

By our tongues united? Irish and Scots language contact in rural Ulster

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This article suggests that the impact of long-term language contact between the languages of Irish, Scots and English in the province of Ulster led to a hybridisation of accent which challenges traditional ethnolinguistic differentiations - namely, the myth that Catholics and Protestants can be differentiated by their accent. The digitisation of archive recordings from the Tape Recorded Survey of Hiberno-English (TRSHE) permitted a detailed phonetic analysis of two speakers from Atticall, a rural townland in the Mourne Mountains with a unique geographical and linguistic setting, due to the close proximity of Ulster Scots and Irish speakers in the area. Phonological features associated with Irish, Northern English and Lowland Scots were garnered from previous dialectological research in Irish, English and Scots phonologies, which aided with the interpretation of the data. Other contemporaneous recordings from the TRSHE allowed further comparison of phonological features with areas of Ulster in which linguistic interaction between Scots and Irish was expected to be less prevalent, such as Arranmore, Donegal (primarily Irish) and Glarryford, Antrim (primarily Scots). Accommodation theory and substrate/superstrate interaction illuminate patterns of phonological transfer in Mourne, Arranmore and Glarryford English, supporting the conclusion that accent in contemporary Northern Ireland is built upon a linguistic heritage of contact and exchange, rather than political or ethnolinguistic division.

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Introduction

There is a perception that speech and accent, like much else in the province of Ulster, have been shaped by the political and religious conflicts that have characterised its recent history (Todd 1984). However, the concept of using language as an ethnolinguistic divider or politicised tool seems to be a rather new phenomenon in Northern Ireland. In ongoing policy wars, Catholic nationalists advocate for Irish language provision, whilst Protestant unionists position Ulster Scots as a ‘language’ in its own right. Instead of indulging in debates on the status of Ulster Scots as either language or dialect, this article argues that in contemporary Northern Ireland, phonological similarities amongst speakers from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds subvert political divides. Developmental contact between speakers of English, Irish and Scots languages predates periods of conflict and continues to shape speech varieties today. Despite perceptions of linguistic division in Northern Ireland, analysis provides no concrete scientific evidence. For example, Rahilly (2006) examined the pronunciation of the <h> shibboleth in Northern Ireland² and found that perceptions of difference have, themselves, heightened awareness of the stigma surrounding the pronunciation of <h>, perhaps invoking a differentiating trend. Though dominant ideologies may seek to enforce divisive linguistic patterns, it is important to note that contact-induced changes can rarely be disguised when scrutinised through a close analysis of speaker phonology: the complex processes involved in linguistic transfer cannot be disguised.

Language Contact and Interdialect Formation

In any situation where two (or more) languages co-exist, a contact situation develops and in every contact situation, languages take on roles of either substrate (low status language) or superstrate (high status language) (Hickey 2012). Local demographics influence the likelihood of community engagement with newly arrived speakers and their languages. Across the whole of Ireland, English was a high status language of the settlers, whilst the majority of natives spoke Irish. In Ulster, English-speaking

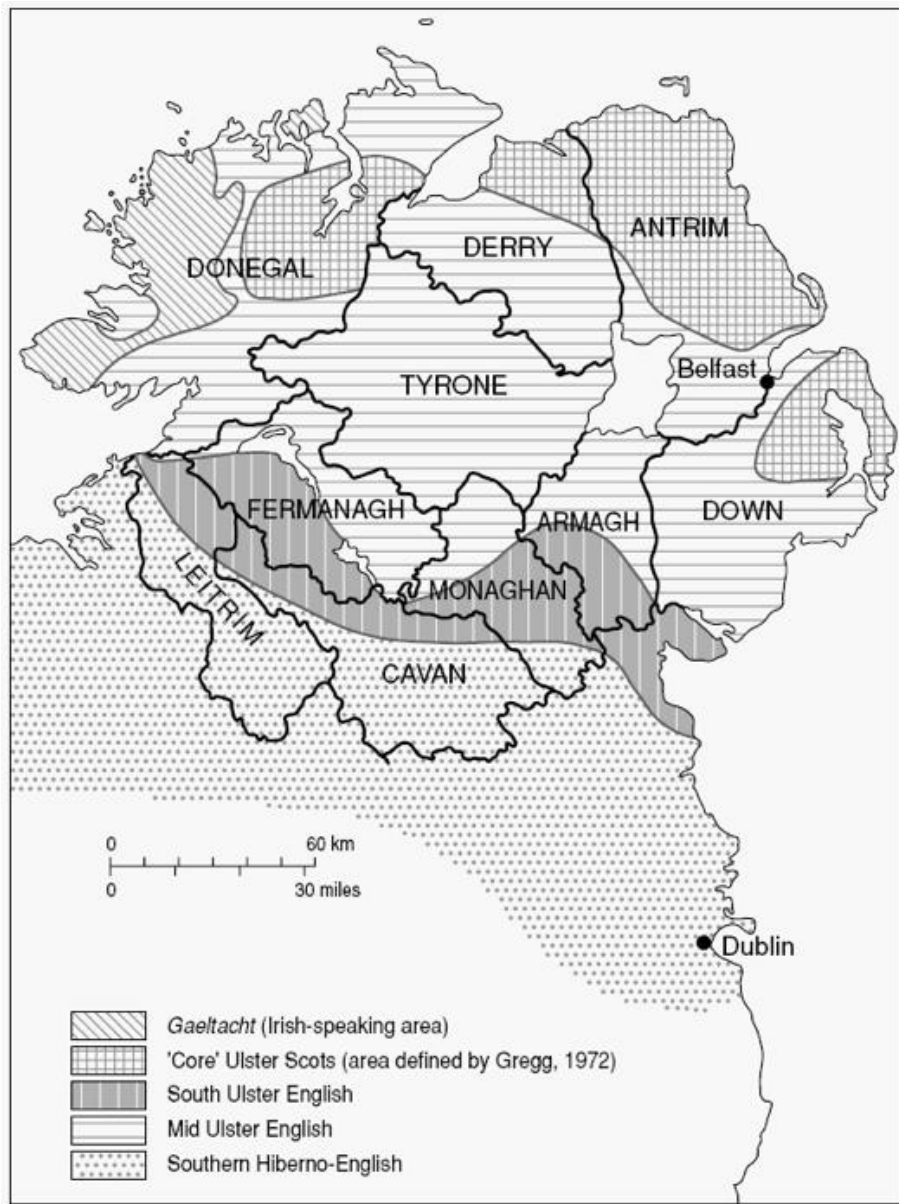
² A widespread belief is that the pronunciation of letter name <h> is realised by Catholics as [hetʃ] and by Protestants as [etʃ], with the phonetic difference being one of “word-initial aspiration versus non-aspiration” (Rahilly 2006: 47).

settlers of Scots and Northern English origin would have adopted some features of Irish for communication purposes, producing a “shift variety of the high-status minority” (Hickey 2012: 19). Thus, speakers of Irish learning English were acquiring a variety of English that was itself in flux, appropriating features of Irish. In contact situations, interdialects emerge (Trudgill 2008), which possess features that are not exact transplantations from the contact languages themselves but are developed during contact, as intermediate or compromising features to maximise communicative ease. Moreover, speakers map new sound structures onto their native phonological frameworks, which is exhibited in patterns of palatalisation, the insertion of /j/ between front and back sounds in the oral cavity, e.g. ‘cart’ is pronounced as /kjaɪt/, in Ulster Scots speech, a remaining feature from the Scots Gaelic root (Hale 2008). Believing that a language shift involves the complete transplantation of features and grammar from one language community to another does not reflect the process of language contact.

Dialectologists traditionally approached linguistic mapping in the fashion shown in figure 1. Mid Ulster English, Gaeltacht, and Ulster Scots are presented as discrete and distinguishable regions in dialect maps (Corrigan 2010; Hickey 2007). Though focusing on historical background and introspective data establishes the neat phonological boundaries exhibited above, the influence of contact-induced variation is ignored in favour of presenting homogeneous areas, which are consequently less reflective of localised trends. Gregg’s early research on Ulster Scots suggests that it is unique to the ‘Coastal Crescent’ of Ards, the North Coast and the Laggan area of Donegal (1972). However, in a later work, Montgomery and Gregg (1997) realised that even in the presence of much more scholarly work and larger amounts of rural speech data, either/or classifications oversimplified the linguistic continuum along which different accents in Ulster were situated.

Traditional approaches to dialectology in Ulster

Figure 1: Dialectological map of Ulster with linguistic isoglosses



Source: Hickey (2007: 442).

As a researcher with local knowledge of South Down, I took issue with the archetypal isoglosses in Figure. 1. The mountainous Mourne area is classified as Mid Ulster English, but Lowland Scots settlers came to Mourne in the 1600s. Though the literature on Ulster Scots language is silent on Mourne and South Down, there is

lasting linguistic and cultural evidence of a Scots presence in the town of Kilkeel and the surrounding countryside. Contact and transfer between Scots Gaelic, Irish Gaelic and English would have been facilitated through the daily tasks of farming and fishing; moreover, the geographical block of the Mourne Mountains appears to act as a barrier protecting the local accent from trends of normalisation across areas such as Banbridge, Lisburn and Mid Down. To test my hypotheses, I needed to subject dialectological data from the Mourne area to a comparative linguistic analysis.

Methodology

The *Tape Recorded Survey of Hiberno-English* (TRSHE), conducted in the 1970s by the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen's University, Belfast, in conjunction with researchers at University of Ulster, Coleraine, University College, Cork, Trinity College, Dublin, and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, was a methodological innovation for its time. Before the TRSHE, non-mobile older rural males (or NORMs) were the preferred subjects of dialectological research, as they would most likely preserve conservative dialect features; historical linguistic surveys did not strive for representative and inclusive data, as required in contemporary research. The TRSHE however, documented linguistic variety across the island of Ireland by collecting data from 3 age groups (9-12 years, 35-45 years and 65-75 years) (Barry 2014, 1981).

A limitation to any phonological study is the data collection process itself, as participants will usually adapt their speech in an interview setting, a pattern called 'linguistic accommodation' (Giles 1973). The phenomenon is particularly problematic if the fieldworkers have noticeably different accents from the participants with whom they engage verbally, or if read-speech tasks are used, as these tend to heighten speech consciousness and invoke more standardised pronunciation (Bowerman 2012). The elicitation exercise used in the TRSHE sought to distract participants from word pronunciation, as they were focusing on retrieving the appropriate target word. Instead of reading or mimicking, the participant uttered an on-line pronunciation of the target word.

As the Mourne area was the focus of my research, I used the TRSHE archive at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum to locate recordings made in the area and found just two, both recorded in Atticall, County Down. Atticall remains a predominantly Roman Catholic townland that, according to the 1911 Language Census (see Adams 1964), previously lay in a linguistic interface between areas where Irish was still spoken and English-speaking communities had been developing. Locations for comparative analysis were chosen using the mapped regions in figure 1, in attempts to find archetypal Irish English and Ulster Scots data for comparison. For the former, the specific site chosen was the island of Arranmore; it seemed likely that features of Irish would retain a stronger influence on the local dialect as it was a Gaeltacht region, where Irish was still spoken by the majority. The other control location selected was Glarryford, Co. Antrim; the rural town is situated within Gregg's 'Coastal Crescent' (1972), which is perceived in the literature as a stronghold of Ulster Scots influence in the province.

In order for the data to be accessible for auditory and acoustic analysis, the original reel-to-reel tapes had to be digitised into WAV format. Peter Carson, the sound archivist at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, oversaw the digitisation procedure. Despite my initial fears of tape degradation (MacKay 2010), the final versions were of suitable quality for phonetic analysis; though admittedly some sections were much clearer than others, and unintelligible portions were removed to prevent analytic bias. The quality of the material available is a testament to the training and expertise of the original fieldworkers and to the recording equipment they used at the time.

Analysis

Impressionistic phonetic transcriptions of the digitised data were made using the International Phonetic Alphabet. It is important to explore phonetic inventories through their position in the syllable, which is made of onset, nucleus (vowel) and coda. Categorising inventories by syllable position helps with the identification of phonotactic patterns governing the language: consonants (or consonant clusters) that are permissible in the onset of a syllable may not appear in the coda, e.g. <str>.

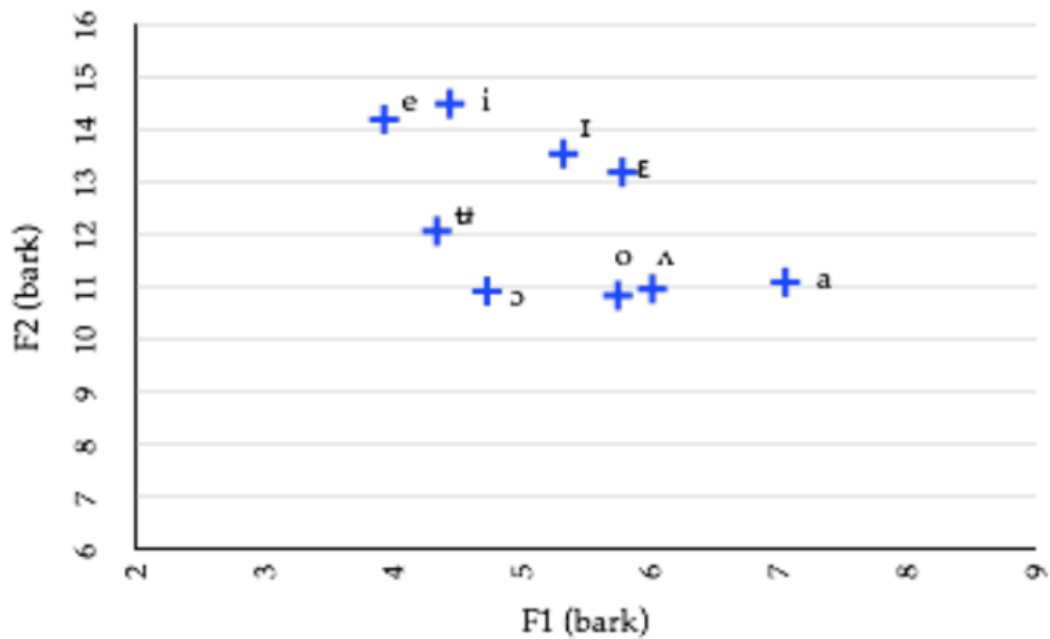
Comparing phonetic inventories for each section of the syllable establishes permissible single consonants and consonant clusters, creating a unique inventory for onsets and codas, developing specific distributional rules. Table 1 shows how target sounds were realised in word-medial onset position according to the geographical location of the participant.

Table 1: Word-Medial Onset Realisations

<i>Target</i>	Arranmore	Atticall	Glarryford
/d/	d, d̥, t̥, θ	d, d̥, t̥	d, ?
/g/	g, gj	g, ø	g
/k/	k	k	k, g
/n/	n, l	n, l	n, l
/ɹ/	ɹ, r	ɹ	ɹ
/t/	t, t̥, d, ð	t, t̥, d, ʔ, θ, d̥	t, t̥, d, ?
/ð/	ð, d̥	ð, ʔ, ø	ð, ø
Total: 7	17 (13)	18 (13)	14 (11)

Source: Hanna (2014:107).

Praat software (Boersma and Weenink 2014) allows the linguistic researcher to consolidate auditory with acoustic analysis by measuring vowel formant frequencies in Hertz, and plotting them graphically (see figure 2). Values are normalised from Hertz to Bark scale, and the vowel space graph produces a visual representation of the size of the vowel space and the distribution of vowels within the oral cavity. In figure 2 below, F1 inversely represents tongue height and F2 inversely represents a fronted tongue position; the distribution reveals quite a narrow range of F1 and F2 values and a minimally distributed (or centralised) vowel space, which is particularly fronted.

Figure 2: Vowel Realisations in Atticall

Source: Hanna (2014: 39).

Results

In the process of data transcription and analysis, it became clear that even the ‘control locations’, which I presumed would be comparatively homogeneous, exhibited crossover between Irish English and Ulster Scots accentual features. Indeed, the Atticall speakers’ phonetic transcriptions often revealed more Scotticisms than the Ulster Scots and Irishisms than the Gaeltacht Irish speakers. However, space limitations allow only a brief depiction of consonantal and vocalic trends in the Atticall data.

Consonantal features of Ulster Scots

	Target Phoneme	Realisation	Phonological Process	Target Word	IPA Transcription
1	/t/	[d]	Voicing	<i>after, faster</i>	[ˈafdəɪ, ˈfasdəɪ]
2	/t/	[ʔ]	Glottalisation	<i>ant, teapot</i>	[anʔ, ˈti:pəʔ]
3	/d/	[∅]	Deletion	<i>diamond</i>	[ˈdaimən]
4	∅	[j] / k, g, n —	Palatalisation	<i>cart, gather,</i> <i>new</i>	[kja:ɪʔ, ˈgjaðəɪ, nɟu]
5a	/x/	[x]	Retention	<i>trough,</i> <i>lough</i>	[tɹɔx, lɔx]
5b	/x/	[xk]	Stopping	<i>trough,</i> <i>lough</i>	[tɹɔxk, lɔxk]

The above features show patterns suggesting an Ulster Scots influence on Atticall consonant realisations, such as:

1. Voicing of voiceless plosive /t/ before a vowel reflecting a break between two syllables.
2. Glottalisation of voiceless plosives in coda position.
3. Deletion of voiced plosives in coda position.
4. Palatal insertion (or gliding) between (a) a velar (back) consonant and a front vowel, and (b) an alveolar consonant (front) and a centralised vowel.
5. a) Retention of the recessive /x/ phoneme, which Hickey (2012) pinpoints as a feature unique to Ulster Scots. /x/ is often realised as either [f] or [k] in syllable-final position, such as [tɹɔf] for /tɹɔx/ *trough*, but [x] remains in Atticall speech. One participant (b) produces a [xk] cluster, suggesting a mix between Scots and normalising trends.

Consonantal features of Irish English

	Target Phoneme	Realisation	Phonological Process	Target Word	IPA Transcription
1.	/t, d/	[t̪, d̪] / _ɪ	Dentalisation	<i>drink,</i> <i>trotting</i>	[d̪ɪŋk, 't̪ɒʔɪŋ]
2.	/θ, ð/	[t̪, d̪]	Stopping	<i>thistles,</i> <i>thimble</i>	['t̪ɪsls, 't̪ɪmpl]
3.	/s/	[ʃ] / WI	Palatalisation	<i>snow</i>	[ʃno]

A smaller number of consonantal features show patterns of accent realisation that suggest Irish influence:

6. Alveolar plosive dentalisation before / ɪ /, which differentiates the place of articulation between adjacent consonants.
7. Stopping dental fricatives, as they are absent phonemes in Irish Gaelic.
8. Palatalisation of /s/ in consonant clusters, again differentiating place of articulation between adjacent consonants.

Vocalic features of Irish English and Ulster Scots in Atticall

The centralised vowel space and patterns of reducing weak vowels to 'schwa' ([ə]) suggests a strong Ulster Scots influence on the Atticall vowel space. A high rate of diphthongisation, or vowel lengthening through the addition of 'schwa', may be a means of gliding between adjacent sounds by returning to the centralised/neutral position in preparation for the next sound, a trend mirroring consonantal palatalisation in Ulster Scots. It could be argued that the process of diphthongising monophthongs is, in itself, a marriage of Irish English and Ulster Scots vowel systems, as it maintains the distinctiveness of vowels seen in Irish English, whilst terminating in a centralised location, typical of Ulster Scots. The influence of Irish is seen in the comparative vowel space distribution of Atticall. However, decreased tongue movement in diphthongs, to the extent that they become monophthongs (e.g. *beard* /bɪəɪd/ > [bɛɪd]), is a feature of Irish rather than Ulster Scots. Regardless of directly earmarking influence, it is clear that phonological features from two underlying

phonological inventories explain the trends of vocalic variation in Atticall.

Conclusion

Speech data collected in Atticall provides little evidence for ethnolinguistic speech profiling in Ulster, as consonantal and vocalic features reflect an intermingling of Irish/Scots phonological features. Moreover, the control areas of Arranmore and Glarryford similarly did not reflect archetypal phonological patterns of Irish English and Ulster-Scots documented in previous literature on the subject. Though limited in scope, the results indicate broader variation, fluidity and accommodation in language than initially expected, suggesting a dialectical relationship in the linguistic development of rural Ulster. As the TRSHE recordings were made at a time when the Troubles were at their height, it was arguably a moment in history when people would have wanted to distinguish themselves by their accent, if they had the conscious ability to do so. The participants did not appear to heighten linguistics features in an attempt to identify with their ‘community’, suggesting ignorance of contemporary ethnolinguistic categorisations, which leads to the conclusion that stereotypes may have developed at a later stage in an attempt to promulgate marked ‘differences’ between Catholic and Protestant communities. Though wars of words may divide Northern Irish communities, it appears that beneath the surface, our tongues continue to unite us.

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