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AIDAN DOYLE

A HISTORY *of the*
IRISH LANGUAGE

From the Norman Invasion to Independence



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In memory of my mother, who didn't speak a word of Irish,
but who loved language

Contents

Acknowledgements	xi
List of figures	xiii
List of abbreviations	xiv
Conventions for spelling and transcription	xv
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Writing the history of a language	1
1.2 Dates and periods	3
1.3 Some sociolinguistic terminology	4
1.3.1 Standard languages and dialects	5
1.3.2 Language contact	5
1.4 Sources	6
1.5 Scope and lay-out	7
Further reading	10
2. The Anglo-Normans and their heritage (1200–1500)	11
2.1 The Anglo-Norman invasion	11
2.1.1 Before the Anglo-Normans	11
2.1.2 The Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland	14
2.1.3 The linguistic and cultural impact of the conquest	15
2.1.4 <i>Hibernicis ipsis Hiberniores</i>	15
2.2 The shape of the language (1200–1500)	18
2.2.1 Early Modern Irish and Modern Irish	18
2.2.2 Spelling and pronunciation	21
2.2.3 Classical Irish	24
2.2.4 The non-classical language	30
2.2.5 Borrowing	33
2.3 Conclusion	34
Further reading	35
3. The Tudors (1500–1600)	37
3.1 A new era	37
3.1.1 The Tudors	38
3.1.2 Language and identity under the Tudors	40
3.1.3 The Tudor response to language conflict	44
3.1.4 The Gaelic reaction	47
3.2 The shape of the language (1500–1600)	51

3.2.1	Conservatism, innovation, and genre	51
3.2.2	Diglossia and bilingualism	55
3.3	Conclusion	59
	Further reading	60
4.	The Stuarts (1600–1700)	62
4.1	A new dynasty	62
4.1.1	The linguistic effect of the conquest	65
4.1.2	Language attitudes in the Stuart era	68
4.1.3	Interaction between English and Irish at the written level	72
4.1.4	The Irish abroad	73
4.2	The shape of the language (1600–1700)	75
4.2.1	Late Modern Irish (LMI)	75
4.2.2	Borrowing and code-switching	77
4.3	Conclusion	78
	Further reading	79
5.	Two Irelands, two languages (1700–1800)	81
5.1	The Anglo-Irish Ascendancy	81
5.1.1	The Penal Laws	81
5.1.2	The hidden Ireland	83
5.1.3	Language contact and macaronic poems	85
5.1.4	The Anglo-Irish and the Irish language	88
5.1.5	The churches and the Irish language	90
5.1.6	A private document	92
5.1.7	Bilingualism, diglossia, and language statistics	95
5.2	The shape of the language (1700–1800)	98
5.2.1	Representing dialects in writing	98
5.2.2	Vocabulary	100
5.2.3	The language of Charles O’Conor’s journal	102
5.3	Conclusion	105
	Further reading	105
6.	A new language for a new nation (1800–70)	107
6.1	Change comes to Ireland	107
6.1.1	Daniel O’Connell	108
6.1.2	Language and national identity in Europe and Ireland	113
6.1.3	Education and literacy	117
6.1.4	<i>Bíoblóirí</i> , Jumpers, and <i>An Cat Breac</i>	120
6.1.5	The Famine and emigration	124
6.1.6	The extent and pace of the language shift	128
6.1.7	Later attitudes towards the language shift	132
6.1.8	Attempts to preserve and strengthen Irish	138

6.2 The shape of the language (1800–70)	141
6.2.1 The innovative strand	141
6.2.2 The conservative strand	143
6.2.3 Borrowing	147
6.2.4 Grammars and primers	153
6.3 Conclusion	157
Further reading	158
7. Revival (1870–1922)	161
7.1 Political and social developments (1870–1922)	161
7.2 Cultural developments (1870–1922)	163
7.3 A precursor to the Gaelic League	165
7.4 Douglas Hyde	170
7.5 The Gaelic League	177
7.6 Education	180
7.7 Adult education	185
7.8 Cultural activity	187
7.9 Publishing	189
7.10 The Gaeltacht	193
7.10.1 Gaeltacht and Gaeltacht	193
7.10.2 Conceptualizing the Gaeltacht	195
7.10.3 The Gaeltacht: myth and reality	201
7.11 The Gaelic League and politics	205
7.12 Conclusion—the substance and the shadow	210
Further reading	213
8. The modernization of Irish (1870–1922)	215
8.1 Reshaping the language	215
8.2 Orthography	215
8.3 The dialects and standardization	222
8.4 Which dialect?	227
8.5 Perceived threats to Irish	230
8.6 Borrowings	233
8.7 ‘Irish forms of thought are not the same as those of other nations’	235
8.8 The codification of Irish	237
8.9 Vocabulary	238
8.9.1 Expanding the vocabulary	240
8.9.2 The older language as a source of vocabulary	244
8.9.3 The reception of the new words	246
8.9.4 Censoring vocabulary	250

8.10 New kinds of writing	252
8.10.1 Literature	252
8.10.2 Journalism	258
8.11 Conclusion	261
Further reading	262
9. Conclusion	263
Further reading	272
Glossary of linguistic terms	274
References	277
Name index	293
Subject index	297

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List of figures

1.1	Map of Ireland	9
2.1	Quatrain from University College Cork, Irish MS 1, p. 6	22
2.2	Examples of manuscript contractions	22
3.1	Language communities in Ireland c.1500	41
4.1	Language communities in Ireland c.1700	66
6.1	Language communities in Ireland c.1800	130
6.2	Language communities in Ireland 1851	131
7.1	Language communities in Ireland 1891	166
8.1	The Gaelic font	216

List of abbreviations

A. Publications

CS	<i>An Claidheamh Soluis</i>
D	<i>Irish-English Dictionary</i> (= Dinneen 1904)
Des	<i>Desiderius</i> (= O'Rahilly 1941)
DIL	<i>Dictionary of the Irish Language</i> (= Royal Irish Academy 1983)
GJ	<i>The Gaelic Journal</i>
HM	<i>An haicléara Mánas</i> (= Stenson 2003)
FL	<i>Fáinne an Lae</i>
OD	<i>Foclóir Gaeilge Béarla</i> [Irish-English dictionary] (= Ó Dónaill 1977)
PB	<i>Párliaiment na mban</i> (= Ó Cuív 1977)
PCT	<i>Parliament Chloinne Tomáis</i> (= Williams 1981)
PF	<i>Párliment na bhfíodóirí</i> (= Ó Duinnshléibhe 2011)
TST	<i>Teagasc ar an Sean-Tiomna</i> (= Ó Madagáin 1974)

B. Terms and names

EMI	Early Modern Irish
LMI	Late Modern Irish
MI	Modern Irish
NUI	National University of Ireland
SPIL	Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language

C. Labels not found in Leipzig glossing rules

EMP	emphatic
NAS	nasalized consonant
PRS	present
PRT	particle

Conventions for spelling and transcription

Since many readers will not be familiar with the International Phonetic Alphabet, an attempt is made to represent the sounds of Irish using English spelling. Individual sounds are written between slashes, e.g. ‘The first sound in the Irish word *sí* is pronounced as /sh/’.

When discussing spelling, graphs are written between angled brackets, e.g. ‘<ph> in the Irish word *phós* is pronounced as /f/’.

When discussing the provenance of words, a single angled bracket is placed before the source, e.g. *sagart* (< *sacerdos*).

Segments of words which have a grammatical function, such as prefixes, suffixes, and endings of verbs, are written in bold, e.g. ‘The ending **-ann** in the Irish word *glanann* stands for the Present Tense’.

An asterisk before a word indicates that it is ungrammatical or misspelt, e.g. **mouses*, **dogz*.

Titles of publications in Irish are followed by an English translation in square brackets, e.g. *Cín lae Amhlaoibh Uí Shúilleabháin* [Humphrey O’Sullivan’s diary] (de Bhaldraithe 1970).

Passages in Irish are followed by an English translation in square brackets, e.g. *I ndán na nGall gealltar linn* [In the poem for the foreigners we promise].

Linguistic examples which are discussed are numbered. When necessary, they are glossed word for word according to the Leipzig glossing rules.

Irish words which occur throughout the text and which are commonly used in English are not written in italics, e.g. Gael, Gall, Gaeltacht. Individual Irish words are written in italics and translated, e.g. the word *dún* ‘close’.

Many Irish names occur in both Irish and English variants, e.g. Douglas Hyde = Dubhghlas de hÍde. In the text, the English variant is invariably used, but the reader should bear in mind that Irish variants may occur in quotations and references. The most common duplicates are cross-referenced in the index.

Likewise, the spelling of Irish words varies depending on whether they occur in texts before or after 1950, e.g. *Gael* (new) = *Gaedhal* (old). Except in quotations and references, the post-1950 form is used.

Unless otherwise stated, all translations are the author’s.

Introduction

1.1 Writing the history of a language

Libraries and bookshops often have sections entitled Language, or Language Studies. Within these sections one will find a number of books dealing with the history of individual languages, like English or French. These histories can be divided into two types depending on the approach taken by the author.

Internal histories deal with concrete changes that have occurred in a language over the centuries. In the case of English we can observe a major difference if we compare the Old English period (c.450–c.1150 AD) with present-day English. Old English is closely related to Old German, and many of its linguistic features can still be found in present-day German: for example, the three genders for nouns—masculine, feminine, and neuter. Present-day English no longer has this grammatical gender, and its vocabulary has expanded considerably in the last millennium, by borrowing words or creating them out of existing resources. An internal history of English would describe all of the various changes in detail, and try to account for their occurrence.

Language history is also part of history in general, it does not exist in isolation from it. External histories describe changes that take place in the communities that speak different languages, linking these changes to events in politics, culture, and social structure. If we take again the case of English, an external history would refer to the effect that the Norman invasion of England in 1066 had on its linguistic community. It would describe among other things the wholesale borrowing of words like *dinner* or *baron* from French into English in the period following the Norman invasion, linking this to the prestige enjoyed by the language of the new ruling class, Norman French. External histories also deal with such matters as bilingualism, the rise and fall of languages, and written and spoken language. In brief, one might say that external histories deal with the social aspects of language use, or sociolinguistics.

To some extent, internal and external histories are independent of each other. Thus, it is possible to provide an outline of the development of a language and its interaction with society and culture without going into details

of the internal changes within the language in the same period. Likewise, one could deal with the details of linguistic change by simply stating, for example, that a certain sound or grammatical structure was replaced by another one, without linking this to non-linguistic factors. However, if we compare the internal and external development of any language, we realize that the two are closely interconnected. Change is nearly always driven by some alteration in the linguistic community.

Consider for a moment the process by which a single language, Latin, developed in the period *c.*500–*c.*1000 AD into the various individual languages which we know today as the Romance languages—French, Italian, Spanish, and Rumanian. Before the break-up, there were regional dialects of Latin which prefigured the later languages. Now, one might argue that the dialects simply diverged and leave it at that. However, it is no coincidence that this divergence coincided with a period of great upheaval in the area of the Roman empire. Until the fifth century this single administrative and cultural unit had relied on a single language, Latin, as its medium of communication. Before the fall of the western empire in 476 AD it was necessary to have a language that could be used by all its citizens for communicating, whether they were living in Britain in the far west or in Northern Africa in the Mediterranean. With the break-up of the empire into smaller regions, such distant communication was no longer necessary; one only had to deal with the inhabitants of one's own region, at least in speaking. Population movements and invasions further disrupted the former unity, and the final outcome was the emergence of different languages about 500 years after the empire broke up.

Now it is not possible to state categorically that the change of a certain sound in Latin into another sound in Spanish is specifically linked to an event such as the invasion of the Iberian peninsula by the Vandals in the fifth century. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the political upheaval was indirectly responsible for the linguistic chaos which produced the new sound. To simply concentrate on the internal linguistic development without taking into consideration the external factors constitutes a very limited approach.

Likewise, social change often has as one of its consequences linguistic change. Irish society has undergone something of a transformation in the last forty to fifty years. This has had an effect on the English spoken in Ireland. In 1950, the regional dialects of the country were quite distinct, even in the case of educated speakers. As soon as somebody opened their mouth, one could identify them as coming from a particular region such as the south-west, or the north, or Dublin. Unlike Britain, where a standard kind of English had existed for sometime, there was no standard pronunciation for Irish English.

This situation has changed dramatically in the last half century. A new dialect has emerged which one might label standard Irish English, a dialect spoken by members of the middle classes all over the country, from the heart of Dublin to the Aran Islands on the western seaboard. It is based on the metropolitan dialect which has developed in Dublin in the last fifty years or so, but it is no longer confined to this area. The rise of this standard dialect has been accompanied by the decline of the traditional regional dialects. This particular case of linguistic change is not accidental. It is a direct consequence of the spread of education, the influence of the mass media, particularly television and radio, and the urbanization of Irish society.

The present work presents aspects of both the external and internal history of Irish. However, it is not intended as a systematic study of the internal changes that Irish has undergone in the period 1200–1922. For the most part, it is concerned with the shifting position of Irish in society over the centuries, with the way it is perceived by the Irish people, and with its interaction with various historical developments in Ireland. At the same time, it seemed a good idea to provide some information about how the actual shape of the language changed in tandem with the external developments. For this reason, I also provide a brief account of the more accessible and important internal changes which affected Irish over the centuries.

In theory at least, it would be possible to write an internal history of Irish without saying much about other languages. For an external history, this is simply not possible. The history of Irish is intimately bound up with the spread of English in Ireland. This in turn is the result of a complex array of political, cultural, religious, educational, and sociological factors. An alternative title for the book might be: *A history of the Irish and English languages in Ireland*. Thus, as the narrative progresses, I will have more and more occasion to refer to the rise of English.

1.2 Dates and periods

At this stage, it is necessary to define some terms that I will be using in the course of this work. Just as general historians divide the past into various periods such as the Middle Ages or modern times, historians of language use terms like old or modern when referring to the various phases of a language's life. However, the terms used in language studies, and particularly in the history of Irish, differ somewhat from those found in general history, and often cause confusion for students and readers. For this reason, I will try to present a succinct and precise definition of the labels attached to the various periods in the history of Irish.