

Examining 'Bad Data' Ego Documents in the History of English



THE DEPARTURE.

Berkeley, April the 20th 1844
My dear Father
I take the liberty of writing
these few lines to you hoping to
find you my dear Mother
and sister in good health as that
leaves me's sister and my Mother
in good health thanks be to our
Almighty Redeemer for his great
mercies ever yours
My dear Father I am to
inform you that we left Dublin
on the 26th inst for the High
Arms and she is to sail on
Monday next with the passengers
on a board the vessel

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BAD
DATA

What variety linguists are interested in ...



The *envelopes of variation* for individual languages, depends on their historical development and their typologies.



The *envelope of variation* for all human languages determined by the permissible structures of universal grammar.



A *feature pool* is a source from which speakers in new dialect formation scenarios can select features which may become established in the emergent variety.

BAD
DATA

What are 'bad data'?

By 'bad data' is meant fragmentary data from poorly documented sources which nonetheless can provide insights into the state of a language on a vernacular level and into possible language change. Among such sources are the following:

- 1) Earliest audio records
- 2) Emigrant letters

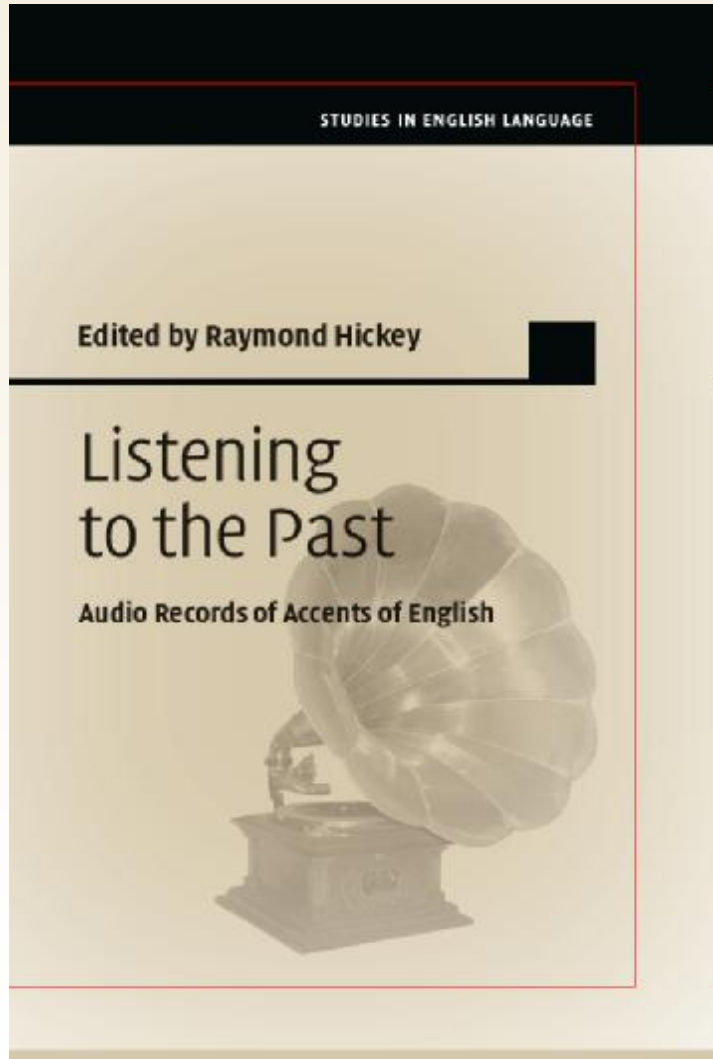


BAD
DATA

Helpful in completing a jigsaw puzzle



'Bad Data': the linguistic value of fragmentary material



(Cambridge University Press, 2017)

The 'bad data' project covers both familiar letters and the earliest recordings of varieties of English.

These recordings now go back more than a century. True, they often involve set texts and the individuals recorded are prominent people of society at the time, but they are still genuine records of earlier accents of English.

Caveats when using data from early recordings

- 1) *The range of data for any one individual is limited.* This is usually due to the length of the recording (normally only a few minutes at the most). Hence early recordings are practically only suitable for sound analysis; for grammatical analysis they contain too little data.
- 2) *Typical recordings consist of reading a set piece.* For instance, the story of the prodigal son used by Wilhelm Doegen in his recordings of English prisoners of war in WWI. Free speech is rarely available in early recordings.
- 3) *The quality of the recordings is generally not sufficiently good to carry out fully reliable acoustic analysis.* Nonetheless, a certain amount is nearly always possible.
- 4) *The available early recordings rarely show any social stratification.* Hence a variationist analysis, in the modern sociolinguistic sense, is not possible.

Classification of insights from early recordings

Level 1: *Early recordings reveal previously unattested features.* This is not common, but an example would be the use of a rolled [r] attested in the recordings of Baroness Asquith and Virginia Woolf for earlier Received Pronunciation.

Level 2: *Early recordings display combinations of features not previously attested.* For instance, in early twentieth-century Irish English non-rhoticity and a monophthong in the GOAT lexical set is found, a combination which does not occur anymore.

Level 3: *Early recordings have distinctions with features not continued in a variety.* In early twentieth-century Australian English a retracted START vowel and a fronted STRUT vowel co-occurred whereas these vowels converged later in the twentieth century in Australia.

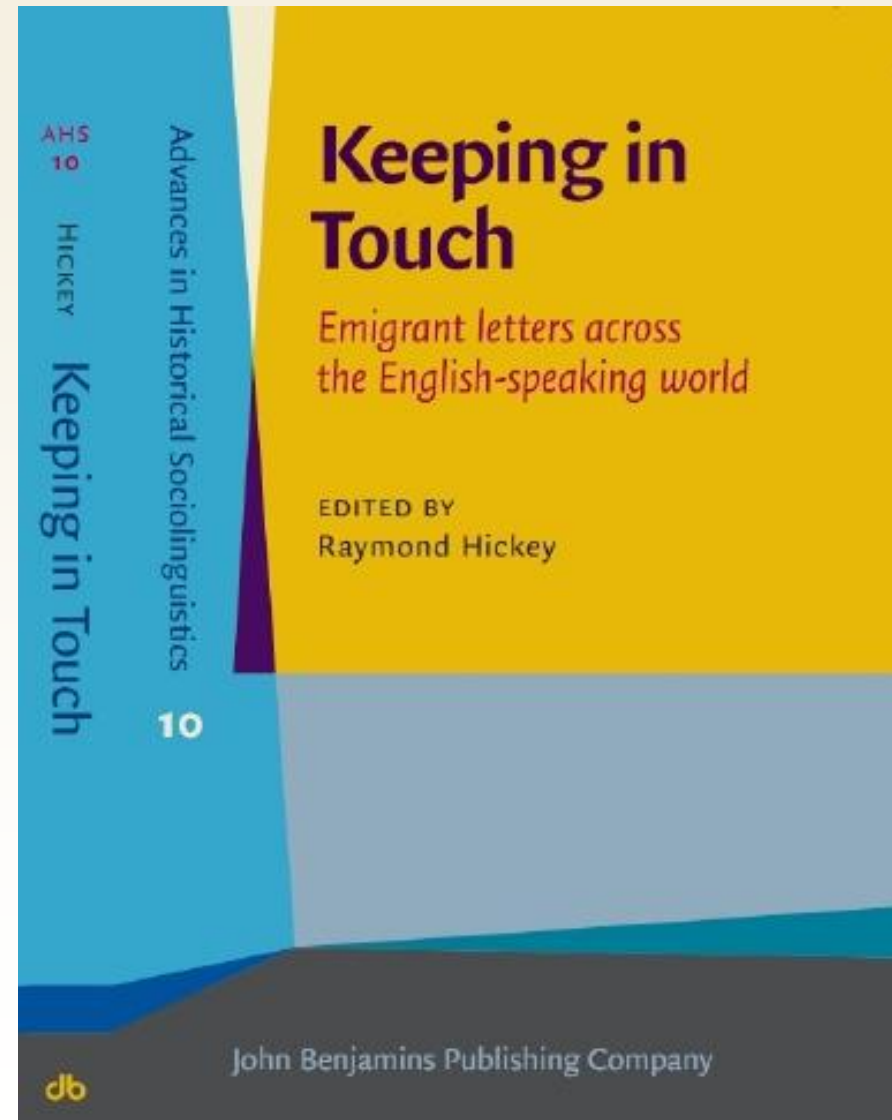
Level 4: *Early recordings display features helpful in deciding between alternatives for the development of features in a variety.* For instance, in early South African English the retracted START vowel is nothing like as prominent as it is today, suggesting that this was an internal development after initial anglophone settlement.

Level 5: *Early recordings confirm features known from later recordings and observations of present-day speakers.* For instance, the early recordings of English from Tristan da Cunha document clearly the presence of non-etymological initial /h-/ which is known from studies of modern English on the island.

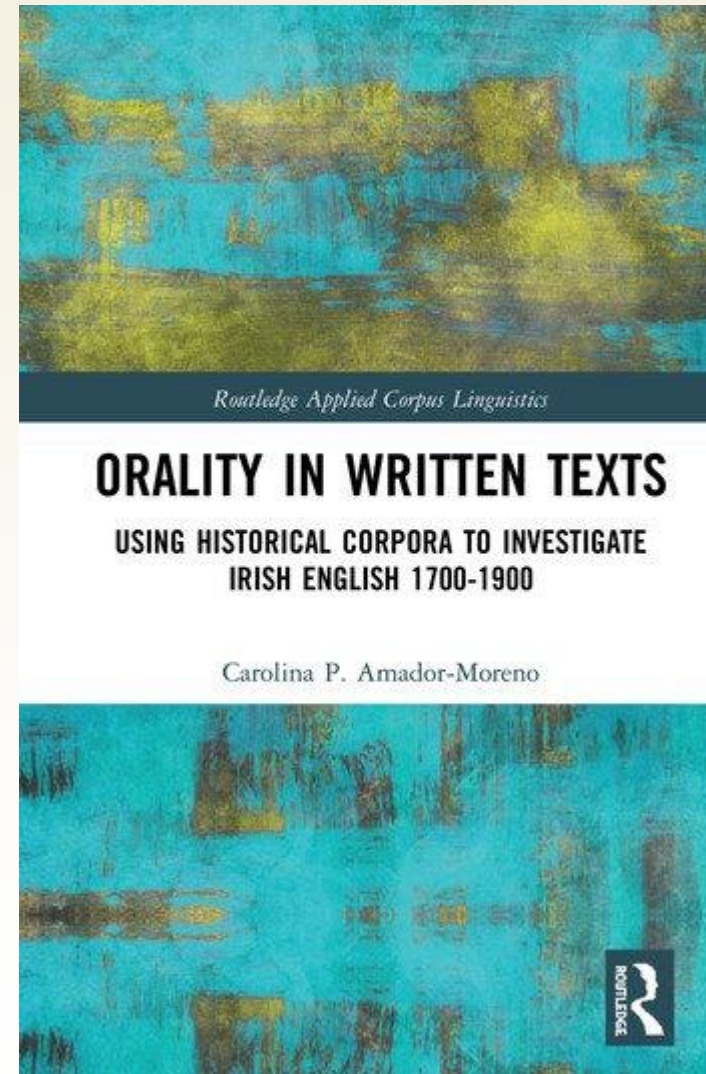
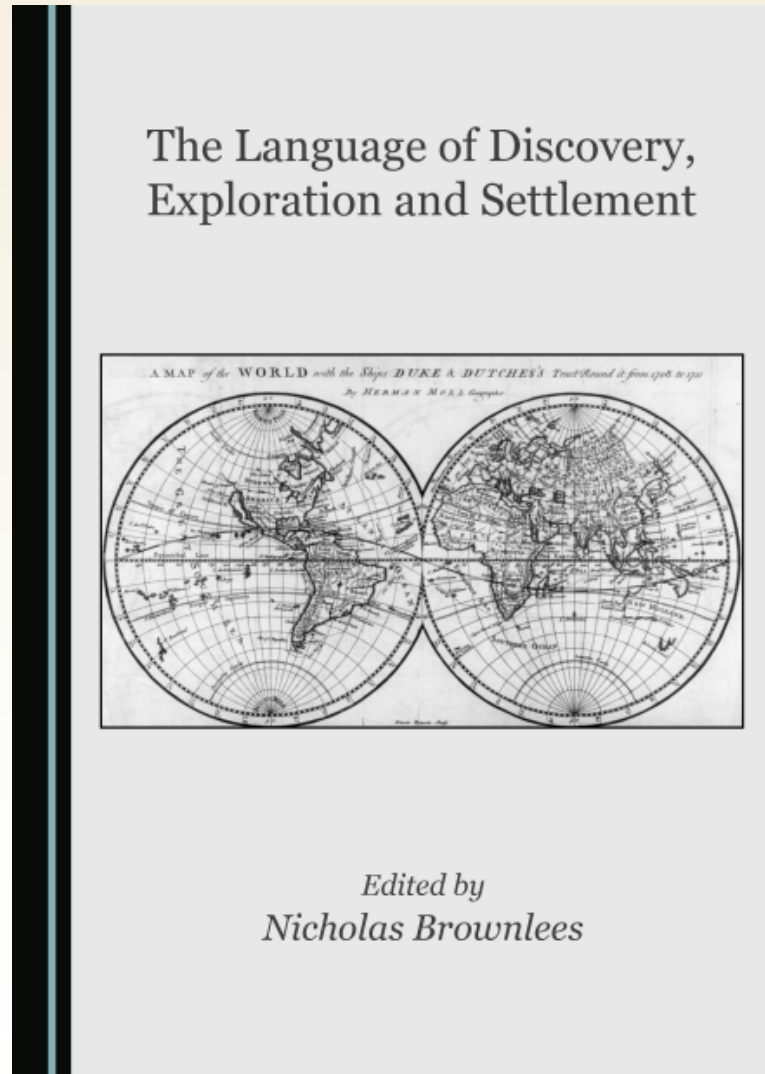
Level 6: *Early recordings confirm general patterns assumed for the development of varieties.* For example, the speech of older speakers from Ghana show that for four key variables, Ghanaian English moved away from RP and more towards endonormative realisations of the variables in question supporting the theoretical model of new variety development put forward in Schneider (2003) and (2007).

'Bad Data': the linguistic value of fragmentary material

Hickey, Raymond (eds)
2019. *Keeping in Touch. Emigrant Letters across the English-speaking World*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.



Some other relevant literature



Obtaining letter data: the role of serendipity and chance

A practical question when wishing to analyse emigrant letters is how to get hold of them. They do not form a text type which is typically in the public domain, like legal texts, charters, contracts and the like. An intermediate text type is seen in business letters and petitions of all kinds – these letters generally survive.

In many instances, one may by chance come across a number of letters which somehow, some time, some way became available. If you are lucky, someone may have left letters to a library or have given them to a researcher who happened to be in contact with them. But people do not generally go to libraries and say ‘I’d like to give you a batch personal letters from my deceased relatives’. Because of this situation we can assume that the available emigrant letters are a miniscule fraction of all such letters.

serendipity

[ser-uh n-dip-i-tee] *noun.*

The occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way.

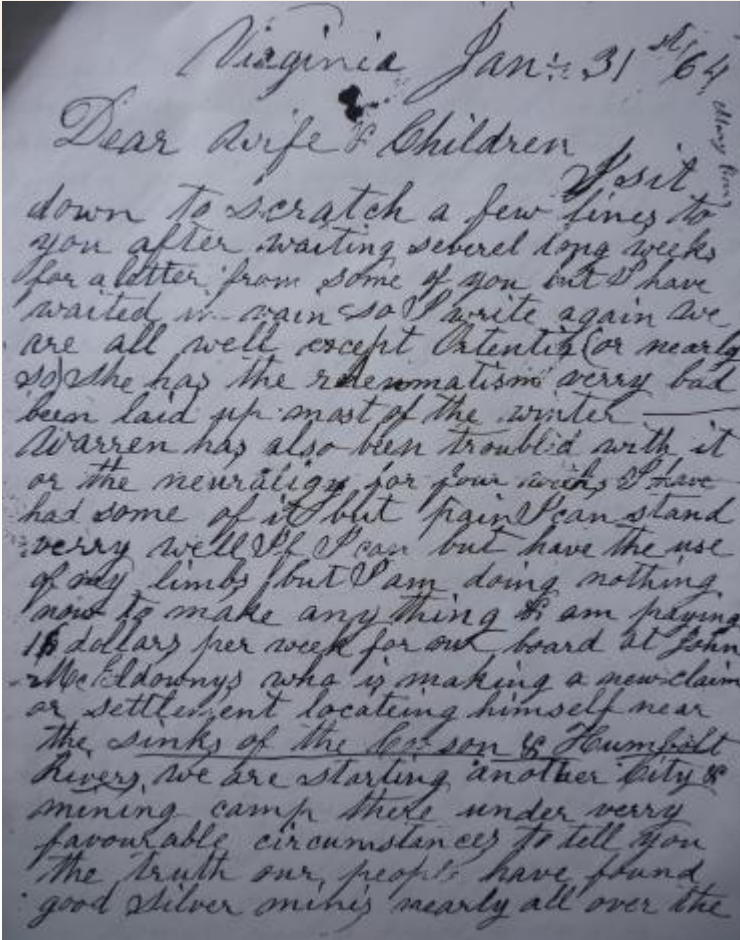


Kinds of letter writers

Who is the ideal emigrant letter writer (from the linguist's point of view)?

- 1) Someone who writes continuously back home
- 2) Someone who uses their vernacular mode in their letters

This is difficult because when people learned to write they learned to write standard English. So vernacular language in emigrant letters would only seem to occur with individuals who are largely unaware of the language they are using.



Virginia Jan: 31 1864
Dear wife & Children
I sit
down to scratch a few lines to
you after waiting several long weeks
for a letter from some of you but I have
waited in vain so I write again we
are all well except Otentia (or nearly
so) she has the rheumatism very bad
been laid up most of the winter
Warren has also been troubled with it
or the neuralgia for four weeks I have
had some of it but again I can stand
very well I can but have the use
of my limbs but I am doing nothing
I wish to make any thing I am paying
16 dollars per week for our board at John
McElownys who is making a new claim
or settlement locating himself near
the sinks of the Jackson & Humboldt
Rivers we are starting another city &
mining camp there under very
favourable circumstances to tell you
the truth our people have found
good silver mines nearly all over the

Emigrant letters

Emigrants to overseas locations during the colonial period wrote back home recounting their experiences in their new environment and trying to get news of the family members in the home country and to convince potential emigrants to make the move and leave.



Emigrant letters

The survival of personal letters depends on (1) whether settlers wrote letters back home and/or to others in the colony and (2) whether such letters were not destroyed or simply thrown away once read. As said above, these letters would then have to find a way into the public domain.



Some groups were better at letter writing than others, e.g. Protestants over Catholics in Ireland as the latter had little or no schooling and were frequently illiterate. Letters from the latter begin to appear in the 19th century after the introduction of primary schooling in the 1830s.

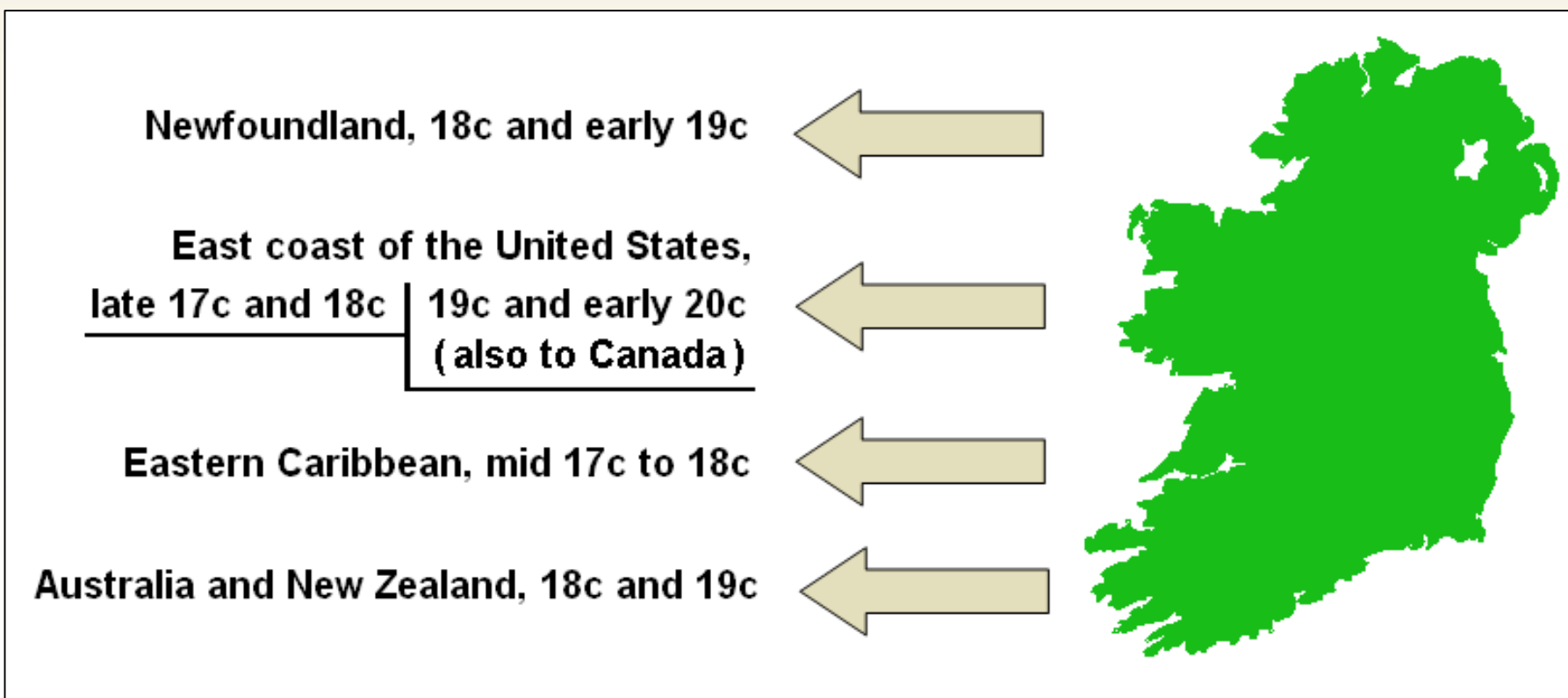
Postal service in the colonies

For the larger colonies, a postal service back home was available on the emigration ships on their return journey. The post bags taken on board were then distributed throughout the British Isles. If a location was far removed from a port then post had to be first taken by coach to a ship. Many months could elapse between sending and receiving a letter.



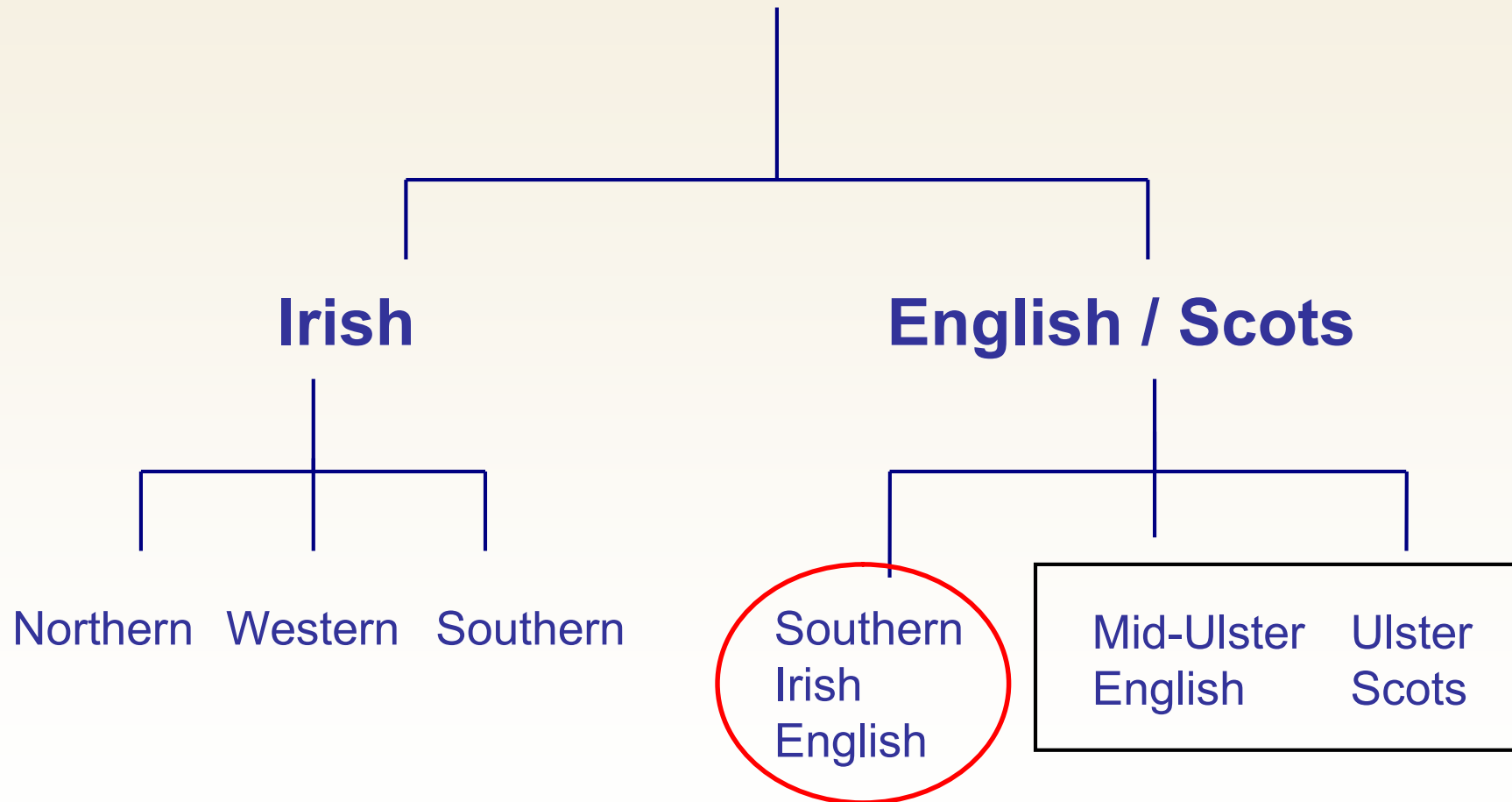


The Spread of Irish English

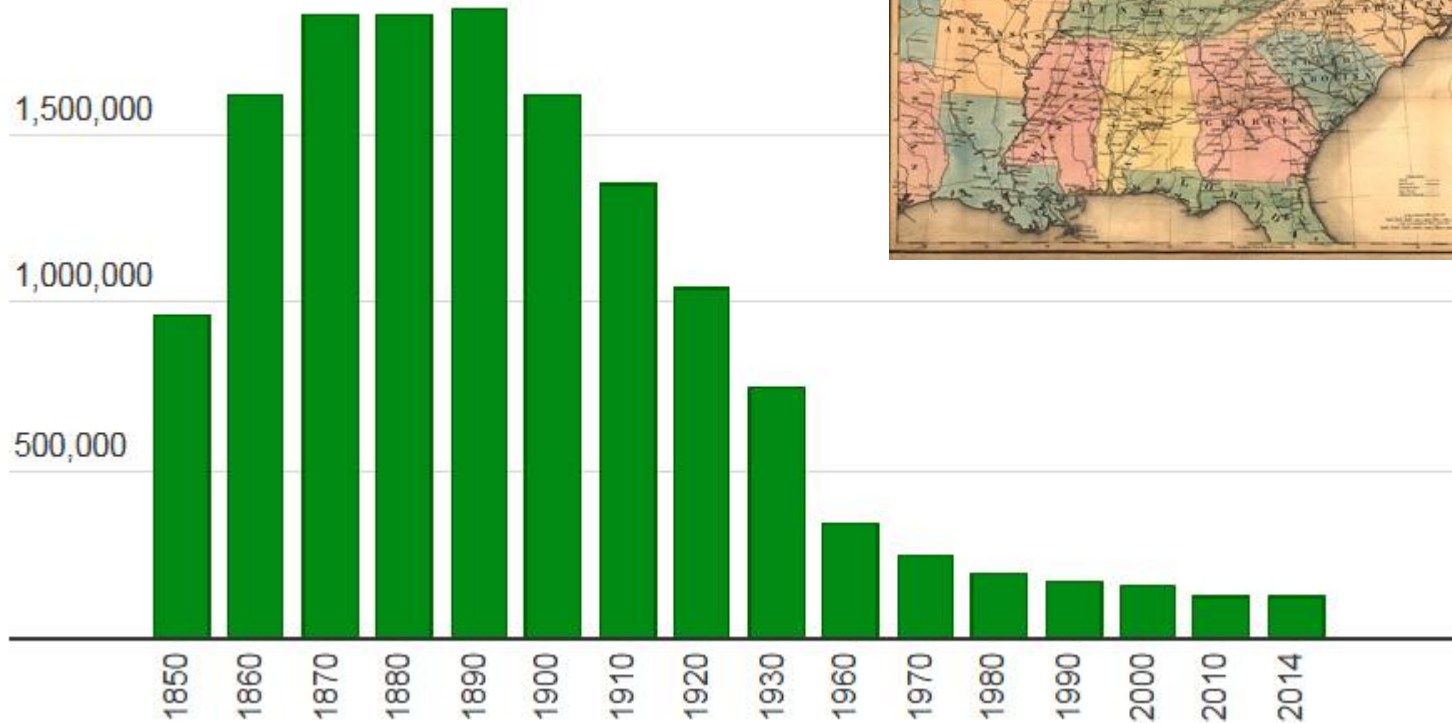
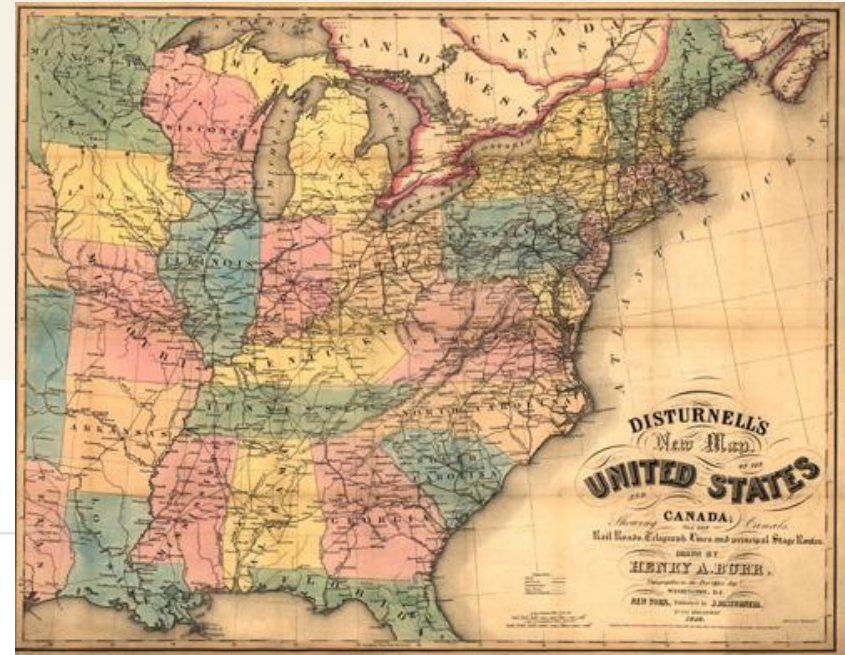
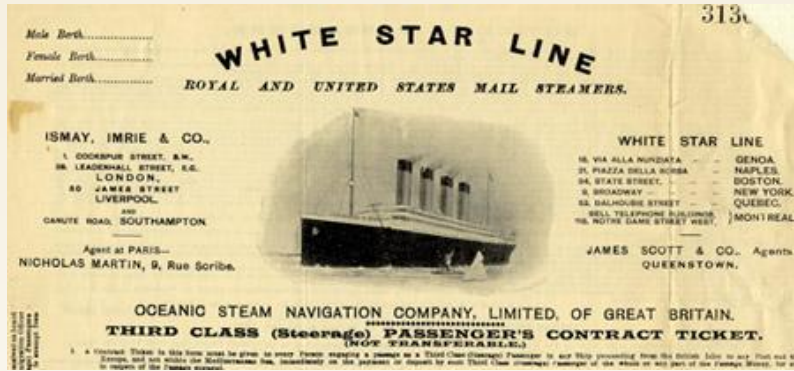




Language in Ireland



Irish emigration to the USA



Irish emigration to Australia

Female Emigration TO NEW SOUTH WALES.

COMMITTEE:

THE TEN, THE ARCHDEACONS OF CORK, JOSEPH LEECHTER, ESQ. DANIEL LANK, ESQ. DANIEL LEAHY, ESQ. MRS. JOHN DEAN	WILLIAM CRAWFORD, Esq. Chairman, F. F. CURRAN, ESQ. S. D. KEARNEY, ESQ. JAMES MURPHY, ESQ. REV. DOCTOR QUAIN	VERY REV. THEODORE MATTHEW, DANIEL NEUMEYER, ESQ. LOUIS TROUSSEAU, Parson, Claremorris, REV. WILLIAM TOWNSE, REV. MICHAEL B. O'NEIL
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LIEUT. CHARLES FRIEND, R.N. His Majesty's Agent for Emigration.

The Committee for promoting the Emigration

Single Women

from IRELAND to AUSTRALIA, acting under the Authority of His Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies, HERBERT LOVE JOYCE, ESQ.

A Superior First Class SHIP of 500 Tons,

carrying an experienced Surgeon and Master of this respective Kingdom of Cork, to receive the Captain and Steward of the Young Women during the Voyage, will sail from

CORK,

on Thursday, the 26th of May next,

(Beyond which day she will in no account be detained) direct for

SYDNEY.

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT, in order to encourage the Emigration of Single Women and Widows of Good Character to the Colonies of this Kingdom, who are desirous of settling in that Kingdom, has ordered THE KING'S SHIP TORRENT to sail

A FREE PASSAGE

To each SINGLE WOMAN, between 18 and 40 years of Age, on the Condition she provides to be likely to conduct herself suitably and usefully in the Colonies. All the expenses incurred by the Company upon 2700 SOUTH WELSH, comprising the Passage, the first and second fares in the Ships and out by them, one light, victuals, and necessaries, the most expensive Ladies in the Colony have usually experienced and who have been from the number of their arrival, and are in their hands placed in proper Asylums, and every well conditioned Female situated for the education of good women, in the Colonies of which they are permitted to settle and reside for themselves. A large proportion have received respectable salaries, and have made valuable services to the Colonies.

Married Agricultural Laborers, Single Men, Widows, and Children, are also Benefitted and Settled, particularly Blacksmiths, Carpenters, Joiners, Millwrights, Wheelwrights, Agricultural Labourers, Barbers, Tailors, Shoemakers, Bookbinders, Stationers, Paper-hangers, Glass and Sash-makers, and other Tradesmen. It is a care to enable such persons to settle in the Colonies, and to establish themselves in any trade or profession which may be necessary to the Colonies. As a condition of the Passage, every person who is sent out by the Company will be obliged to do so, and to remain in the Colonies for at least a year, after which time he or she may return if he or she shall be so minded. For full particulars, apply to the Agents, who will be glad to furnish every necessary information.

Persons in the County who are desirous to settle themselves in the Colonies, should apply to Lieut. to JOHN CHALLENGER, R.N. His Majesty's Agent-General for Emigration of Cork, at the Office of the Emigration Department, in the Dock, or some other respectable Person in whom the Applicant is well known.

For further information, apply to the EMIGRATION DEPARTMENT in London, or request to address from Letters to

J. DENHAM PINNOCK, Esq. His Majesty's Agent-General for Emigration.

Under Order to the SECRETARY of STATE, Colonial Department.

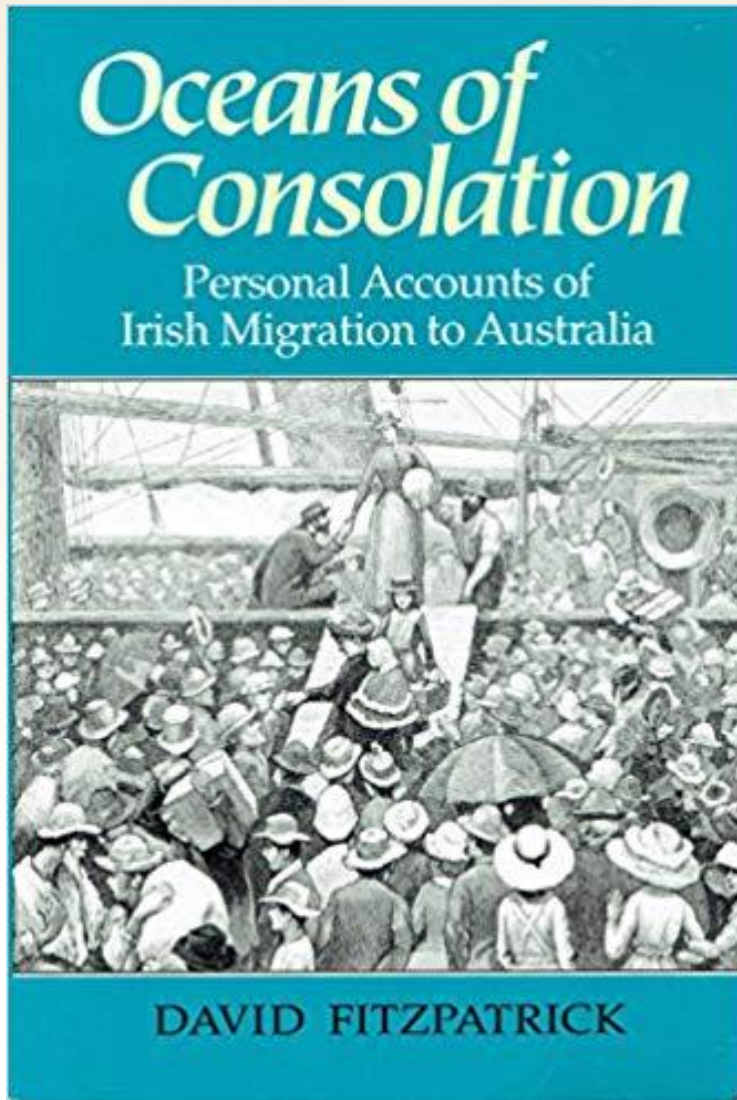
By Authority:

PRINTED BY ANDREW DANIEL, Fleet Street, PARER HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERS OFFICE.

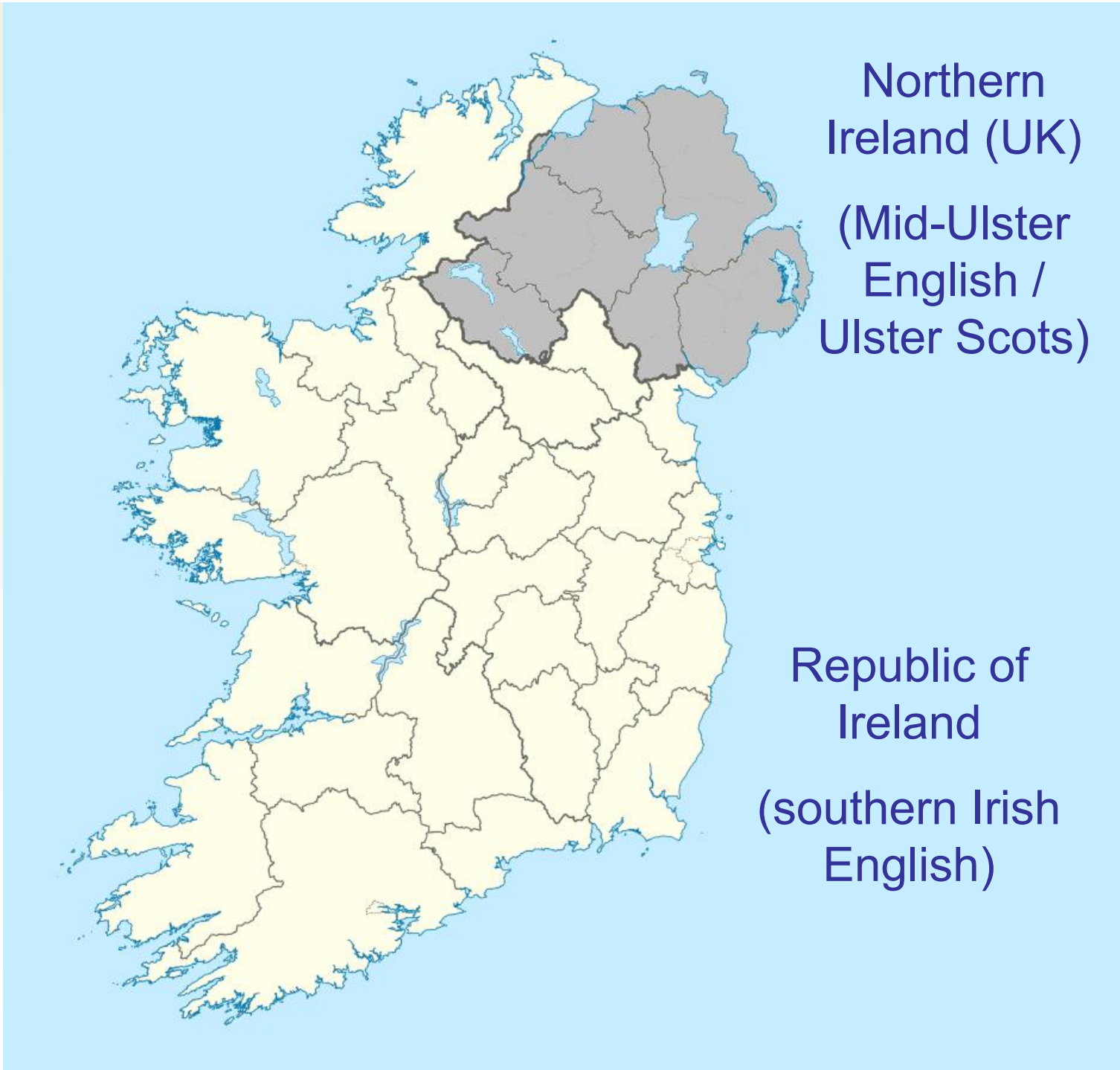
NO 100 TORRENT
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Irish emigration to Australia



Also: Australian emigrant letters from the *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence* (Kevin McCafferty and Carolina Amador Moreno [both Bergen]).



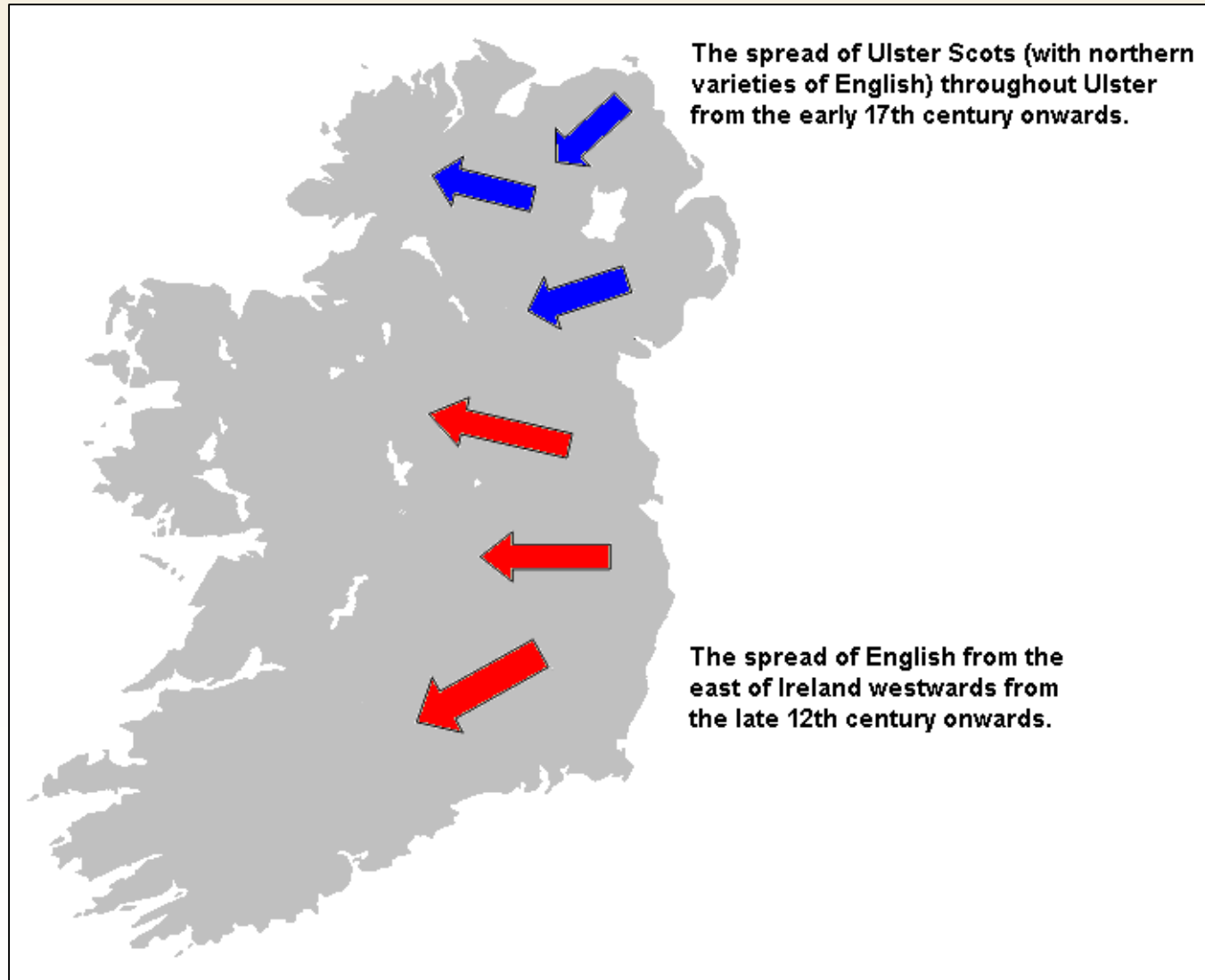
Northern
Ireland (UK)

(Mid-Ulster
English /
Ulster Scots)

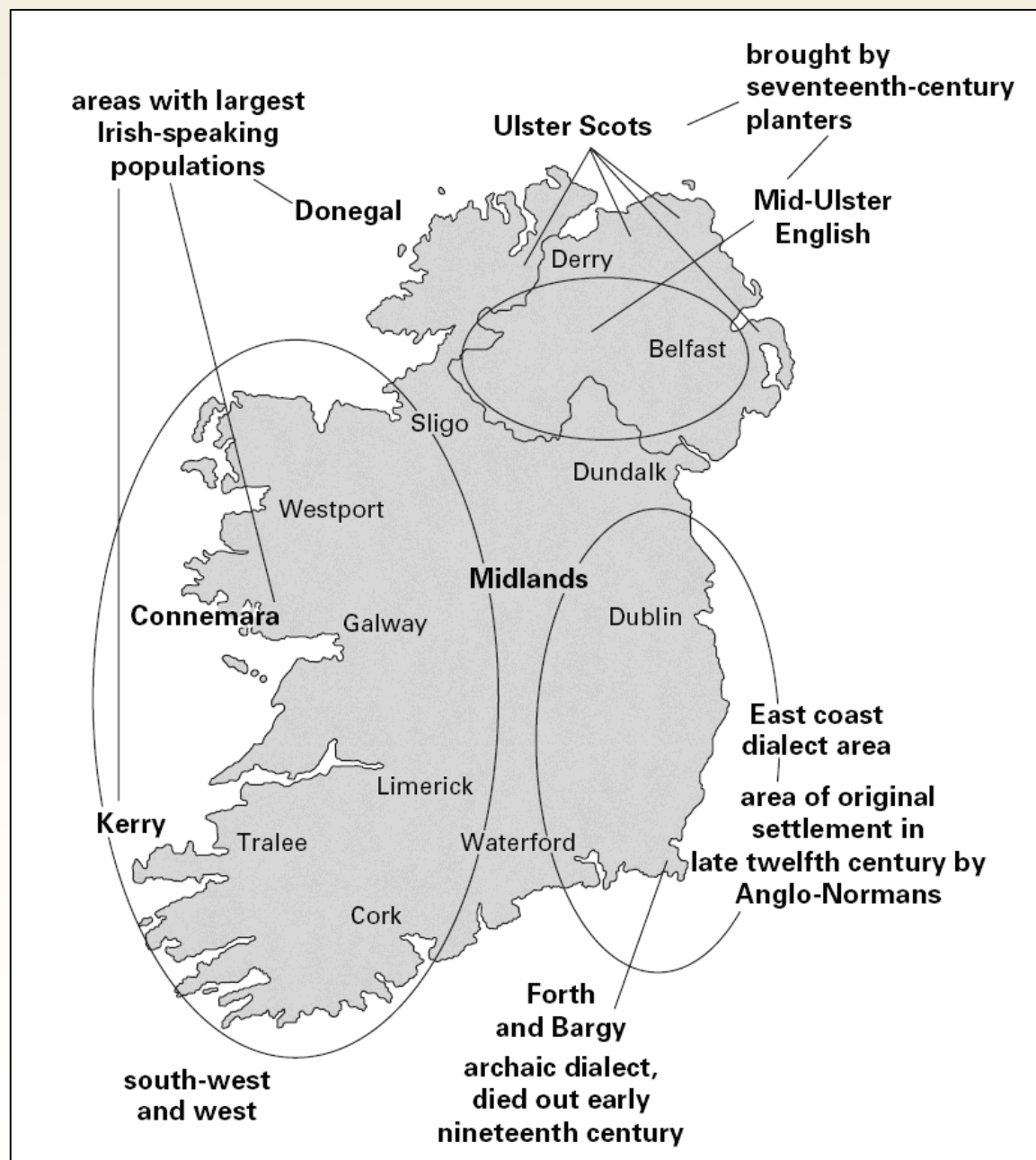
Republic of
Ireland

(southern Irish
English)

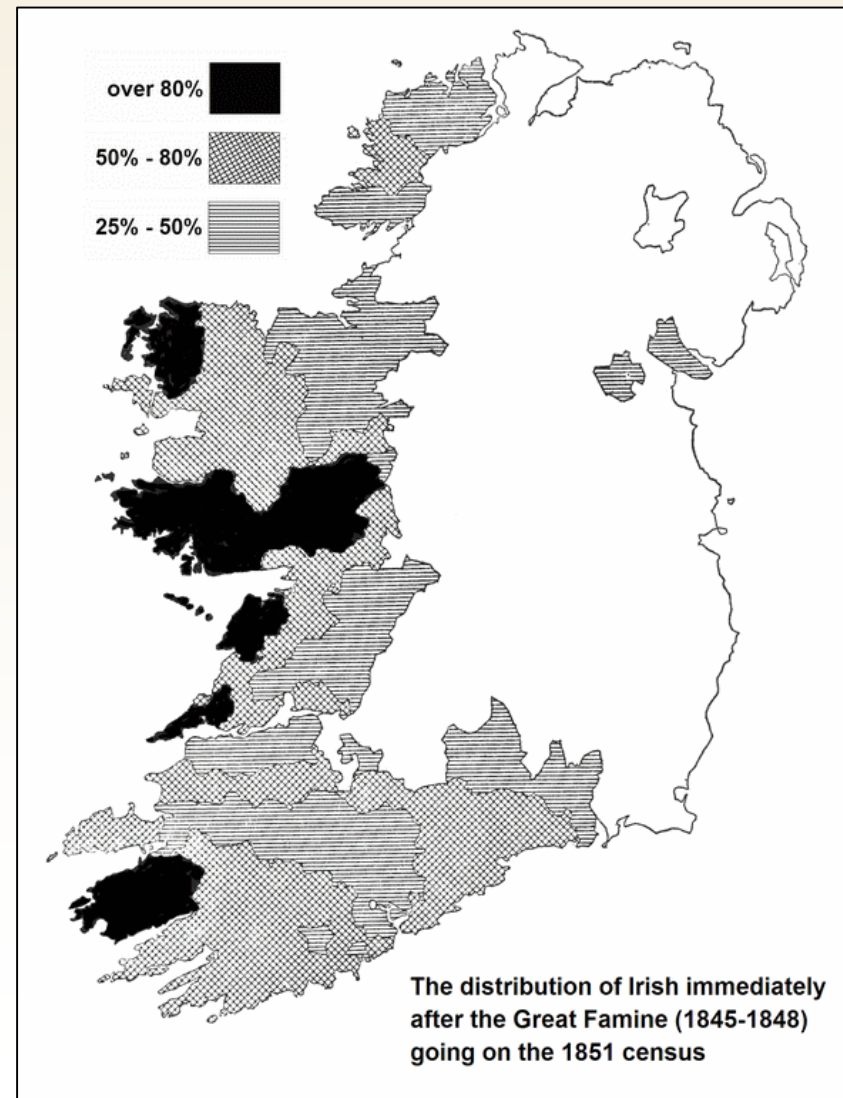
Spread of English in Ireland



The dialects of English in Ireland



The Great Famine (1845-8)



The emigration experience in art



Emigrants leave Ireland (1868) Henry Doyle (1828-1892)

The emigration experience in art

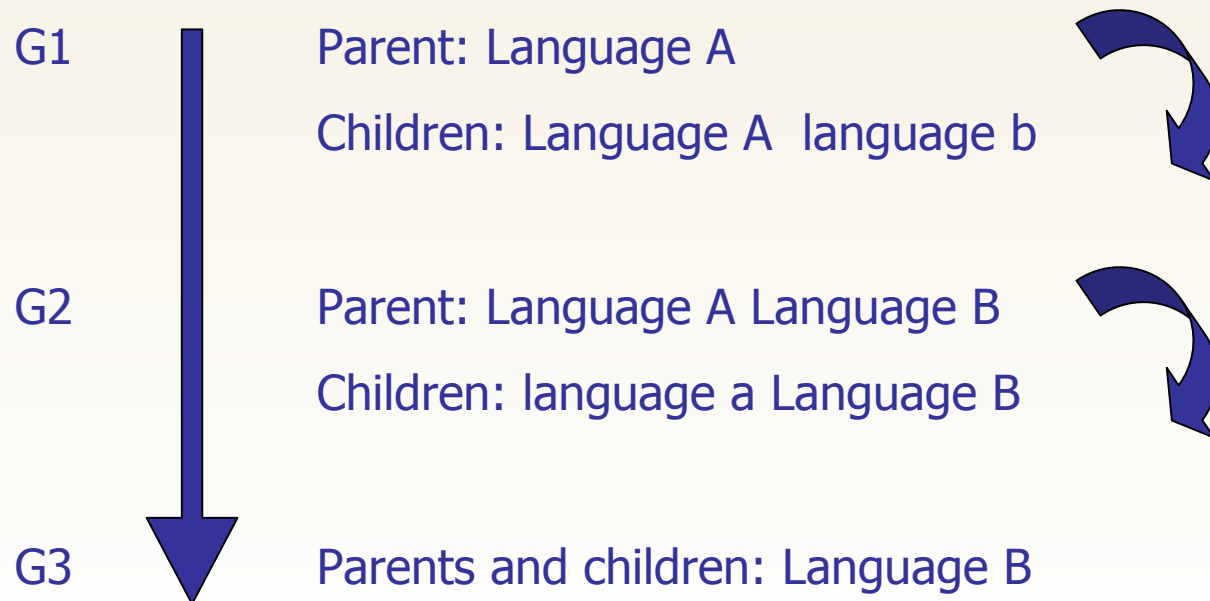


Letter from America (1875, by James Brenan, 1837-1907). Note that it is the young girl who is reading the letter from overseas, written in English. The parents are listening attentively hoping to understand the language while the older man on the left is completely detached (probably a native speaker of Irish with no English). The elder sister behind the table is dreaming of emigrating for a better life outside rural Ireland.

In the second half of the 19th century the majority of the Irish population shifted to English. By 1900 less than 10% of the population were Irish speakers.

Irish → **English**

Three generations model of language shift



Language shift in nineteenth-century Ireland

Irish → **English**

During language shift many features are transferred from the source to the target language. Most of these are phonological and/or syntactic. After some time, many of these features disappear and only a small subset remain to become typical of the resulting contact variety (as is the case with present-day Irish English).

However, it would be interesting to see what features were present in the early stages of the language shift, during the process or at least soon after it was completed. Then we would know what features survived and could ask why certain features did not continue into later stages of the contact variety in question.

Mining vernacular correspondence for linguistic insights:

Looking at the data



An implicational hierarchy for features in familiar letters

Table 1. Classification of insights from familiar letters

Level 1: Familiar letters reveal previously unrecorded features or confirm uncertain features.

Level 2: Familiar letters have features or combinations of features not attested or not continued in a present-day variety.

Level 3: Familiar letters help in determining the period in which known features of a later variety probably arose.

Level 4: Familiar letters confirm features known from later sources and observations of present-day speakers.

Level 5: Familiar letters yield clear negative finds for later known features or those suspected of not belonging to a variety.

Level 6: Familiar letters confirm general patterns assumed for the development of varieties.

Annie's Story

Short biography:

Annie Carroll emigrated to the USA in the summer of 1883 and went first to her brother Peter Carroll in Jefferson County, Wisconsin. In April 1884 she moved to Chicago where she worked as a domestic servant and/or cook at several addresses – she frequently refers to “my laide” and “my boss” in her correspondence – until illness forced her to retire from this work in 1896, after which she continued by taking in washing until February 1902 when she was apparently hospitalised; the record of her life in Chicago ends there. Annie Carroll remained single all her life and wrote constantly to her mother, another brother John and her cousin Minnie in Ireland throughout the 1880s and 1890s.



Annie's Story

Annie Carroll is the ideal writer of familiar letters: an individual who could and did write constantly and nonetheless in vernacular Irish English close to the spoken form of language which she acquired in her youth and seemingly maintained all her life in North America. It is uncertain whether she was a native speaker of Irish from her youth in Ireland but her English was certainly influenced by the structural features transferred from the Irish language during the long period of historical contact between Irish and English.

It is furthermore certain that she wrote the letters herself, i.e. did not have someone more literate write them for her, as was often the case with early emigrants.

Features of Annie Carroll's language in 11 letters

Lack of indefinite article

*we will send it before we will get Ø ancer to this letter
before I had Ø letter from him*

she got to be Ø very stout girle

thair is Ø chance in this counetry

Dear Mary I expect Ø long letter from you

*pleas tell Mary to write soon to me and send me Ø long
letter*

I had Ø nice time of it

I am gone to for quite Ø while

I had Ø letter from uncle peter few days ago

*he told me he built Ø new house at sullivan stason that is
Ø mile and half from where he did live*

her husbent is Ø black smith

the are Ø evil minded lot

Features of Annie Carroll's language in 11 letters

Absence of personal pronoun

*I did not see John sence Ø got your letter
if I had any money to send Ø would sent it*

Unmarked genitive

*I did not get Mary last letter
I think it for me to write you few lines I got mother letter monday
I was sory to here of Bess Carroll death
I was sory to here of Ann death
I was very sorey to here of Maggie Gilmour death
Mary Carroll told me of Pat Markey death*

Annie Carroll's language

So of what value are the letters by an individual like Annie Carroll? Well, they document the occurrence of two previously undocumented features, the omission of the indefinite article and the use of an unmarked genitive. These are Level 1 features, i.e. those not previously attested for the variety in question.

There are also many examples of features from Levels 3 and 4, that is those which are still attested in vernacular varieties of English and which help us with drawing a more complete picture of nineteenth century Irish English.

Nineteenth-century Irish English

So what do such features tell us about nineteenth-century Irish English?

The effects of contact with Irish were more extensive than one might think from Irish English today. The features tell us that the variety of English used in the immediate aftermath of the language shift from Irish showed many more contact features and that many of these got weeded out later so that Irish English as a contact variety shows a relatively small set of entrenched transfer features from a much larger pool during and immediately after the contact with Irish.

Many thanks, I hope the presentation provided you with some food for thought.

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University of Duisburg and Essen
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