaeltacht, see the associated website at www.coimisineir.ie.

⁶ See the assessment of the latter in Nic Craith 2003 and the general discussion in Phillipson 2003, especially pp. 152-157.

Irish on official EU occasions and to have interpreting facilities provided. The reaction to the official status of Irish has in general been positive. However, it has been pointed out within Ireland that the increase in expenditure which this entails could have been applied to promoting the Irish language in Ireland. Outside of Ireland there has been a natural demand by language communities with much greater numbers, e.g. Catalán with some six million speakers, to also be accorded the same official status.

1.4. The Irish language in modern Ireland⁷

Irish is a language with a long history and a considerable body of both fictional literature and language research work connected with it. Although formerly the native language of several million people it has been reduced now to some tens of thousands who use the language as their first means of communication in historically continuous communities, the districts which collectively form the Gaeltacht. Before considering the question implicit in the title to this section it is worth dealing briefly with these Irish-speaking districts to better understand the geography of the present-day language.

In 1925, three years after the formation of the Irish Free State, the government commissioned the Irish police with the task of determining which electoral divisions of the country contained substantial numbers of Irish speakers (Ní Bhrádaigh et al. 2007: 103). This resulted in a two-way classification of such areas: *Fíor-Ghaeltacht* ‘true Irish-speaking region’ (defined originally as one where a minimum of 80% of the population used Irish as the predominant everyday language) and *Breac-Ghaeltacht* ‘intermittent Irish-speaking region’. These two categories together included large parts of Cos. Mayo, Galway, Kerry, Waterford (all counties still with Gaeltacht areas today) and even the western half of Co. Clare (see map in Ní Bhrádaigh et al. 2007: 102). A government act of 1929 then contained a list of electoral divisions designated as Irish-speaking. This excluded some of the districts surveyed in 1925 and labelled as Breac-Ghaeltacht then. For the purpose of housing improvement grants some other districts were added in Cos. Limerick, Cavan, Leitrim and Sligo, counties where no historically continuous communities survived during the twentieth century.

A significant reduction in the geographical extent of the Gaeltacht came about with the Gaeltacht Areas Order of 1956.⁸ After that only Cos.

⁷ A good overview of the relationship of the Irish state to the Irish language is given in Ó Tuathaigh (2008).

Waterford, Cork, Kerry, Galway, Mayo and Donegal contained officially recognised Irish-speaking districts and in all but Cos. Donegal and Kerry these were only a fraction of the size of the counties in question. Three amendments were made to the 1956 Order, in 1967, 1974 and 1982, the main addition being the recognition of Ráth Chairn⁹ as an official Gaeltacht area consisting of 10 townlands (later 15) in Co. Meath (see III.1.3.7 below). No districts have been removed from the Gaeltacht since 1956 which means that the linguistic and demographic developments of the last half century in Ireland are not reflected in the geographical definition of the Irish-speaking areas.

Some of the difficulties have arisen due to unexpected developments. For instance, there is an area called An Achréidh adjoining on the north-west of Galway city. Due to an expansion in size over the past few decades the city of Galway has encroached on this area with the result that there are now more people in the city of Galway technically living in the Gaeltacht than there are in the Connemara Gaeltacht. A further ramification of this is that there are now more people with little attachment to Irish who are entitled to vote in the elections to *Údarás na Gaeltachta* (the authority for the development of Irish-speaking regions).

The generous drawing of boundaries in the early years of the Irish state has also meant that certain Gaeltacht areas are very diffuse. This can be seen clearly in North-West Mayo. The official boundaries enclose the entire peninsula of Belmullet (called in Irish Leithinis an Mhuirthead from the main town Béal an Mhuirthead at the entrance to the peninsula), the adjoining mainland of Iorras (Erris) as well as the entire north-west corner of Mayo, the region containing Ceathrú Thaidhg (Carrowteige). This geographical extent bears little or no relationship to the number of remaining Irish speakers in this region.

The inertia evident in the Gaeltacht as a geographical entity (Ní Bhrádaigh et al. 2007: 105) did, however, lead to a new attempt to define it in terms of language usage but the study released in 2007 (see I.2.6. for details) consisted of recommendations and not of legislative measures.

Outside the current Gaeltacht areas there are many people with a strong interest in the Irish language and its culture. Given that the latter group is

⁸ The distinction between *Fíor-Ghaeltacht* and *Breac-Ghaeltacht* was abandoned with this order and the provision of a government department for the Gaeltacht was made.

⁹ This name normally has lenition of the second element, i.e. *Chairn* with /x-/. But some authors use a form without this lenition, i.e. *Cairn* with /k-/, see the relevant items by Stenson in the bibliography.

numerically by far the greater, it is probably their forms of Irish which will survive into the twenty first century (Mac Giolla Chríost 2005). Public support for the language, both within Ireland and through its new official recognition by the European Union, is important in providing a social framework in which the language can prosper. Certain issues about the language seem intractable, such as the inconsistent orthography or the question of what dialect might be taken as standard.¹⁰ Whether the language will survive and perhaps even spread within Ireland is a question which ultimately rests on its perception as a medium fit for use on all levels in contemporary Irish society.

¹⁰ There have been attempts at producing a common standard of pronunciation, see Ó Baoill (1986, 1988) and the summary discussion in Ó hIfearnáin (2010: 567-570). Despite the many efforts of concerned scholars, the issue is one of acceptance in the traditional Irish-speaking communities. These show no major sign of approximating to each other in terms of pronunciation. On questions of orthography in a possible standard for Irish, see Williams (2002).

2. Who speaks Irish?

This is not an easy question to answer given that official figures in Ireland have been unrealistically optimistic throughout the entire twentieth century (Ó hÍfearnáin 2010: 539-543), a period of major decline in the numbers of native speakers of Irish. Successive governments in Ireland have been content to publish figures which bore little or no relation to reality. These figures derive from censuses which were carried out roughly every decade (since 1981 the intervals between censuses have been about halved). The problematic nature of census figures can be illustrated by looking at the returns for the ability to speak Irish during the past century and a half.

The statistics below imply that between 1926 and 2006 the number of Irish speakers in Ireland more than trebled. This is plainly absurd. Consider that the census returns were formerly based on self-assessment: individuals were asked if they could speak ‘Irish only’, ‘Irish and English’, ‘Read but cannot speak Irish’ and the responses formed the basis of the statistics produced later.

Table 1. Census returns for speakers of Irish 1861-2006

Year of census	Irish speakers	Non-Irish speakers
<i>All ages</i>		
1861	1,077,087	3,325,024
1871	804,547	3,248,640
1881	924,781	2,945,239
1891	664,387	2,804,307
1901	619,710	2,602,113
1911	553,717	2,585,971
1926	543,511	2,428,481
<i>3 years and over</i>		
1926	540,802	2,261,650
1936	666,601	2,140,324

1946	588,725	2,182,932
1961	716,420	1,919,398
1971	789,429	1,998,019
1981	1,018,413	2,208,054
1986	1,042,701	2,310,931
1991	1,095,830	2,271,176
1996	1,430,205	2,049,443
2002	1,570,894	2,180,101
2006	1,656,790	2,400,856

In the 2006 census the language data were collected by asking a single question: ‘Can you speak Irish’; below is the relevant part of the census questionnaire.

Figure 1. Question on the Irish language in the 2006 census

12 Can you speak Irish?

Answer if aged 3 years or over.

1 ☐ Yes

2 ☐ No

IF ‘Yes’, do you speak Irish?

✓ the boxes that apply.

1 ☐ Daily, within the education system

2 ☐ Daily, outside the education system

3 ☐ Weekly

4 ☐ Less often

5 ☐ Never

Because the truthfulness of claims concerning language competence made by individuals was not checked, over-reporting became the norm after Irish independence (post-1922) and was continued through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

2.1. Census 2006 – Irish Language

A census was carried out in Ireland in spring 2006 (Census Night was Sunday, 23 April).¹¹ The returns have been processed by the Central Statistics Office Ireland, *Príomh-Oifig Staidrimh na hÉireann*, and all figures used here were obtained from its website at www.cso.ie.

On 4 October 2007 Volume 9 of the 2006 census – *Irish Language* – was published by the Central Statistics Office. Over some 150 pages, consisting mainly of tables, it attempts to document all aspects of the Irish language in contemporary Ireland. This census, however, still claims that over 40% of the population of Ireland have an ability to speak Irish (without any attempt at specifying just what this means).

Table 2. Persons aged 3 years and over usually resident and present in the State on Census Night, classified by ability to speak Irish.

Total population	Ability to speak Irish	Non-Irish speakers	Not stated	% of total
3,990,863	1,650,982	2,242,554	97,327	42.4

However, in one crucial respect the 2006 census provides information on language use which gives the returns a flavour of reality. For the first time, the census registers the use of Irish by the census respondents and, importantly, distinguishes between use of the language in the educational system¹² and outside. It has long been assumed by observers of census figures that the claim of respondents to speak Irish rests largely on their exposure to the language in school (where the language is compulsory). Needless to say, the level of proficiency attained with a compulsory subject in school can and does vary greatly.

The use of the language on a daily basis outside the education system, which is a good yardstick for any living community language, presents a very different picture. Consider the following returns in this respect.

¹¹ A further census was carried out on 10 April 2011 but the results were not available in time for inclusion here.

¹² For an overview of Irish and education in Ireland, see Ó hIfearnáin (2010: 550-557).

Table 3. Use of Irish within and outside the education system

	<i>Daily within education</i>		<i>Outside education</i>				
Ability to speak Irish	Speaks Irish within education only	Speaks Irish also outside education	Daily	Weekly	Less often	Never	Not stated
1,650,982	452,925	31,567	53,130	96,716	578,779	411,043	26,822

These figures show that of the 1.6 million individuals who claim the ability to speak Irish, only 3.22% (53,130) actually use it on a daily basis outside the education system. Additionally, the fact that the figure for a weekly use outside the education system is nearly twice as large as for a daily use would imply that this use is very brief, that is there may not be a chance to use the language daily, but one might be able to use it once a week, assuming one can find other individuals one can talk to. Even a reference to using Irish daily outside the education system does not mean that Irish in this case is the language of choice, i.e. preferred over English for all levels of public and private exchange. In sum, the figure of 3.22% for individuals with a daily use of the language outside the education system should not be taken to imply that there is this number of native speakers of Irish in present-day Ireland.

An interesting result of these statistics is that 70.65% of those who reported an ability to speak Irish never use the language at all. Those who neither speak Irish within or outside the education system total 1,166,490, i.e. just over 70% of the 1,650,982 who claim the ability to speak Irish. So what does the ability to speak Irish mean for this 70.65%? The only answer is that they once learned the language (in school), have not used it since, but view the remnants of their knowledge of Irish as an ability to speak the language. In the census collection situation, where there was no checking of language competence and where the census collector was not likely to have any particular knowledge of the language anyway, this type of claim could be made with impunity.

The relationship between the use of Irish within the education system and outside is more even in the Gaeltacht compared to the urban centres of Ireland. For instance, in Dublin 104,743 persons reported using Irish on a daily basis within the education system while only 6,658 (6%) stated that they also speak Irish on a daily basis outside the education system. In the Gaeltacht of Co. Galway, on the other hand, 5,035 persons reported using

Irish within the education system on a daily basis with 2,416 (48%) also using the language on a daily basis outside the education system.

2.2. Use of Irish and the Gaeltacht areas

The areas designated as belonging to the Gaeltacht have always been generously defined by the Irish government. For instance, the 2006 census still maintains that part of Galway city is a Gaeltacht and returns 13,737 individuals for this area. It is true that many native speakers of Irish (from the Gaeltacht to the West) work in the city, either commuting from outlying locations or living in Galway, but it is by no means certain that a part of Galway city constitutes a living community of native Irish speakers.

Table 4. Overall figures for speakers of Irish

	Total population	Ability to speak Irish	Daily use outside education
Entire state	3,990,863 (100%)	1,650,982 (41.37%)	53,130 (1.33%)
The Gaeltacht areas	91,862 (100%)	64,265 (69.96%)	17,687 (19.25%)
Population of Gaeltacht areas	91,862		
Irish speakers	64,265	69.96%	
Non-Irish speakers	26,539	28.89%	
Not stated	1,058	1.15%	

The census statistics inadvertently confirm this. Of a supposed group of 6,878 speakers only 474 (7%) reported using Irish daily. Compare this with Galway county where the census returned 22,377 speakers with 7,382 (33%) using the language on a daily basis. In addition, the 'Galway city Gaeltacht' shows very few speakers of 65 years and over: 375 with 48 using Irish daily. This indirectly confirms that the younger speakers here are in-migrants from the Gaeltacht areas who came to the city in search of work.

A spin-off of the very broad official definition of Gaeltacht is that the census only returned 64,265 Irish speakers among the total Gaeltacht population of 91,862, i.e. only two thirds of persons in the Gaeltacht speak Irish. A more realistic, i.e. smaller, geographical definition of the Gaeltacht would yield a higher percentage of Irish speakers, though it would never reach 100% as there are many English-only speakers living in the various Gaeltacht areas.¹³

Table 5. Use of Irish on a daily basis outside the education system with speakers aged 3 years and over in each Gaeltacht, classified by frequency of speaking Irish and age group (partial).

Gaeltacht	No. of speakers	Use Irish daily	15-24	65 years plus
Donegal	16,909	5,851	512	1,562
Mayo	6,853	1,031	80	288
(Galway city	6,878	474	73	48)
Galway county	22,377	7,382	851	1,266
Kerry	6,170	1,810	179	339
Cork	2,860	622	68	126
Waterford	1,242	304	39	39
Meath	976	213	25	39
All areas	64,265	17,687	1,827	3,707

¹³ It should also be said that not all Irish-speaking families rear their children through the medium of Irish. On this issue, with respect to the Kerry Gaeltacht, see Ní Chathail (2003) and, on a broader level, the contributions in Ó Baoill (ed., 1992).

2.3. Shifts in language use

The dynamics of the current language situation can be recognised by comparing two age groups, which are roughly equivalent in terms of size, for daily use of Irish (see above table). In all the Gaeltacht areas the ten-year age group from 15-24 constitutes about 10% of the speakers who use the language daily. At the opposite end, one can see that the group of individuals over 65 constitutes more than 25% in the larger Gaeltacht areas.

In the weak Gaeltacht areas, such as Waterford and Meath, the figures are closer because the group of older speakers has been smaller for some time, whereas in the stronger Gaeltacht districts, notably in Co. Donegal and Co. Galway, the decline in language use has been more recent and so there is still a sizeable community of individuals over 65 years of age who speak Irish amongst each other on a daily basis.

There is also a significant proportion of speakers of Irish in the Gaeltacht who claim never to use Irish. The numbers here are greatest for the 25-34 year age bracket. This would confirm the view that some people who acquire Irish in their homes abandon the language as adults during their professional life.

Table 6. Use of Irish by Irish speakers outside the education system in Co. Galway (total of leftmost numerical column: 14,364).

Age		3-4	5-9	10-14	15-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Daily	7,382	147	211	267	385	466	1,011	1,100	1,377	1,152	1,266
Weekly	1,833	33	69	82	116	150	245	354	299	232	253
Less often	3,964	24	53	78	246	335	721	774	742	494	497
Never	1,185	1	9	19	86	127	264	251	238	104	86

Table 7. Use of Irish by Irish speakers outside the education system in all Gaeltacht areas (total of leftmost numerical column: 43,714).

Age		3-4	5-9	10-14	15-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Daily	17,687	332	493	566	821	1,006	2,206	2,778	3,086	2,692	3,707
Weekly	6,564	84	190	258	416	520	885	1,127	1,100	905	1,079
Less often	15,150	85	200	293	940	1,493	2,439	2,524	2,607	2,056	2,513
Never	4,313	1	31	79	385	599	954	698	694	394	478

2.4. How many native speakers of Irish are there?

For the future of the Irish language, this is the most important question. Before tackling the issue it is important to attempt defining a native speaker in a linguistic sense. A person is a native speaker of a language if he/she has acquired this language throughout childhood and started not later than five or six. There must be sufficient exposure to the language through continuous input and reinforcement by members of this language's existing speech community. The situation where individuals are exposed to two languages throughout their childhood to a more or less equal extent is quite common with bilingualism as a result.

Virtually all native speakers of Irish are bilingual with English as their other native language as it is impossible to avoid exposure to English in contemporary Ireland. In a bilingual situation the amount of exposure, use and reinforcement may vary and one language may be dominant. The degree of dominance may increase with individuals acquiring a good knowledge of the second language but not reaching native speaker competence. This stage of language shift, here to English, is characteristic today of many persons in the Gaeltacht (Hindley 1990: 207-220), born into Irish-speaking families but without the same degree of competence in Irish as their parents or grandparents (Ó Giollagáin 2002, 2005).

There are native speakers outside the Gaeltacht, many of whom are individuals who grew up there and went to live somewhere else in Ireland¹⁴

¹⁴ There is a small number of individuals who move from one Gaeltacht area to another, for instance to avail of an employment opportunity not open to them in their own community. Thus one meets persons from Kerry, Connemara or

or abroad. Even if such individuals manage to pass the language onto their children, the families remain scattered and not sufficiently numerous vis à vis English-speaking families who surround them.¹⁵ Hence, such a second generation is very unlikely to form a living community of native speakers outside the Gaeltacht and so will not be instrumental in the overall survival of the language.

It should, however, be mentioned that the issue of who is a native speaker of Irish is not straightforward in Ireland and is not viewed as such by many speakers either. There are individuals who grew up speaking Irish, transmitted to them not by native speakers from the Gaeltacht who had moved to an outside area but by parents with an excellent knowledge of the language¹⁶ and a genuine commitment to doing what they can to keep it alive, including using the language exclusively when talking to their children. This younger generation invariably has a good knowledge of written Irish through secondary and frequently tertiary education later and due to the awareness of written Irish which was likely present in their parental home.

2.5. Irish in urban settings

Irish may well be transmitted in future by non-native speakers outside the Gaeltacht who are committed to the language and dedicated to improving its status and use wherever possible. Such individuals form very small, geographically dispersed networks in contemporary Irish society.

Only in Belfast is there anything like an urban Gaeltacht,¹⁷ i.e. a community, complete with public services, in which Irish is the primary medium of everyday communication. This is *Bóthar Seoighe*, ‘Shaw’s Road’ (Nig Uidhir [Maguire] 2006), in the vicinity of Andersonstown, a largely Catholic area of West Belfast. The Gaeltacht was started by a group of families which in 1969 acquired houses on the road which gave it its

Donegal in Gaeltacht areas other than those they grew up in. Frequently such people show a mixture of dialect features in their speech.

¹⁵ This is a common situation for native speaker teachers from the Gaeltacht areas working in Irish-medium schools, so-called *Gaelscoileanna*, outside the Gaeltacht.

¹⁶ Ó Giollagáin and Mac Donnacha (2007: 36) use the term *cainteoir athdhúchais*, roughly ‘neo-native speaker’, to refer to such individuals.

¹⁷ For more information on this phenomenon, in both the Irish and Scottish contexts, see the contributions in McLeod (ed., 2007).

name. The first Irish-medium school was established shortly afterwards and was accorded official recognition by the British authorities in 1985 and continues today with about 350 pupils attending. It remains to be seen whether this enterprise¹⁸ will be successful in the long term and lead to Irish continuing in Belfast as a native language.

2.6. Census 2006 again

The 2006 census registered some 64,265 individuals within the Gaeltacht who were 'Irish speakers'. This figure, from a total of 91,862, must be rounded up somewhat as it covers those 3 years and older, i.e. the under-three year olds are not included.

Of the 64,265 about 20,000 stated that they never use Irish or use it less often than once a week (outside the education system). Even if some of these 20,000 acquired Irish as their first language, their present linguistic behaviour as 'dormant' native speakers means that they will not be involved in the transmission of the language to future generations.

Whether all the 64,265 individuals registered by the 2006 census are native speakers of Irish is uncertain (there will be some people living in the Gaeltacht but who did not grow up using Irish, especially in the periphery of the areas designated by the government as part of the Gaeltacht). If for argument's sake one subtracts about a third, because the officially specified sizes of the Gaeltacht areas are exaggerations and because not everyone, even in the core of these areas, has grown up speaking Irish as a first language, then one reaches a figure of somewhat over 40,000 for the native speakers of all Gaeltacht areas.¹⁹ This represents about 1% of the present-day population of the Republic of Ireland.

In fact this figure may in itself be too optimistic. If one considers the number of persons in the Gaeltacht who use Irish on a daily basis outside education – 17,687 – and compares it to the population of the entire state – 3,990,863 – then one reaches a percentage figure of 0.44%. Given that the number of active native speakers is probably not higher than that of those in the Gaeltacht who use Irish on a daily basis outside education, then the percentage of active native speakers in present-day Ireland would be between around 0.5%, i.e. 20,000 or perhaps a little above that.

¹⁸ Shaw's Road should not be confused with the Gaeltacht Quarter of west Belfast, a separate project around the Falls Road which began after 2002 and which is intended to promote Irish language and culture.

¹⁹ Recall that only 53,130 individuals in the entire country claimed to use Irish on a daily basis outside education.

2.7. Commissioned study of Irish in the Gaeltacht

In 2004 *An Roinn Gnóthaí Pobail, Tuaithe agus Gaeltachta* ‘The Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs’²⁰ commissioned a comprehensive study of the use of Irish in the Gaeltacht. This linguistic work was carried out by a group of scholars, led by Conchúr Ó Giollagáin and Seosamh Mac Donnacha, from the National University of Ireland, Galway in cooperation with the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. The results of this research were published in autumn 2007 as a comprehensive document, *Staidéar Cuimsitheach Teangeolaíoch ar Úsáid na Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht* ‘A comprehensive linguistic study of the use of Irish in the Irish-speaking regions’ (552 pages). This is available on the website of the department with responsibility for the Gaeltacht and – in an abbreviated form (82 pages) – as a printed publication of the same department.

The report has a number of far-reaching recommendations, e.g. the division of each Gaeltacht into three categories, A, B and C, depending on the strength of the language there. For instance, in Connemara, which is the most populous Gaeltacht area at present, only 16,000 of 45,000 people would be classified as living in a Category A district.

The report attempts to identify the reasons for language decline and makes suggestions to stem this. Chief among the reasons for the retreat of Irish is that young people – typically teenagers – who are growing up in Irish-speaking households very often do not use Irish amongst themselves, especially if there are English-speaking coevals with them. If this tendency was successfully counteracted then language continuity would be on a firmer footing and the future of the Gaeltacht would be more certain.

2.8. The position of Irish in the recent past

Alongside linguistic questions, the position of the Irish language in Irish society has been a concern of scholars. There are older studies of Irish in the early modern period, e.g. Cahill (1939, 1940) as well as several which look at the decline of the language in the late modern period, starting in the late eighteenth century, e.g. Fitzgerald (1990, 2005), de Fréine (1966,

²⁰ That was the title of the relevant department at the time. It is now (2011) called *An Roinn Gnóthaí Pobail, Comhionannais agus Gaeltachta* ‘The Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs’, URL: www.pobail.ie.

1977). Given the sharp reduction in the numbers of speakers during the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century it is understandable that attempts at language planning, with a view to improving the position of the language, have been given increased attention, see S. Ó Riain (1994) and Ó Riagáin (1997, 2007) for discussions of this issue. The Gaeltacht, which came into being after the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922, was based on language use in electoral districts during the 1920s, see the study by Ó Torna (2005). The situation for the contemporary language has naturally been studied in detail given the challenges of modern society for a minority language, see Mac Giolla Chríost (2005), H. Ó Murchú (1999), M. Ó Murchú (1993), Ó Curnáin (2009), Ó Catháin (2010). The possibility of survival in a globalised world is naturally a consideration in this context, see McCloskey (2001) and Cronin (2005) as representative literature. It is also an issue for the vocabulary of Irish which must fulfil the needs of a contemporary, knowledge-based society to survive (Ní Ghearáin 2008).²¹

Despite all the efforts of language supporters, the decline of Irish in the Gaeltacht has been proceeding inexorably in the recent past, although the pace may well have been reduced by the significant amount of official support for the language, e.g. the founding of an exclusively Irish-language radio (*Raidió na Gaeltachta*, ‘Gaeltacht Radio’) in 1972 and of a non-exclusive Irish-language television in 1996 (*Teilifís na Gaeilge* ‘Irish Television’, since re-named *TG4*).

The reasons for language decline in the Gaeltacht can be easily recognised. They have to do with the dilution of the native Irish population in these regions during the twentieth century and with the attitude to their own language by the remaining native speakers. The following quotations may help to illustrate the perception of the language’s status by native speakers who have reflected on the matter. The first extract below is from an interview which Mícheál Ó Domhnaill (1910-1997), the principal of *Coláiste na Rinne* (Ring College), Co. Waterford, given for a radio programme on Ring and broadcast in 1972.²²

Interviewer: *Nuair a thagann dul chun cinn go dtí áit mar seo, an imíonn an Gaelachas anson?* [When a place like this (= Ring, RH) becomes prosperous, does Irish language and culture suffer/disappear then?]

Ó Domhnaill: *Ah, imíonn. Dearfainn go bhfuil dhá c[h]uís le rud don tsórt son, thá a fhios agat. Go dtí, abair, fiche, nó trocha [triocha], nó daichead*

²¹ For a list of linguistic terms used in Irish, see Ó Mianáin (2008).

²² The transcription and translation are by the present author. The orthography has been adapted slightly to reflect the south-eastern dialect used by the speaker.

blian ó shin ... bhí an Rinn agus muintir na Rinne caite anso in aon chúinne beag amháin don tír. Is beag ceangal nó baint a bhí acu leis an saol taobh amuigh ach duine fánach b'fhéidir a chuaigh go Meiriceá nó b'fhéidir go Sasana ... ach bhíodar anso. Ach anson tháinig ré na motorcars isteach, tháinig ré gnó isteach agus mar sin de ... thosnaíodar súd ag dul ag obair i nDún Garbhán go dtí na monarchan atha ag fás ann go tiubh agus síos go Port Láirge agus b'fhéidir go Bleá [Baile Átha] Cliath agus áiteanna don tsórt son. Thosnaíodar ag imeacht ón Rinn. [Ah, it does. I would say that there are two reasons for this sort of thing, you know. Up to say about twenty or thirty or maybe forty years ago Ring and the people of Ring were out on their own in this corner of the country. They had little connection or dealings with people outside except for the odd person who went to America or maybe to England ... but they were here on their own. But then the era of motorcars and business came and because of that they began going to work in Dungarvan to the factories, that are growing up at a great rate there, and down to Waterford and perhaps to Dublin and places like that. They began to leave Ring.]

Ó Domhnaill: Tháinig dream nuaphósta isteach go dtí an Rinn, mná, ná raibh aon Ghaelainn [Ghaeilge] acu, agus cé gur maith an rud é sin ó thaobh na leanai fhéin ... ach ní dóigh liom go bhfuil sé, b'fhéidir, ró-mhaith ó thaobh na Gaeilaine, mar is eol dúinn go léir nuair is Béarla atha ag an máthair is Béarla atha ag a clann istigh sa tigh. [A group of newly-weds came into Ring, women who did not have any Irish, and maybe that is good for the children themselves but I don't think it is good for Irish. As we all know when the mother has English then English is what the whole family in the house has.]

Interviewer: *Cén baol is mó atá romhaibh anso?* [What is the greatest danger facing you here?]

Ó Domhnaill: Ah, is baol é go bhfuil an Béarla ag fáil an lámh in uachtar anso sa Rinn, gach aon duine gnó a thagann isteach go dtí an áit caithfidh tú dul ar Béarla leis, lucht óg agus aosta. [Ah, the danger is that English is gaining the upper hand here in Ring, every business person who comes into this place you have to deal in English with him, young and old alike.]

Ó Domhnaill: 'Sé mo thuairim gur i mbeagán blianta nach mbeidh aon Ghaeltacht ann, chun an fhírinne a rá libh. [It is my opinion that in a few years there will be no Gaeltacht left, to tell you the truth.]

The following are comments by two adult Irish speakers on the use of English by native Irish teenagers in the Gaeltacht (here: the Connemara Gaeltacht). They were contained in a broadcast by Raidió na Gaeltachta in late 2008 as part of a programme on the comprehensive language report published by the government shortly before that (see section I.2.5. above).

A: *De réir mar atá an t-am ag sleamhnú thart tá an Ghaeilge ag fáil níos tanaí, níos laige sa Ghaeltacht. Caithfear gníomhú réasúnta sciobtha.* [As time is slipping by Irish is getting more diluted, weaker in the Gaeltacht. We have to act reasonably quickly.]

B: *'Sea, agus nuair a bhíonn slua, go háirithe slua daoine óga, le chéile agus má tá duine amháin ann le Béarla, tá chuile dhuine le Béarla.* [Yes, and whenever there's a group together, especially a group of young people, and just one of them uses English, then everyone uses English.]

A: *Ah well, sin an rud, tá an ceart agat ... Is cuma cén áit é ... nuair atá daoine óga, mar a déarfá, bailithe le chéile ... tá meon áirithe i measc daoine óga anois, saghas iompú ar an mBéarla ina measc féin.* [Ah well, that's the thing, you're right about that ... It doesn't matter where you are ... when young people, you know, gather together ... there's a particular attitude among young people now, to sort of switch to English among themselves.]

The factors identified by these speakers represent the main danger to Irish in the historically continuous areas: (1) regional mobility in the twentieth century, (2) in-migration to the Gaeltacht by English-speakers and (3) an indifferent or negative attitude to their own minority language by native speakers, partly as a consequence of (1) and (2). Reversing the latter is very difficult given that young Irish speakers wish to be perceived as contemporary and sophisticated and fully fluent in English by their non-Irish-speaking peers. Whether a balance can be found between the natural desire of young people for social acceptance in Irish society as a whole and the necessity for Irish to be used as a community language (Ó Tuathaigh, Ó Laoire and Ua Súilleabháin, eds, 2004) in order to survive is not certain now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. But the matter will be decided in the present century because the numbers of native speakers in the Gaeltacht are fast dropping to a threshold under which Irish will not have sufficient community support to function fully as a living language.

During a seminar in 2008 about Irish in Mayo several people were talking about the state of the language in this county in the West of Ireland. There were ambiguous attitudes to certain developments. Here is a teacher from Erris Peninsula talking about English speakers who have come to the area and who actively support Irish there.

Creidim anois faoin dream óg atá ag teacht ar ais go bhfuil an meon sin athraithe. Agus tá siad ag tabhairt an-an-tacaíocht, ... agus an-suim i gcursai na Gaeilge san áit. Ach mar a dúirt an fear, ní bheidh, ní bheidh an Ghaeltacht mar a bhí sí aríst go deo. Ní bheidh na canúintí mar a bhí siad. Is canúintí bréagacha a bheas iontub.

[Concerning the young crowd which is coming back now, I think that that attitude has changed (the view that Irish is of no use - RH). And they are giving a lot of support, ... and have a lot of interest in language issues in the locality. But as the man said, the Gaeltacht as it was will never come back again. The dialects will never be as they were. We will only have corrupted dialects. – RH]

The disappearance of traditional dialects is seen by some as an irretrievable loss of information about the language and its ecology in the regions of Ireland. For others the concern is with adapting Irish to the needs of twenty-first century Irish society in which local lore is not relevant. But whatever the pros and cons of either stance, the demise of traditional dialects has meant that linguistically significant information is no longer accessible to scholars. A case in point is East Mayo Irish, a few remnants of which were recorded by Thomas Lavin in a PhD and a few articles (Lavin 1956a, 1956b; Lavin / Ó Catháin forthcoming). The stress system which was typical of this dialect, see II.4.3.2 below for details, is different from that in other dialects and throws light on the relationship between phonological quantity and stress placement. It is a matter of conjecture whether other dialects which disappeared without being recorded also had features of relevance to the pronunciation or grammar of Irish.

2.8.1. *Diglossia in present-day Ireland*

The notion of an area which is exclusively Irish-speaking in present-day Ireland is illusory. Those few areas where Irish is strongest are characterised by the use of English in public domains, such as business, banking, the media, etc. Irish is, however, used for communication in the home, exclusively in some instances. Those individuals who use Irish close to 100% of the time do not as a rule participate in public life in Ireland. This is the case for some few traditional Irish speakers, most of whom are farmers or fishermen.

Diglossia, the equal-status division of two languages according to their use in the private and public spheres respectively (Ferguson 1959), does not appear to have been entertained as an option by the government in Ireland. Hence a situation like that in Switzerland (Rash 1998) with local Swiss dialects used in informal situations but High German in distinctly official contexts was never recommended in the many policy documents on Irish produced during the twentieth century. A linguistic division like this might well have provided a viable space for Irish but it would not have been in

keeping with the official, but entirely unrealistic goal of reviving Irish as the primary language of modern Irish society.

Another reason why diglossia would have benefitted Irish is that it would have led to a better relation between rural and urban language use in Ireland. Up to the present day native speakers of Irish who speak the language amongst themselves in the Gaeltacht generally switch entirely to English as soon as they go to any town or city near them. This is the case in Ring with Dungarvan, in North-West Kerry with Tralee, in Connemara with Galway and in North-West Donegal with Letterkenny. If diglossia existed in Ireland then these speakers could continue their use of Irish colloquially in the towns and cities, using English for more formal contexts. The lack of this option serves to increase the feeling that as native speakers they are out on a limb in Ireland, both literally and metaphorically.

2.8.2. *Vernacular Irish in the Gaeltacht*

Irish in historically continuous areas along the western seaboard is quite different from the standard found in schoolbooks and official documents. It is not just the dialect differences which are responsible here. Rather it is the degree of influence of English on the spoken language which makes it diverge from the written norm. Many of the older native speakers in the Gaeltacht do not write Irish and are frequently unaware of the morphology and syntax of the written language. Furthermore, second-language users of Irish are often prescriptive in their attitudes. For example, the word /klʲautə/ for ‘cloud’ is well established in spoken Connemara Irish. The inherited Irish word is *scamall* /skaməlʲ/, but native speakers have /klʲautə/ when using the language colloquially. It is a moot point whether second-language speakers are justified in their criticism of native-speaker usage, even if this is replete with borrowings from English. It is true, of course, that code-switching takes place on a large scale and that the reason for this can, in part, be an insufficient lexical and stylistic repertoire among native speakers, e.g. the use of English *vet* for Irish *tréidlia*.

Such English words are, however, incorporated into Irish by taking native inflectional and word-formational affixes, e.g. *na veteannai* [vʲetənʲi:] (with an alveolar [t]) ‘the vets’, *leaidín* (< English *lad* + diminutive suffix *-ín*) ‘little lad’ or *an-job* [a:n dʒa:b] ‘great job’. This influence is found in syntax as well, e.g. *Tógaim amach é ar walk chuile mhaidín*. ‘I take him out for a walk every morning.’ instead of ... *i gcomhair siúlóide* ... ‘for a walk’, and in the great influx of English phrasal

verbs which are easy to calque in Irish, e.g. *Chuir mé isteach ar an show í*. ‘I put her in for the show’, *Caithfidh tú breathnú go maith ina dhiaidh*. ‘You have to look after him well’ (Stenson 1993a, Veselinović 2006). More subtle influence can also be observed, e.g. the verb *faigh* ‘get, obtain’ has adopted additional meanings under the influence of English *get*, e.g. the inchoative sense in *Fuair sé níos diocra teach a thógáil* ‘It got more difficult to build a house’ and the passive sense in *Fuair sé stoptha ag na póilíní* ‘He got stopped by the police’ or *Ní bhfuair mé íoctha fós* ‘I didn’t get paid yet’.

II The sound system of Irish

1. Introduction

Nearly all studies of Irish dialects deal with the Irish of a specific locality and so all forms quoted in such works are illustrative of just that dialect (see section II.3.1 below). In the present study the aim is to indicate what variation can be found across the dialects. While there are statements on forms in individual dialects there are also non-specific references to matters in Irish which are not generally controversial and which do not vary greatly across dialects. In these cases Western Irish transcriptions are used and stem from the author's data collections. By and large these were made in the South Galway Gaeltacht areas – typically Cois Fharraige, An Cheathrú Rua, Carna (see section III.1.3.6 below) so that in the present study the unqualified term ‘Western Irish’ refers for all intents and purposes to forms of Irish spoken along the southern coast of Co. Galway, including the Aran Islands. Where phonetic differences between sub-areas in this region are relevant they are indicated. The Irish-speaking west also includes parts of north Co. Galway along with south and north-west Co. Mayo where, however, the language is in a much weaker position compared to south Co. Galway.

In analogy to the general term ‘Western Irish’, the labels ‘Southern Irish’ and ‘Northern Irish’ are used so that readers can recognise what is typical of each of the three main dialect areas. Again, further subdivisions are recognised where necessary.

Because current Irish-speaking areas are much more confined than previously one can equate Northern Irish with Irish in Co. Donegal (Irish in Tyrone, Armagh and Antrim died out in the twentieth century) and Southern Irish with Irish in the province of Munster (the language has not existed in Leinster for a considerable time). The strongest Gaeltacht area in Munster is that on the Dingle peninsula (Irish: Corca Dhuibhne) followed by An Rinn/Ring in Co. Waterford and south-west Cork in Múscaí/Muskerry.

1.1. Transcription practice

The transcriptions used in this book are based on IPA practice. The bracketing used is also relevant: obliques – /.../ – refer to systemic units, square brackets – [...] – to phonetic realisations. Certain phonetic details

are not shown in transcriptions unless they are relevant to the discussion at hand. For instance, non-palatal sounds normally show apico-dental contact, but this is not shown in transcription as it is assumed to be the case, e.g. *tá* ‘is’ is transcribed as [tɑ:] and not [t̪ɑ:]. Nor is the velarisation which is typical of such segments shown as this is an automatic feature of non-palatal segments in Irish in general, i.e. to transcribe [tɑ:] as [t̪^Yɑ:] would be to include redundant information which can be mentioned occasionally but does not need to be specified each time. The velarisation which is typical of non-palatal segments is, however, indicated for the sonorants [n^Y, l^Y] as here there is a potential contrast with both the palatal sonorants [n^j, l^j] and the non-polarised sonorants [n_v, l_v] and [n_j, l_j] respectively. For an explanation of polarisation in Irish phonology and of the transcription conventions adopted in the present study, see the discussion in III.3.5.1.4 and in Appendix 3.

Systemically palatal consonants are always shown with a superscript yod after them, as they would otherwise not be distinguished from non-palatal consonants, e.g. *deacair* [d̪^jækɪr^j] ‘difficult’ where the first and last consonant in the word is palatal but the intervocalic [k] is not.

Two transcriptions are used for *r*-sounds: [r] and [r^j]. The first applies to the non-palatal *r*-sound which is found in a word like *rua* /ruə/ ‘red-coloured’. The non-palatal /r/ shows a degree of velarisation, i.e. /ruə/ is phonetically [r^Yuə]. However, because there is no three-way²³ contrast [r^Y - r - r^j] (compare the situation with *n*- and *l*-sounds), the velarisation of [r^Y] is not indicated in transcription as it is automatic and implied by the simpler transcription [r]. This transcription does not imply a trilled *r* (narrow IPA transcription). Where the nature of *r*-sounds is being discussed a narrower transcription may be used, e.g. /r/ can be realised as a tap intervocalically after a short stressed vowel as in *curach* [ˈkʌrəx] ‘currach’ (type of boat).

The schwa symbol [ə] refers to an unstressed central short vowel. This can vary depending on the polarity of the preceding and following consonants, shifting to [ɪ] in the environment of palatal sounds. However, given that the latter are indicated each time with a superscript yod, it is not necessary in systemic transcriptions to indicate the variant of schwa as well. Hence a word pair like *tamall* ‘time span.NOM’ : *tamail* ‘time span.GEN’ is transcribed systemically as /taməl^Y/ : /taməl^j/ but phonetically as [taməl^Y] : [taməl^j]. The phonetic transcription is important, not least because for speakers the acoustic cue for the difference between a final

²³ For the situation in Northern Irish see the discussion in III.3.5.1.4 below.

non-palatal and a palatal consonant is often given by the quality of the preceding unstressed vowel.

The diphthongs /ai/ and /au/ are realised with a somewhat centralised endpoint, i.e. as [aɪ] and [aʊ] respectively. This is not phonologically relevant, hence [aɪ] and [aʊ] are only used in phonetic transcriptions.

Word stress is only indicated when it does not fall on the first syllable of a word. This applies crucially to Southern Irish which has variable stress (see III.4.3.1 below). In Western and Northern Irish, non-initial stress is only found with a few words, e.g. *tobac* [tə¹bak] ‘tobacco’ (the stress pattern found in Southern Irish generally).

Irish phonetics, based on a tradition which was established in the early twentieth century, uses phonetic symbols in boldface,²⁴ e.g. *trá* **tra:** ‘strand’. There is no bracketing so that the distinction between systemic units on the phonological level and phonetic realisations is not always clear.

1.2. Statements about Irish phonology

Any study of dialects will naturally be concerned with phonetic minutiae. On the other hand presenting the overall picture of a set of dialects requires general statements. The following are examples of both types of statement.

- 1) There are no voiced sibilants in Irish. Such segments play no role in the sound structure of the language.
- 2) In the Irish of Roscommon/East Galway²⁵, Ring and Cape Clear voiced sibilants have been reported as the outcome of nasalising /s/, e.g. *i Sasana* [ɪ zasən_və] ‘in England’.

As a general statement (1) is true and is not invalidated by (2) because (1) is overwhelmingly the case in all forms of Irish today. Furthermore, the appearance of voiced sibilants in the dialects mentioned in (2) is the result of analogy, i.e. /s/ is voiced to [z] in analogy to that of /f/ to [v] as in *sa*

²⁴ The chapters of the seminal *Stair na Gaeilge* ‘History of Irish’ (McCone et al., eds, 1994) form a noticeable exception to this in using contrastive bracketing when discussing the sound systems of the major dialect areas.

²⁵ Ó hUiginn (1994: 559) mentions the occurrence of voiced sibilants as the versions of /s/ and /s^h/ with the nasal mutation applied in the now defunct Irish of east Galway.

bhFrainc [sə vrænʲkʲ] ‘in France’. Voiced sibilants do not occur anywhere as independent segments in Irish, i.e. they do not occur in the lexical citation form of words. The only words which might refute this claim are recent neologisms which begin in *z*, a letter which is not found in the native orthographical tradition in Ireland. An example would be the English loan *zú* ‘zoo’. While *z* would seem to imply an initial [z-], those individuals who speak Irish as their first language tend to pronounce this as [su:].

In the present book the aim is to make general statements about the dialects of Irish and hence demonstrate overall phonetic patterning across the varieties of the language. However, many of these statements need to be qualified in the light of details which only apply to dialect subareas or to small parts of the sound inventory of dialects. For instance, Irish does not have an [ɔ]-vowel (general statement, type 1). However, this does occur in Donegal Irish before liquids (qualifying statement, type 2). It is important to realise that qualifying statements do not invalidate general statements but rather serve to show that the latter do not apply without exception in all dialects.

2. Phonology

Irish phonology shows the normal division into consonants and vowels. Length is distinctive for vowels but not for consonants. However, consonantal length was probably a feature of Irish before the Middle Irish period (900-1200) and the effects of long consonants – called ‘emphatic’ or ‘tense’ (*teann*) in Irish (Ó Cuív 1987: 108) – on the vowels preceding them can still be seen today and the reflexes of these vowels are an important defining criterion for the different dialects of Modern Irish.

The contrast between short and long vowels is important for making lexical distinctions in Irish, e.g. *te* /t^ɪɛ/ ‘hot’ versus (*an*) *té* /t^ɪɛ:/ ‘the one who’. The length contrast is relevant to the effect of palatal and non-palatal consonants on preceding vowels because short vowels are effected by this but long vowels are not, consider the fronting of the lower vowel with *deas* /d^ɪas/ [d^ɪæs] ‘nice’ but not with *leá* /l^ɪɑ:/ [l^ɪɑ:] (*[l^ɪɪɑ:], *[l^ɪæɪ]) ‘melting’.

2.1. Voice and length distinctions

Consonants in Irish are also characterised by a voice distinction with voiced and voiceless consonants at most common points of articulation, i.e. it has labial, labio-dental, dental/alveolar and velar segments along with a voiceless glottal fricative. Irish is notable, however, in not having phonological voiced sibilants and in this respect aligns itself with the North Germanic languages and Finnish. This fact was already highlighted at the beginning of the early modern period (1200-1600, McManus 1994) by the authors of the bardic tracts.²⁶ They hive off /s/ as a consonant on its own and refer to it as the ‘queen of consonants’ (Ó Cuív 1965: 150).

Stops after both sibilants and nasals, i.e. continuant sounds, are unaspirated as in English, e.g. *stair* [stær^ɪ], not [st^hær^ɪ] ‘history’. This fact led to earlier spellings with voiced stops after continuants, although these were probably simply unaspirated, if the situation in the present dialects applied formerly as well. For instance, *scéal* [ʃk^ɪɛ:l^ɪ] ‘story’ used to be

²⁶ *The Bardic Tracts* is a collective term (L. McKenna 1979 [1944]) given to a series of treatises for instructing professional writers in the grammar of Irish. They belong to the period of Classical Modern Irish 1200-1600 (Ó Cuív 1965: 141) during which a uniform type of language was used in professional praise-poetry composed primarily in honour of local Irish rulers.

written *sgéal*,²⁷ *contae* [cu:n^Yte:] ‘county’ written *conndae*. This spelling practice may have led to scholars using voiced stops in their transcriptions, e.g. [ʃg^ˈe:L] for *scéal*, see de Bhaldraithe (1945: 29) where the post-sibilant stop is treated together with instances of single word-initial or word-final voiced velar stops like *gaol* [gi:l^Y] ‘relative’, *fágadh* [fa:gu:] ‘left.AUTONOMOUS’.

Affricates in Irish

Irish does not have phonological affricates. Phonetically, palatal coronal stops – /t^j/ and /d^j/ – can be realised as [tʃ] and [dʒ] respectively in some dialect areas, especially in the North, see the discussion in section III.3.2.3 below. In addition, the affricate [tʃ] occurs in one or two cases of sandhi. For instance, when two fricatives adjoin at the boundaries of words which are closely related then the first is changed to a stop which is homorganic with the second fricative. This results from (i) the absolute prohibition²⁸ on two consecutive fricatives in Irish and (ii) the process of forward assimilation. An instance where an affricate is triggered would be where a verb form with a word-final fricative is followed by a fricative-initial pronoun as in *bheadh sé* /v^je:x s^je:/ → [v^je(:)tʃe:] ‘he would be’ or *bhíodh sé* /v^ji:x s^je:/ → [v^ji(:)tʃe:] ‘he used to be’ (Ó hUiginn 1994: 556).

Affricates also occur in many English firstnames which are common in the Gaeltacht, e.g. *Joe*, *Jack*, *John*, *Charlie*, and in many loans from English, e.g. *Tá jeep nua ag a mhac* ‘His son has a new jeep’, *Joináil tú an t-arm san am sin* ‘You joined the army at that time’, *Rinne sé jump mór thar an gclái* ‘He took a big jump over the wall’. Whether one is dealing with established loans or instances of code-switching is difficult to determine in many cases. The fact that both voiced and voiceless affricates are produced effortlessly by Irish speakers would favour an interpretation

²⁷ By the beginning of the twentieth century, this practice was dying out as can be seen from the entry for *sg-* in Dinneen (1927: 1923): ‘for words beginning with *sg*, see under *sc-*’. However, some authors kept to the practice, e.g. Ó Máille (1927: 18) who criticises Finck, Quiggin and Sommerfelt for not writing *d*, *g* for *t*, *k* after *s* as in *sgéal* [ʃk^je:l^Y] ‘story’. This insistence on Ó Máille’s part probably resulted from his not realising that the stops are not voiced but merely unaspirated in the position immediately after *S* in a syllable onset.

²⁸ There are one or two words which have two fricatives initially, e.g. *sféar* ‘sphere’, and which are English loanwords of Greek origin.

of words with initial /tʃ-/ or /dʒ-/ as loans. However, such words are not subject to initial mutation despite their being in the language for a considerable time.²⁹ For instance, after a leniting element affricates do not show lenition. Consider *Rinne sé an-jab* [a:n dʒa:b] *ar an gcarr* ‘He did a great job on the car’. The final word in this sentence can be considered as a loan as it participates in mutation (here: nasalisation). Nonetheless, the loan status of a word like *job* could be argued for on the grounds that there simply are no mutated forms of /dʒ-/ (or /tʃ-/) in Irish and that words with initial affricates do show plural marking, e.g. *jobannaí* [dʒa:bən^yi:] ‘jobs’. Another criterion for loanword status rather than just code-switching would be the ability of words to combine with native elements to form compounds, e.g. *ceann de na sean-leaids* [ʃæn^ylæts] ‘one of the old lads’, see section I.2.7.2 above.

2.2. The palatal / non-palatal distinction

For Irish today the main phonological feature is the distinction between palatal and non-palatal consonants. It applies to all consonants, with the exception of /h/, and is an essential element of both the morphological and lexical structure of the language. Phonetically, palatal consonants are produced by raising the middle of the tongue towards the palate. This provides the constriction which is the acoustic cue for such segments. Palatal sounds are indicated in transcription by placing a superscript yod [^y] after the sound in question, e.g. /t^yax/ ‘house’. Within the Irish linguistic tradition the sign for palatality is a prime as in *t^yax*.³⁰

The realisation of palatal coronals varies greatly across the dialects as the following typical pronunciations show: Northern [tʃɛ], Western [t^yɛ], Southern [tɛ] (with an apical /t/) ‘hot’.

²⁹ *Job*, in the augmented form found in the following sentence, is attested in de Bhaldraithe (1953a: 257).

³⁰ This is the transcription found in the dialect studies of the mid-twentieth century (published by the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies) which are the primary source of published information on Irish dialects.

Figure 2. Articulation of palatal sounds, typical of Western Irish

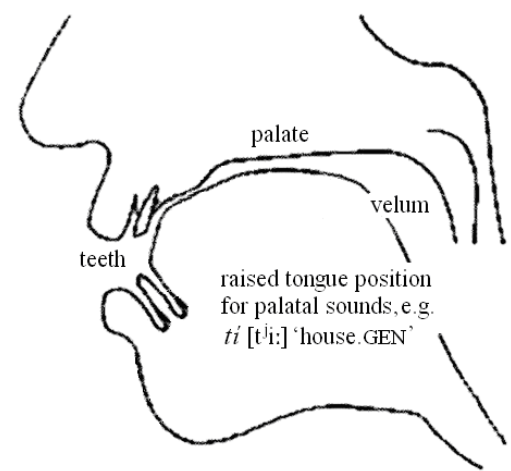
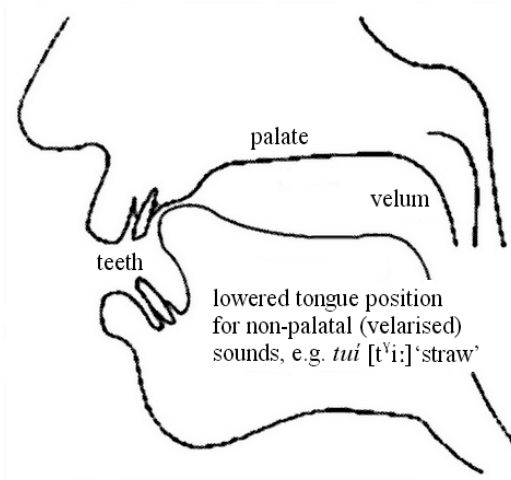


Figure 3. Articulation of non-palatal sounds, common to all dialects



Non-palatal consonants are generally velarised with the middle of the tongue lowered and the back raised towards the velum. Acoustically, this

gives a hollow sound to non-palatal segments which indicates clearly that they are the opposite of palatal sounds with the constriction just described. This ‘hollow’ quality is most noticeable with non-palatal versions of the sonorants *l* and *n*. e.g. /l^yɑ:/, phonetically [l^yɑ:] ‘day’, /n^yɑ:/, phonetically [n^yɑ:] ‘nor’. Perhaps for this reason, these sonorants show a three-way³¹ distinction in Western and Northern Irish, i.e. /l^y – l_j – l^j/ and /n^y – n_j – n^j/. Non-palatal sounds are indicated in transcription by placing a superscript gamma [ʸ] after the sound in question (IPA convention).

When dealing with the sound system of Irish one must distinguish the status which palatal and non-palatal segments can have. On the one hand palatal / non-palatal sounds are part of the lexical structure of words. For instance, the initial palatal sound in *nigh* /n^ji(:)/ ‘wash’ largely distinguishes this word lexically from *naoi* /n^yi:/ ‘nine’. An assignment of sound segments as palatal or non-palatal is a property of words in Irish. For that reason, the pair of terms *palatality* – *non-palatality* (see Table 8. below) is used to denote this lexical property. In contrast to this one has a process of palatalisation in the language as well.

Palatalisation arose as the result of co-articulation in the environment of high vowels, that is a high vowel – /i/ or /e/ – following a consonant (typically found in inflectional endings) caused this consonant to be pronounced in a position with the tongue raised in the mouth as if to produce the high vowel. Later the high vowels disappeared with the general loss of inflections from earlier stages of Indo-European and palatalisation was left as the sole indication of grammatical categories such as the genitive, consider a modern Irish example like *cnoc* ‘hill.NOM’ – *barr an chnoic* ‘top of the hill.GEN’³².

The situation in the modern language is that there are two complementary processes, i.e. palatalisation and its opposite de-palatalisation. The former consists of the reversal of the value for [palatal] (from negative to positive) and the latter consists of the opposite, i.e. of the change from positive to negative for [palatal] under specific morphological conditions, for example in the change from nominative to genitive, from singular to plural with nouns or from base form to comparative with adjectives.

³¹ The case has been made by several authors for a four-way distinction in Northern Irish, see the discussion in III.3.5.4 below.

³² In general, palatalisation is indicated in Irish orthography by the letters *i* or *e* before and/or after a main vowel of a syllable. For more details of Irish orthography, see Appendix 2.

Table 8. Properties and processes in Irish

1a	<i>Palatality</i>	Lexical property of words
1b	<i>Non-Palatality</i>	Lexical property of words
Lexical contrast of initial and final palatal consonants		
	<i>siúl</i> /sʲu:lʲ/ ‘walking’	
	<i>súil</i> /su:lʲ/ ‘eye’	
	<i>cás</i> /kɑ:s/ ‘case’	
	<i>cáis</i> /kɑ:sʲ/ ‘cheese’	
2a	<i>Palatalisation</i>	Morphological process
2b	<i>De-Palatalisation</i>	Morphological process
Morphological contrast of final palatal consonants		
	<i>leabhar</i> /lʲaur/ ‘book.NOM’	
	<i>leabhair</i> /lʲaurʲ/ ‘book.GEN’	
	<i>pobal</i> /pʌbəlʲ/ ‘people’	: <i>pobail</i> /pʌbəlʲ/ ‘peoples’
	<i>bog</i> /bʌg/ ‘soft’	: <i>níos boige</i> /nʲi:s bʲigʲə/ ‘softer’

The basic principle of palatalisation/de-palatalisation is one of alternation in the codas of syllables: the final sound or sounds in a syllable shift in value. All consonants in a coda – with the exception of the cluster /xt/ – are affected by this as is the vowel preceding these, assuming that it is systemically a short vowel, e.g. *olc* [ʌlʲk] ‘evil.NOM’ and *oilc* [ɛlʲkʲ] ‘evil.GEN’.

This change in value for [palatal] is also found in unstressed syllables, as seen in *pobal*, *nó pobail*, *na hÉireann* [pʌbəlʲ nʲu: pʌbʲlʲ nʲə he:ɾʲənʲ] ‘the people, or peoples, of Ireland’.³³ Perceptually, the cue for palatalisation is a schwa vowel [ə] and that for de-palatalisation is a somewhat retracted high front vowel [ɪ]. Systemically, however, the distinction is one of non-palatal versus palatal segment in the ending of the word forms just quoted, *pobal* /pʌbəlʲ/ [pʌbəlʲ] versus *pobail* /pʌbəlʲ/ [pʌbʲlʲ].

Because the change from [+palatal] to [-palatal] was triggered historically by an ending in which the vowel was non-palatal in character, de-palatalisation in modern Irish is frequently associated with suffixation in

³³ From a talk by a native speaker of Western Irish on present-day language use.

nominal paradigms, e.g. *cáin* [kɑ:n^j] ‘tax.NOM’ and *méid na cánach* [kɑ:n^Yəx] ‘the amount of the tax.GEN’. A change in only the value for [palatal] can be found in verbal paradigms, e.g. *cuir* /kɪr^j/ ‘put’ vs. *cur* /kʌr/ ‘putting’.³⁴

2.3. Independent and dependent segments

In any overview of the sounds of Irish it will become obvious that not all of these can occur in word-initial position in citation forms of words. Some normally only appear as the result of applying an initial mutation, e.g. /ʃ/ practically only³⁵ occurs in this position as the result of leniting either /g/ or /d/. The same is true of /x/ which is the outcome of leniting /k/ (there are, however, a few grammatical words which are permanently lenited). This situation can be dealt with in a phonological analysis by subdividing segments, in effect consonants, into two types, ‘independent’ and ‘dependent’ depending on whether they are the result of mutation or not.

Table 9. Independent and dependent consonants in Irish (i)

<i>Independent</i>	Those consonants which occur word-initially in the citation forms of lexemes.
<i>Dependent</i>	Those consonants whose occurrence word-initially is dependent on the application of a mutation.

Sounds which are dependent may, however, occur in non-initial position, e.g. *fiach* /f^jiəx/ ‘hunt’. In such cases the sound in question, here /x/, is part of the lexical structure of the word and is present in the citation form. The restrictions on the occurrence of sounds in word-initial position are due to morphology. Those sounds which are the result of a mutation cannot be found without the mutating element (in the citation form of a word), e.g. *glúin* /ɡl^Yu:n^j/, */ʎl^Yu:n^j/ ‘knee’ : *a ghlúin* /ə ʎl^Yu:n^j/ ‘his knee’. The only

³⁴ The change in vowel here is triggered by the change in the value for [palatal] of the final *r*. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see section II.2.5.2.

³⁵ There are some words which show permanent lenition of /d/ to /ʃ/, e.g. *dhá* /ʃɑ:/ ‘two’ and the derivative *dháréag* ‘twelve persons’, i.e. ‘two and ten persons’.

exceptions to this are a small set of words, mostly grammatical, which can show lenition without a preceding mutating element, e.g. *duit* [ɣit^j] ‘to you’, *chuile* [xɪlə] ‘every’, *cibé* [hɪb^jːe:] ‘whichever’ (de Bhaldraithe 1985: 123) and the defective verb *dóbair* [hɔːbɪr^j] which now means ‘almost, nearly’.

Certain consonants occur both independently and as the result of mutation leading to sounds which can be both primary and derived, e.g. /f/: *fadhb* /faɪb/ ‘problem’, *a phota* /ə ɸtə/ ‘his pot’ (cf. the non-mutated form *pota* /pɸtə/ ‘pot’).

Table 10. Independent and dependent consonants in Irish (ii)

(i)	Primary nasal (independent)	<i>maith</i>	/ma/	‘good’
(ii)	Derived by mutation (dependent on the mutation nasalisation)	<i>i mbun oibre</i>	/ɪ mʌn ^ʷ aɪb ^j ɪr ^j ə/	‘at work’

Morphological and lexical contrast

Because contrasts in the feature [palatal] are found in both the lexicon and the grammar of Irish, there are words which differ in their citation forms and words which differ in some grammatical category with respect to palatality. For instance, the lexical words *leá* /lʲaː/ ‘melting’ and *lá* /lʲaː/ ‘day’ are distinguished by the palatal lateral and non-palatal lateral at the beginning of each word respectively. In the words *tamall* /taməl/ ‘interval.NOM’ and *tamaill* /taməl^j/ ‘interval.GEN’ the difference is due to a contrast in case. Such grammatical distinctions apply at the end of words forms, i.e. in syllable codas. A morphological contrast of palatal versus non-palatal is never found in a syllable onset in Irish.

Because of various historical developments, the alternation between palatal and non-palatal segments may not be symmetrical. For example, the root extension /-əx/ changes to /ə/ or /i:/ on palatalisation as seen in *marcach* /markəx/ ‘rider.NOM’, *marcaigh* /markə/ ‘rider.GEN’, *Gaelach* /geːlʲəx/ ‘Irish’, *níos Gaelaí* /nʲiːs geːlʲiː/ ‘more Irish’. Historically, the inflectional ending consisted of a short vowel plus /j/ but the latter sound was absorbed into the preceding vowel (leading to a lengthening in some cases) hence the vocalic ending in the genitive and comparative of the forms just given. Note that the final element of the extension was voiced as