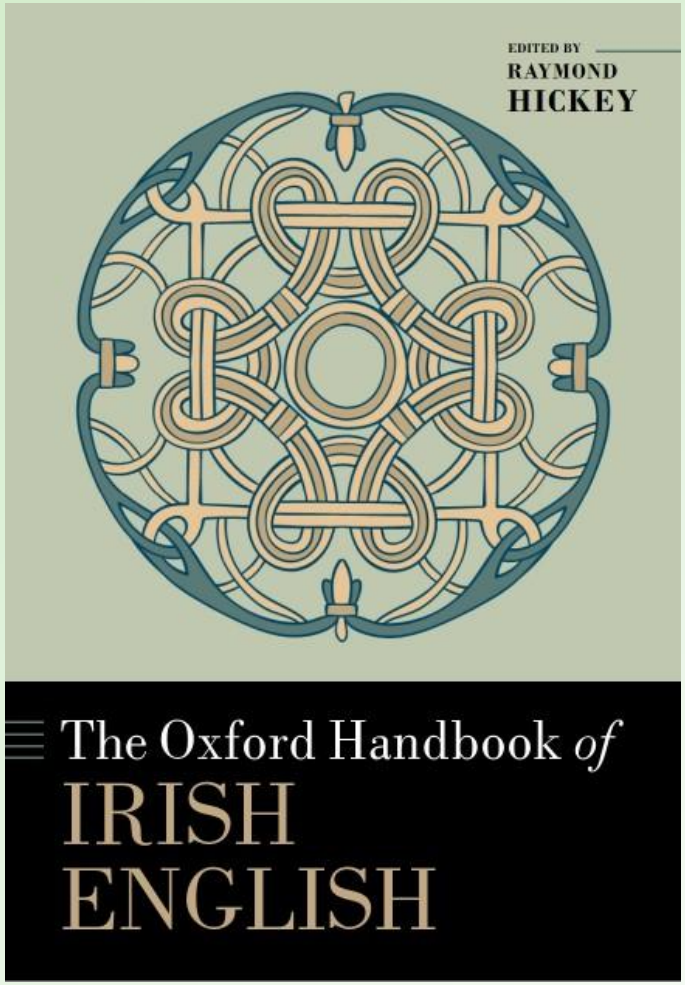
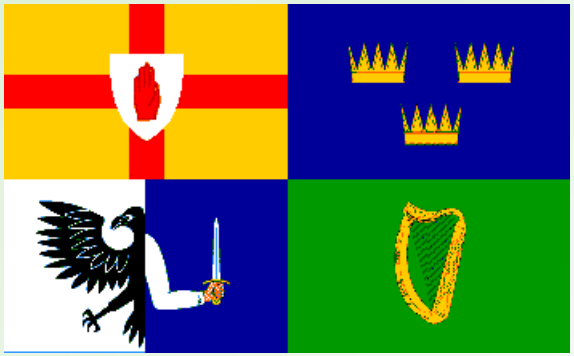
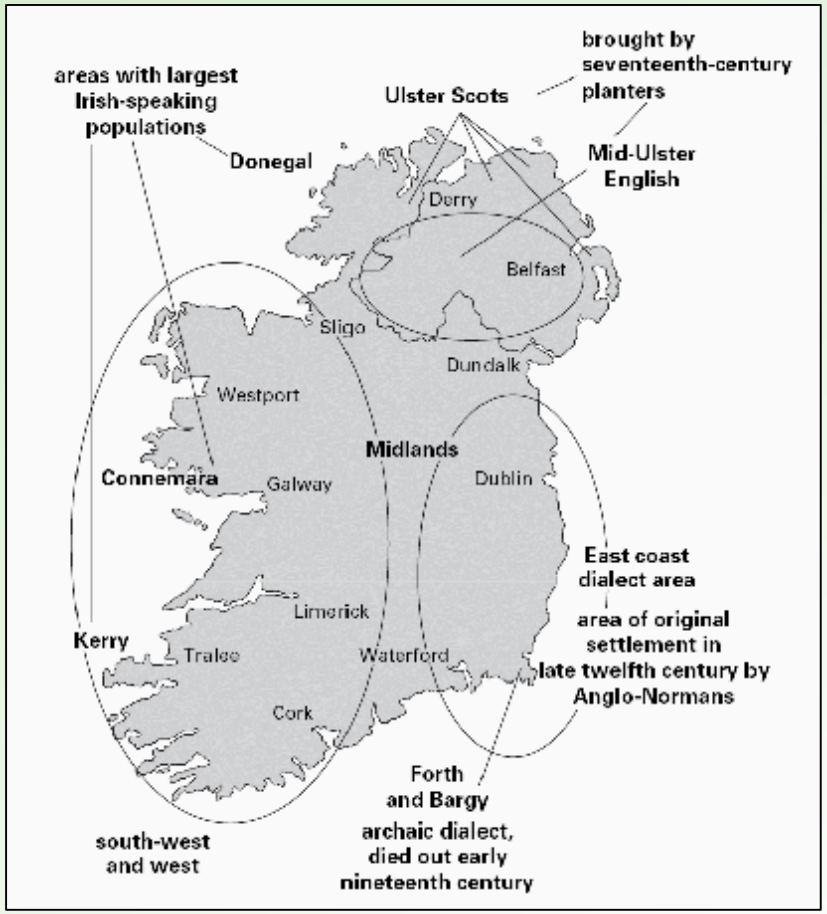
Research trends in Irish English

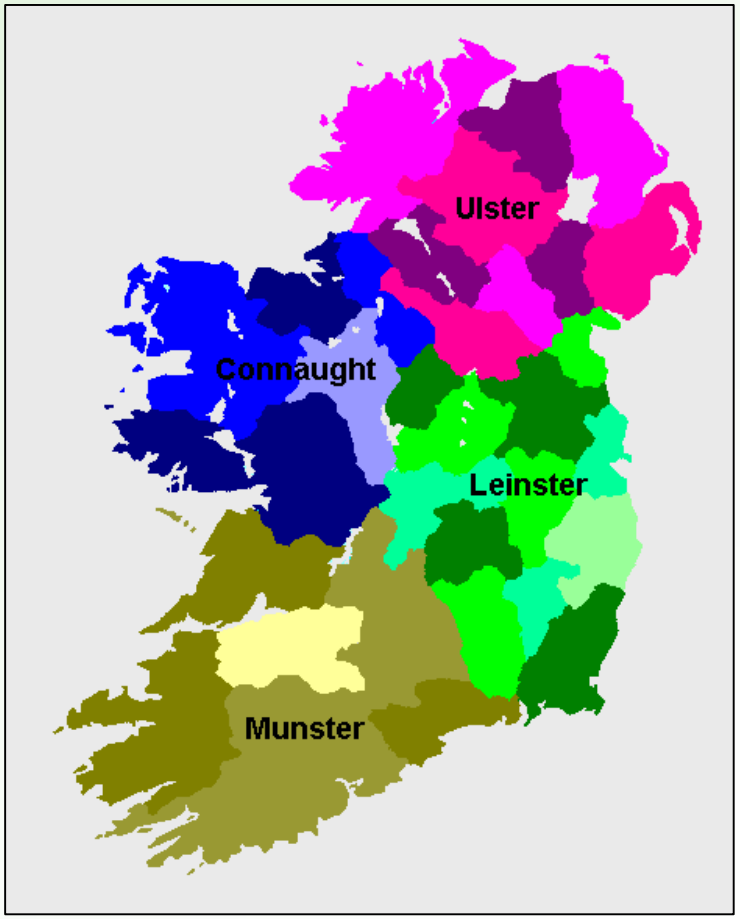


Oxford University Press, 2024, 698pp.

The History of Irish English – a (very) brief summary







Languages during the history of Ireland

Language varieties in present-day Ireland

Irish

- Northern
- Western
- Southern

English / Scots

- Southern Irish English
- Ulster English
- Ulster Scots

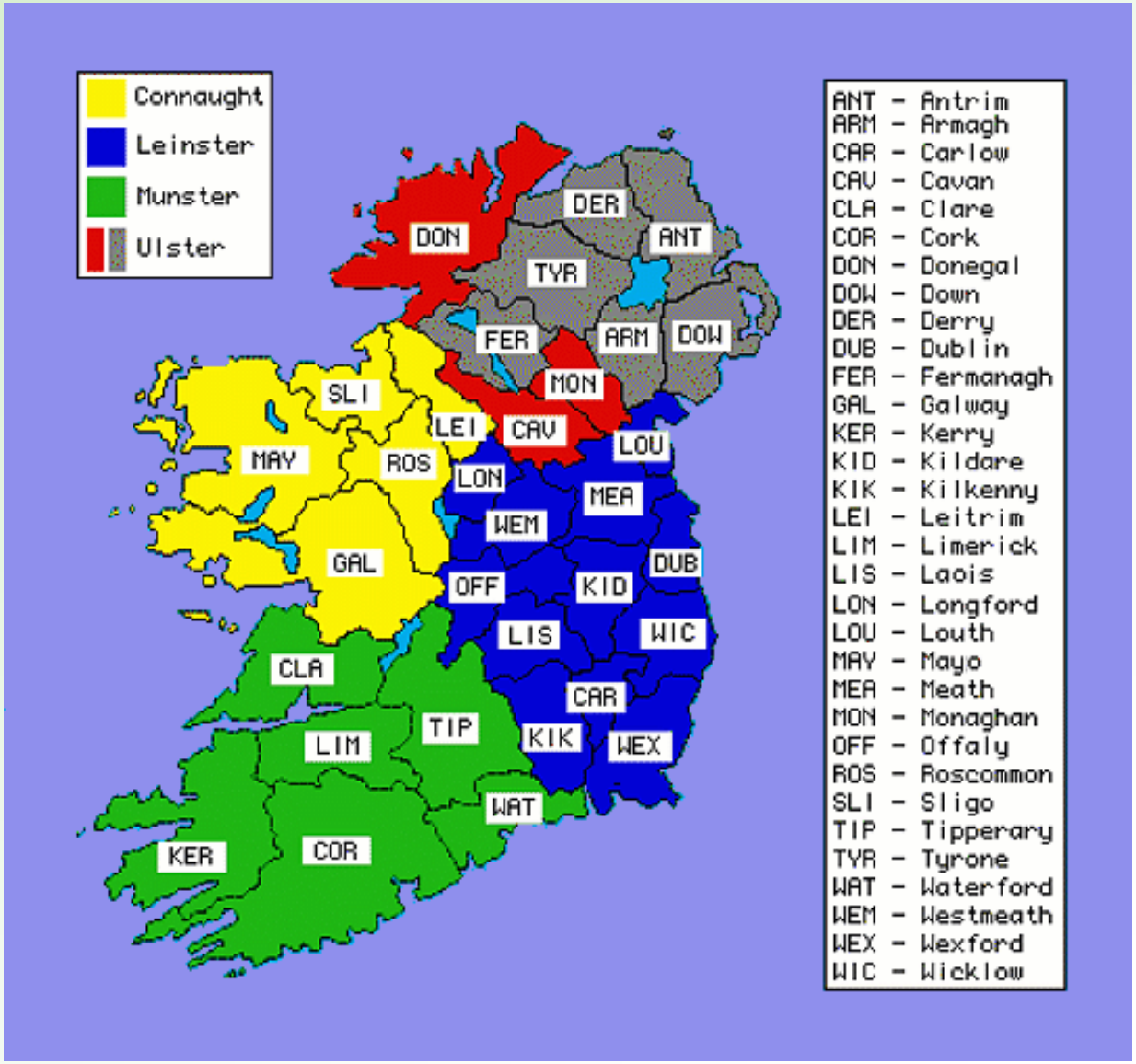
The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (UK)

Northern Ireland (grey counties in Ulster) is part of the United Kingdom. Population: c. 1.5m.

Majority: Protestant

The remainder of the country is the Republic of Ireland, population over 4 m.

Majority: Catholic



Cities in present-day Ireland

Dublin: over 1m; Belfast c. 400,000; other cities, e.g. Derry and Cork, are much smaller

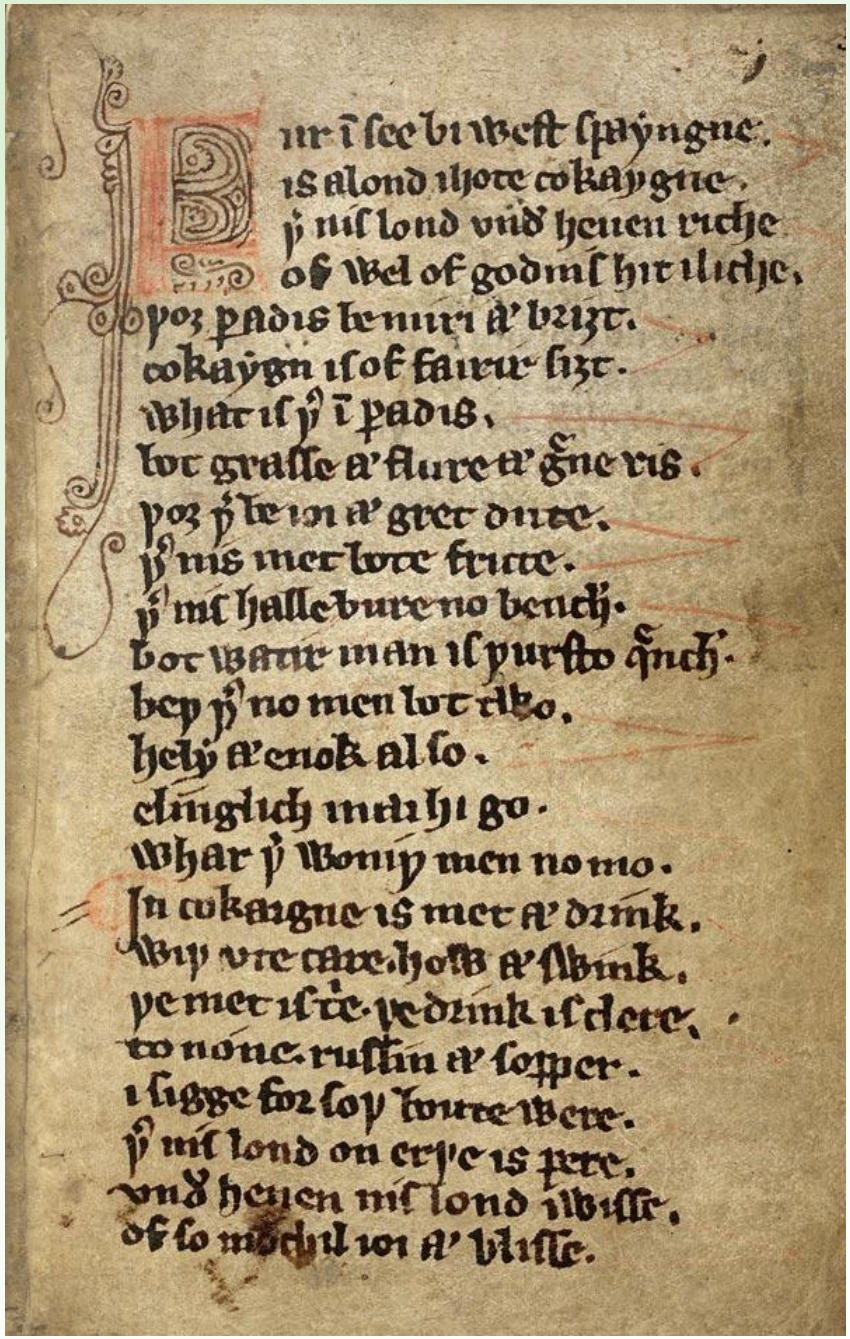
When did the English language come to Ireland ?

Initial settlement of south-eastern Ireland by Anglo-Normans from Wales as of the late 12th century

The ***Kildare Poems***

16 pieces of verse of Irish origin in the Harley 913 manuscript in the British Library

Early 14th century

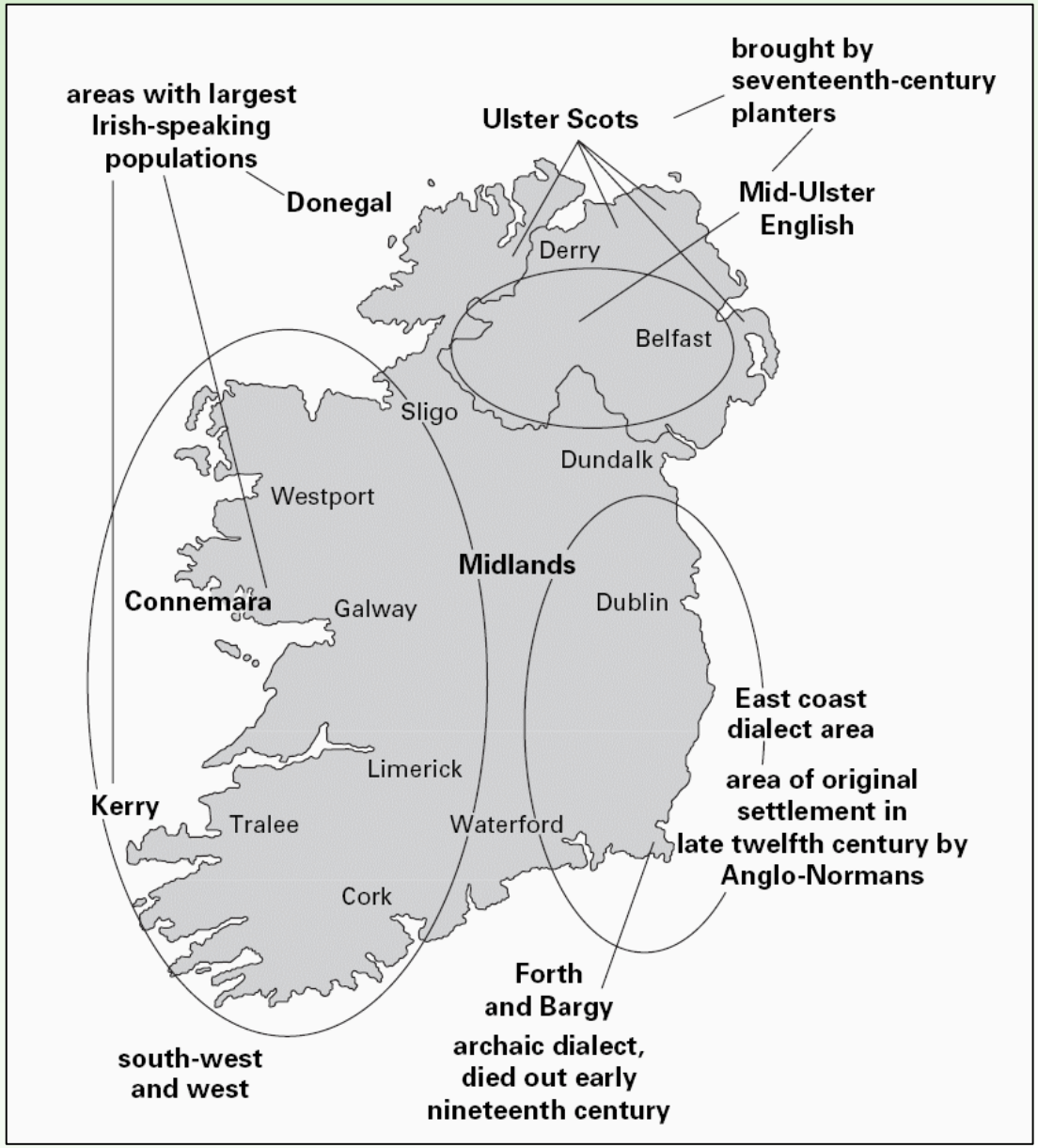


Who wrote the ***Kildare Poems*** ?

Most probably one or more monks at one of the Franciscan or Cistercian monastaries in the east of Ireland. Such individuals would have been Irish and English bilinguals given the proportion of English to Irish speakers in 14th century Ireland.

A south-west English feature which still survives in the south-east of Ireland is the fortition of sibilants in pre-nasal position:

isn't [ɪdn̩t], *wasn't* [wɒdn̩t], *doesn't* [dʌdn̩t]



Periods in the development of Irish English

1) **First period** *Late 12th century to 1600*

Establishment of English on the east coast in a band from Dublin down to Waterford. English is above all present in the towns; Anglo-Norman — and of course Irish — in the countryside. Increasing Gaelicisation in the centuries after the initial invasion led to the demise of English outside the major towns. The low point for English is reached in the 16th century with Irish in a correspondingly strong position.

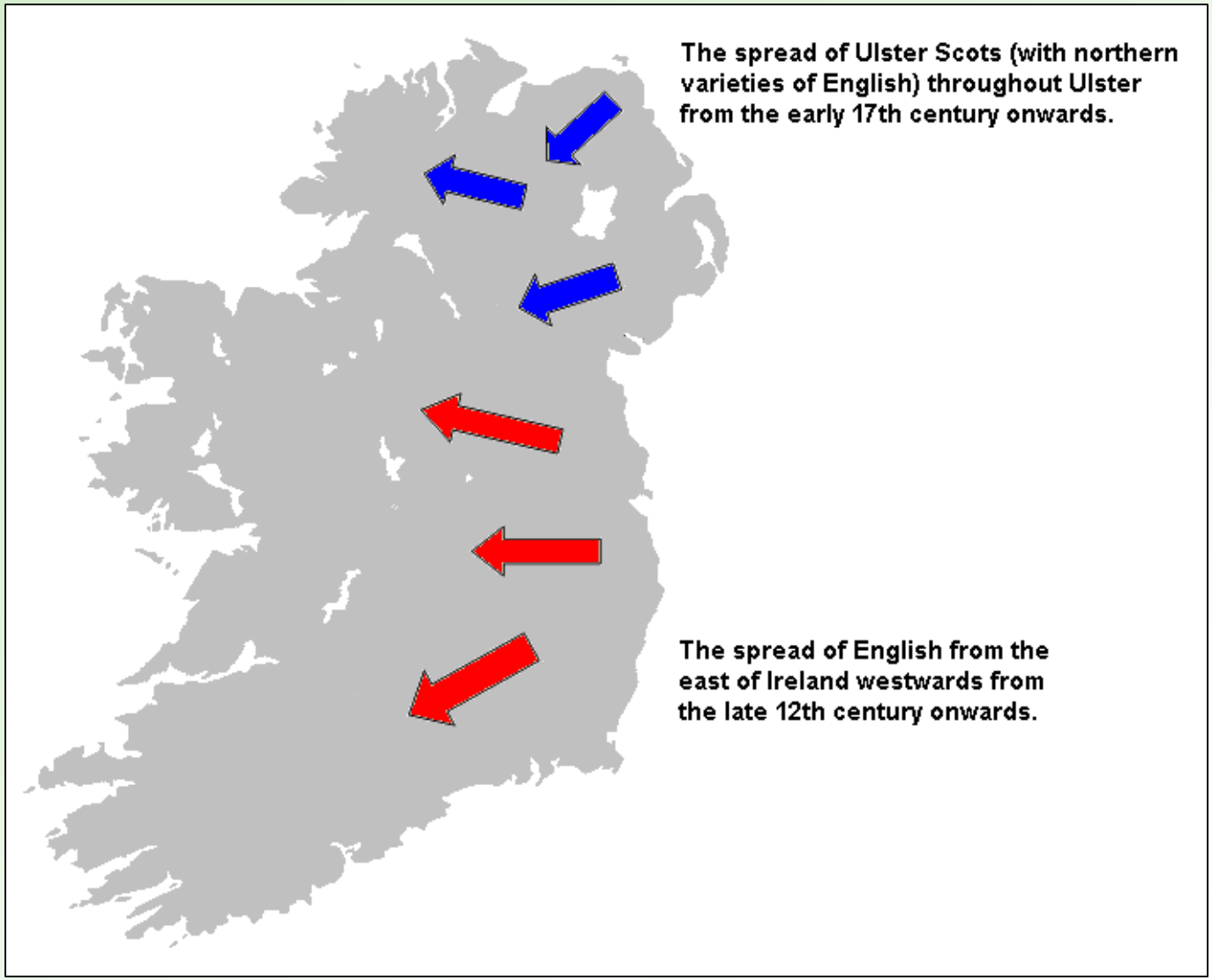
2) Second period *1600 to present-day*

This begins with a decisive military defeat for the Irish. The north of the country is particularly affected with settlers from Lowland Scotland moving to Ulster and establishing a firm presence there. Later on in the 17th century there are vigorous plantations of the south of the country (under Cromwell). By the end of the 17th century, the position of English is unassailable and the general decline of Irish sets in with events like the Great Famine in the late 1840s and the ensuing mass emigration dealing a final blow to the language.

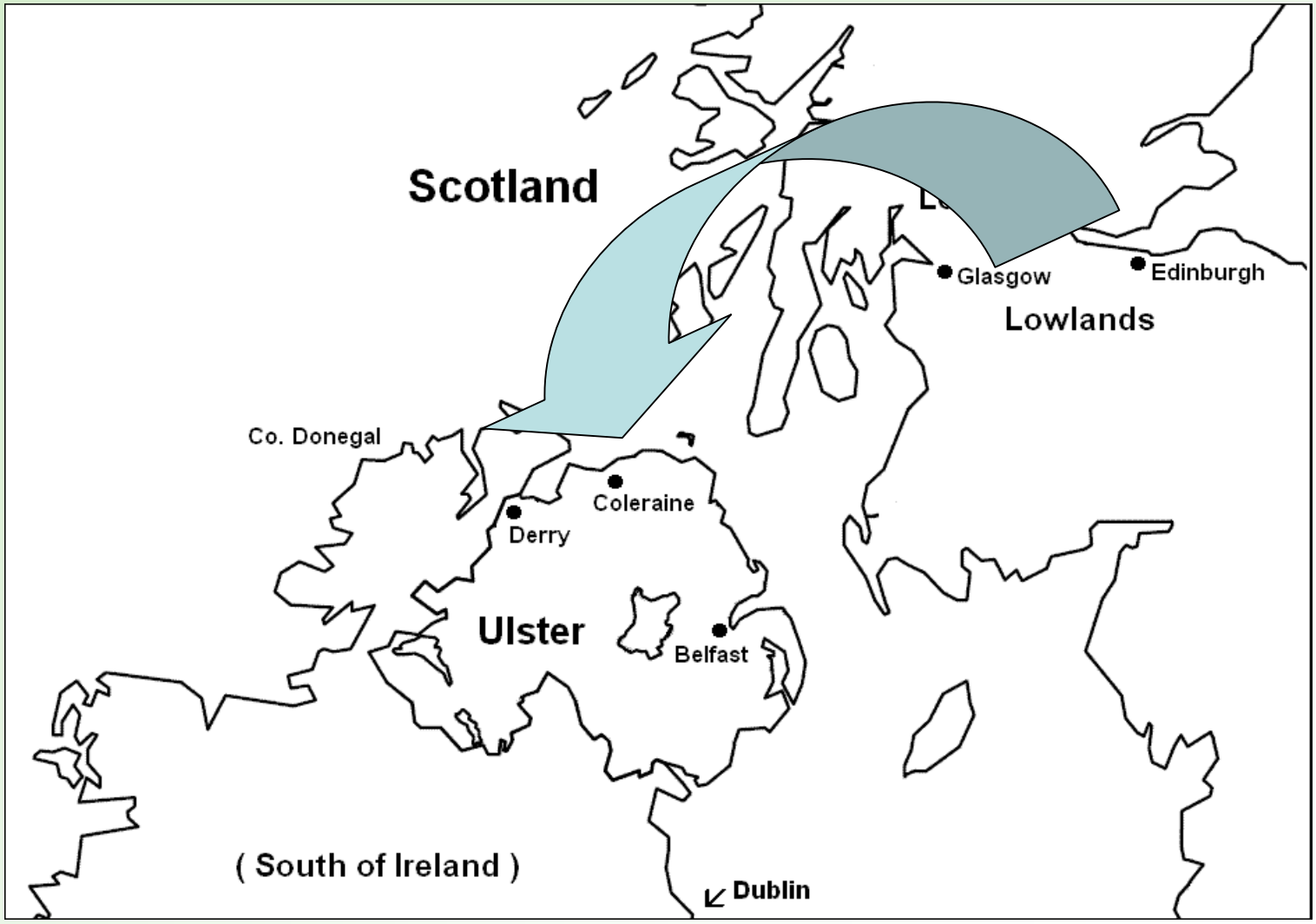
The Seventeenth Century:

Large-scale Anglicisation of Ireland

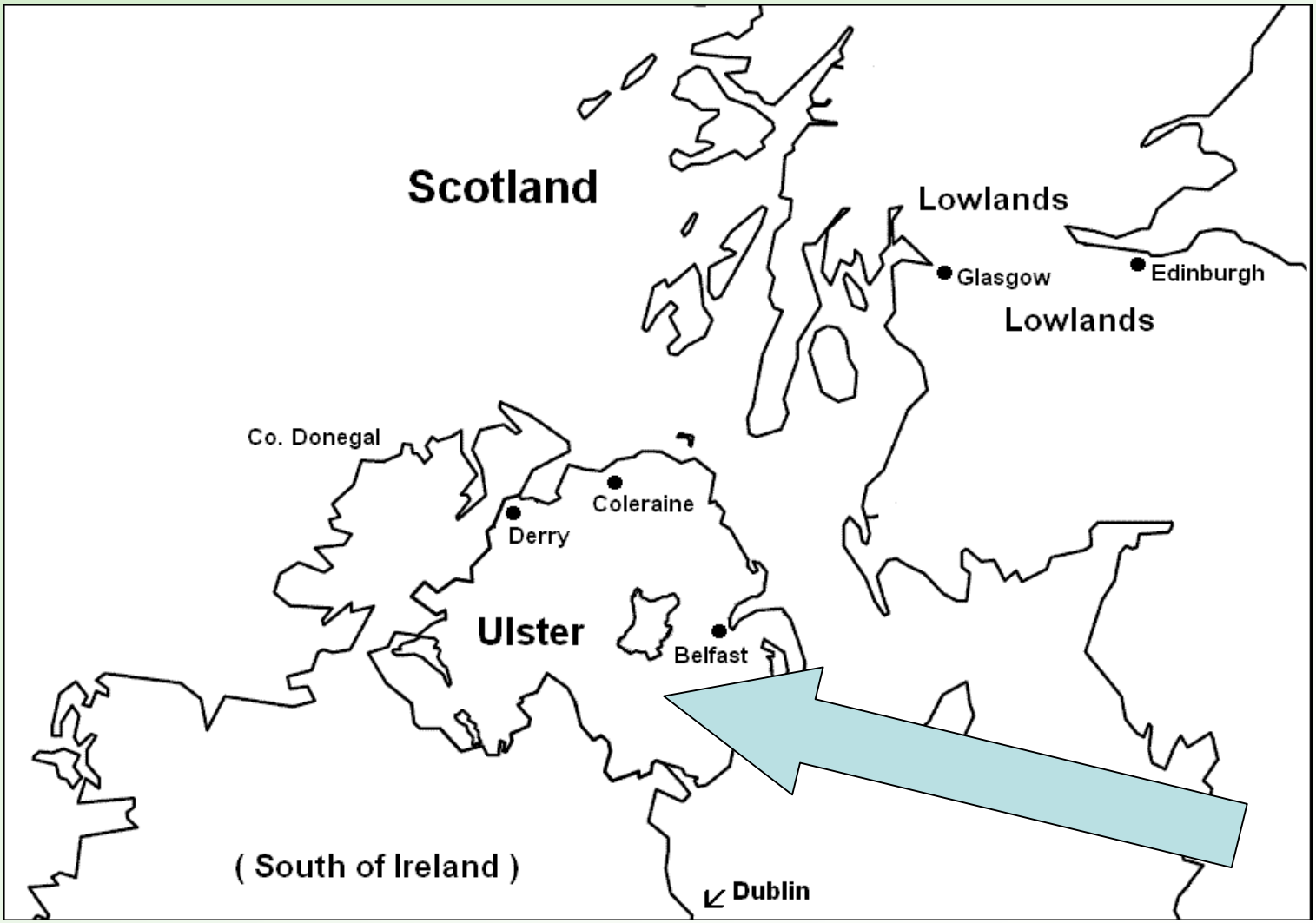
Spread of English in Ireland



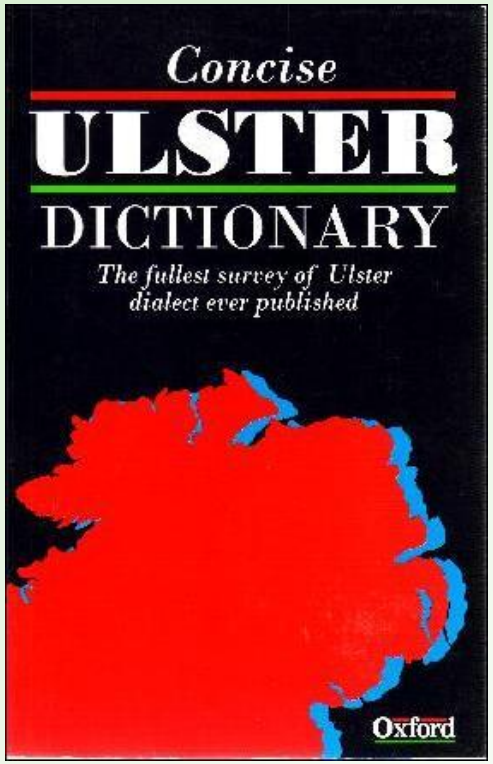
Migration of Lowland Scots to Ulster in the 17th century

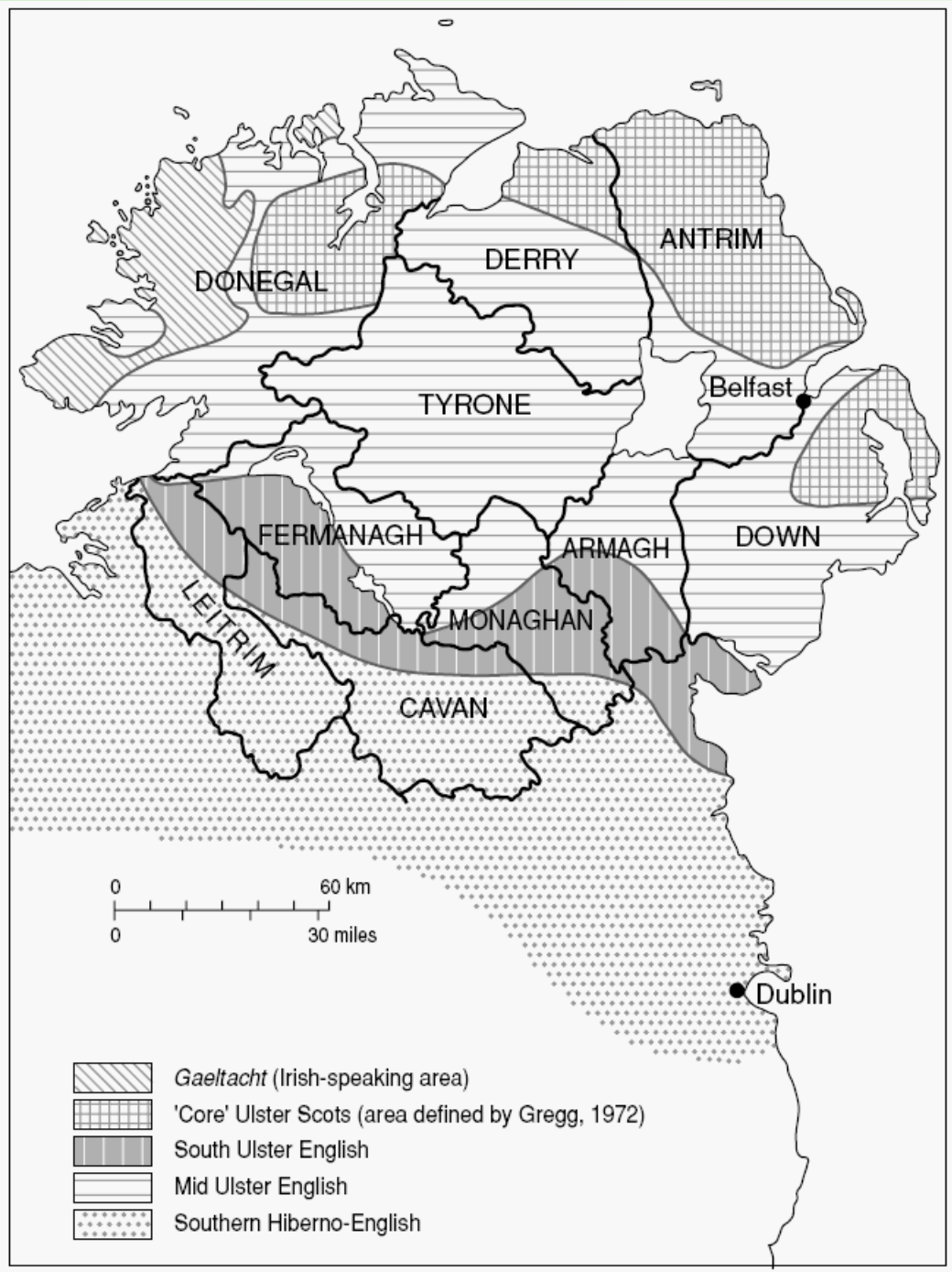


Migration of northern English to mid-Ulster in the 17th century



Present-day dialect divisions in Ulster





The Eighteenth Century:

The Long Peace

The 18th century was a time of relative peace in Ireland. However, there were periods of famine and continued emigration, especially from Ulster, to North America (in all, about 250,000 people left).

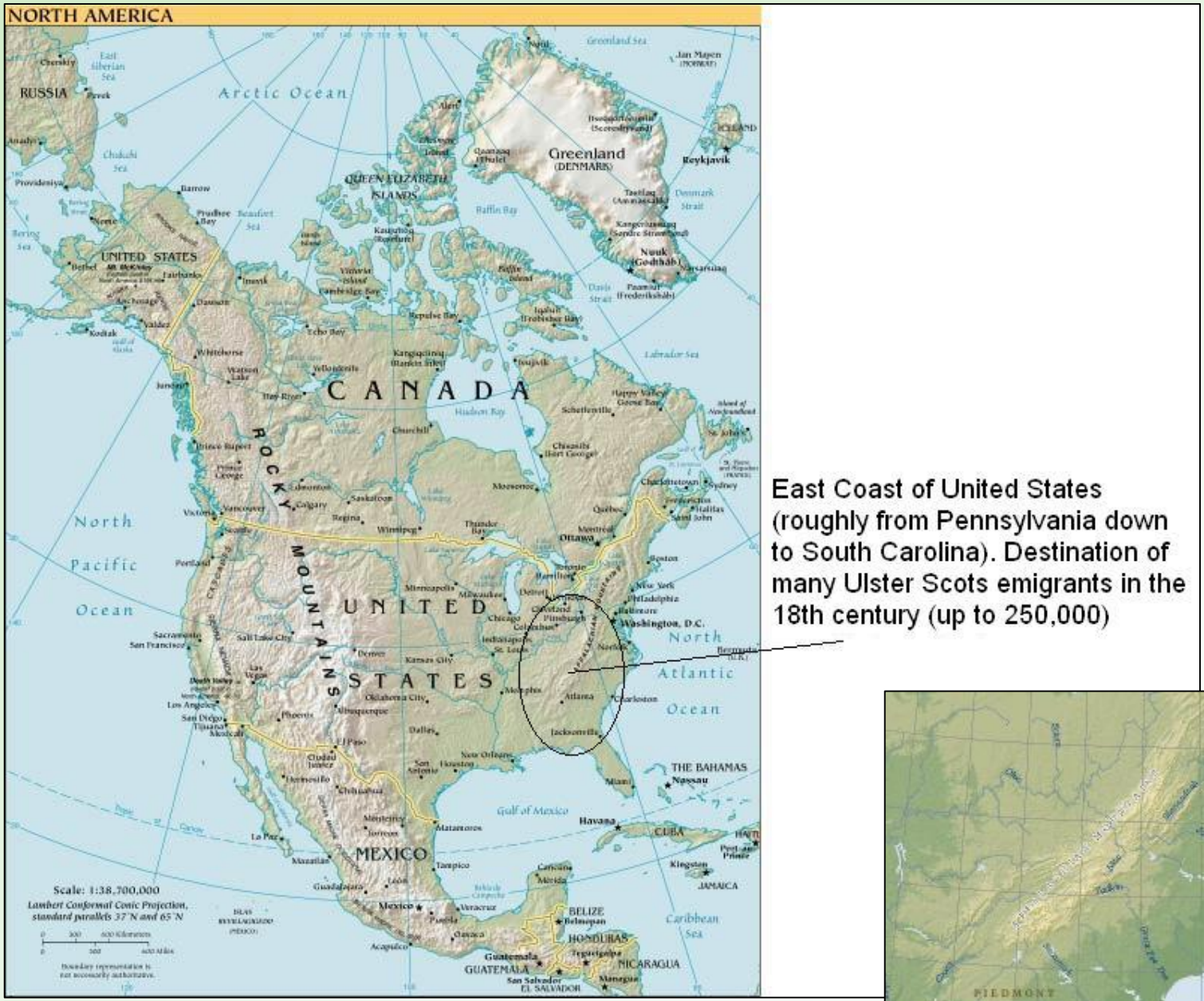
English continued to expand its position in Irish society with the rise of the Ascedancy (a Protestant propertied class with an English orientation). The disenfranchisement of the native population continued unabated.

Newfoundland, 18c and early 19c

East coast of the United States, late 17c and 18c | 19c and early 20c (also to Canada)

Eastern Caribbean, mid 17c to 18c

Australia and New Zealand, 18c and 19c

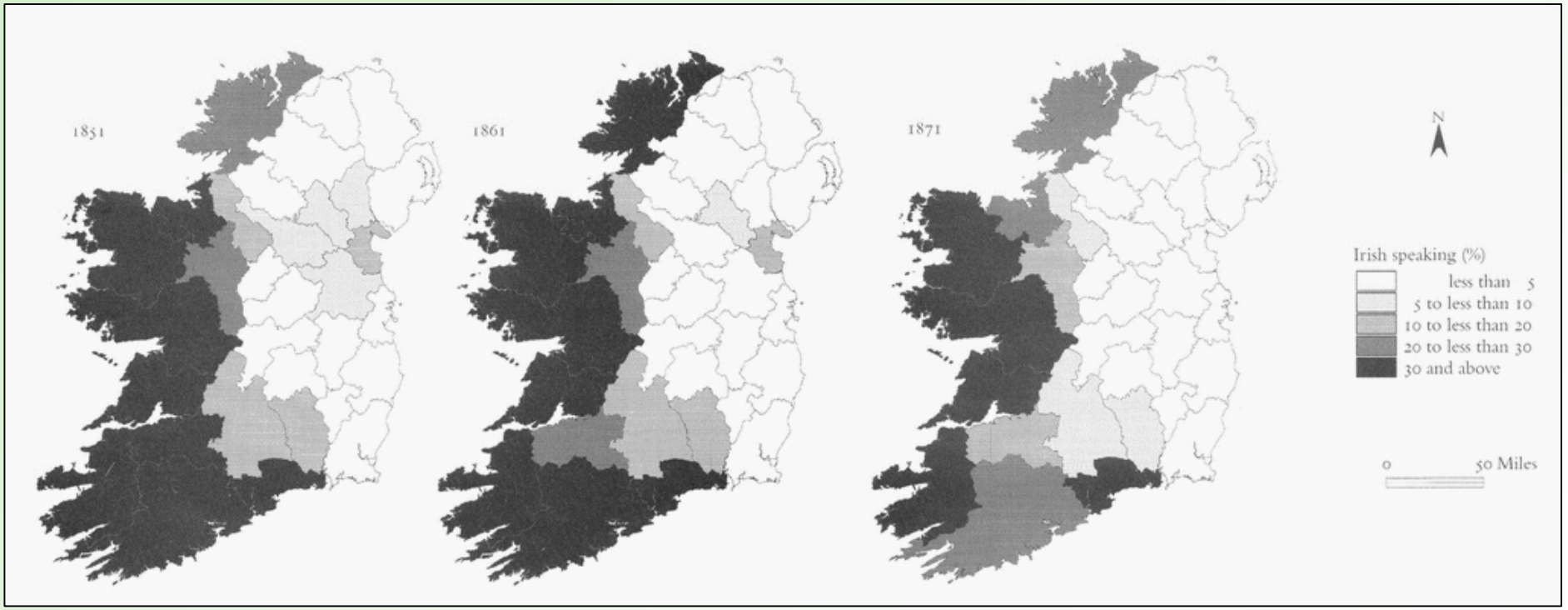


East Coast of United States (roughly from Pennsylvania down to South Carolina). Destination of many Ulster Scots emigrants in the 18th century (up to 250,000)

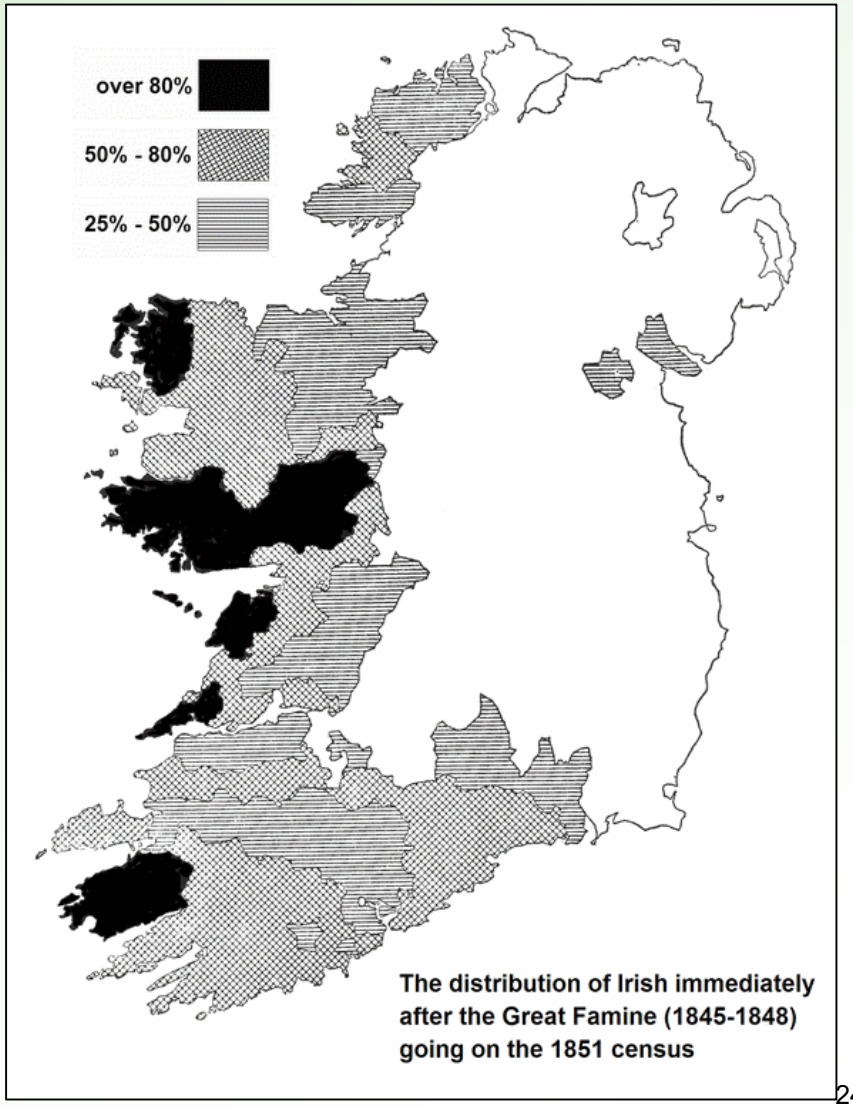
The Nineteenth Century:

The Final Shift to English

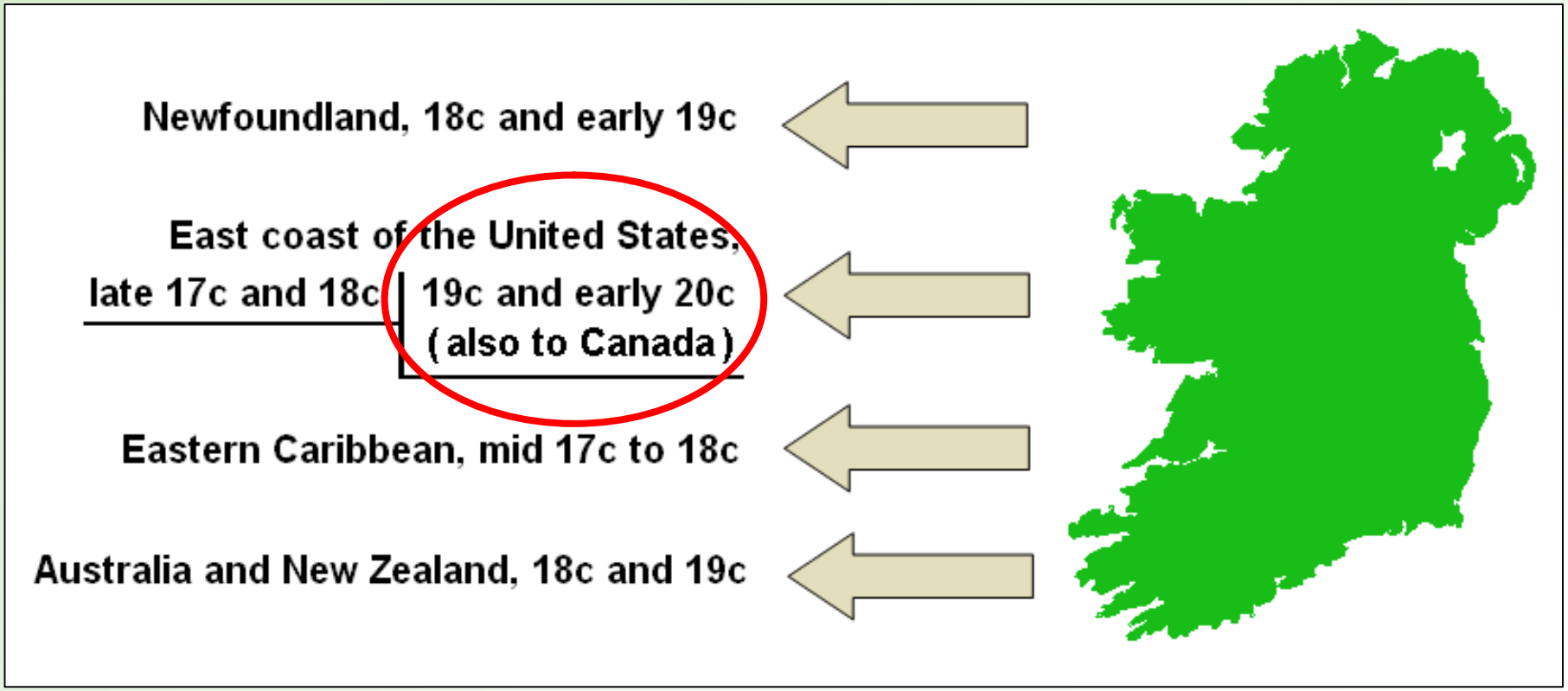
Retreat of Irish westwards



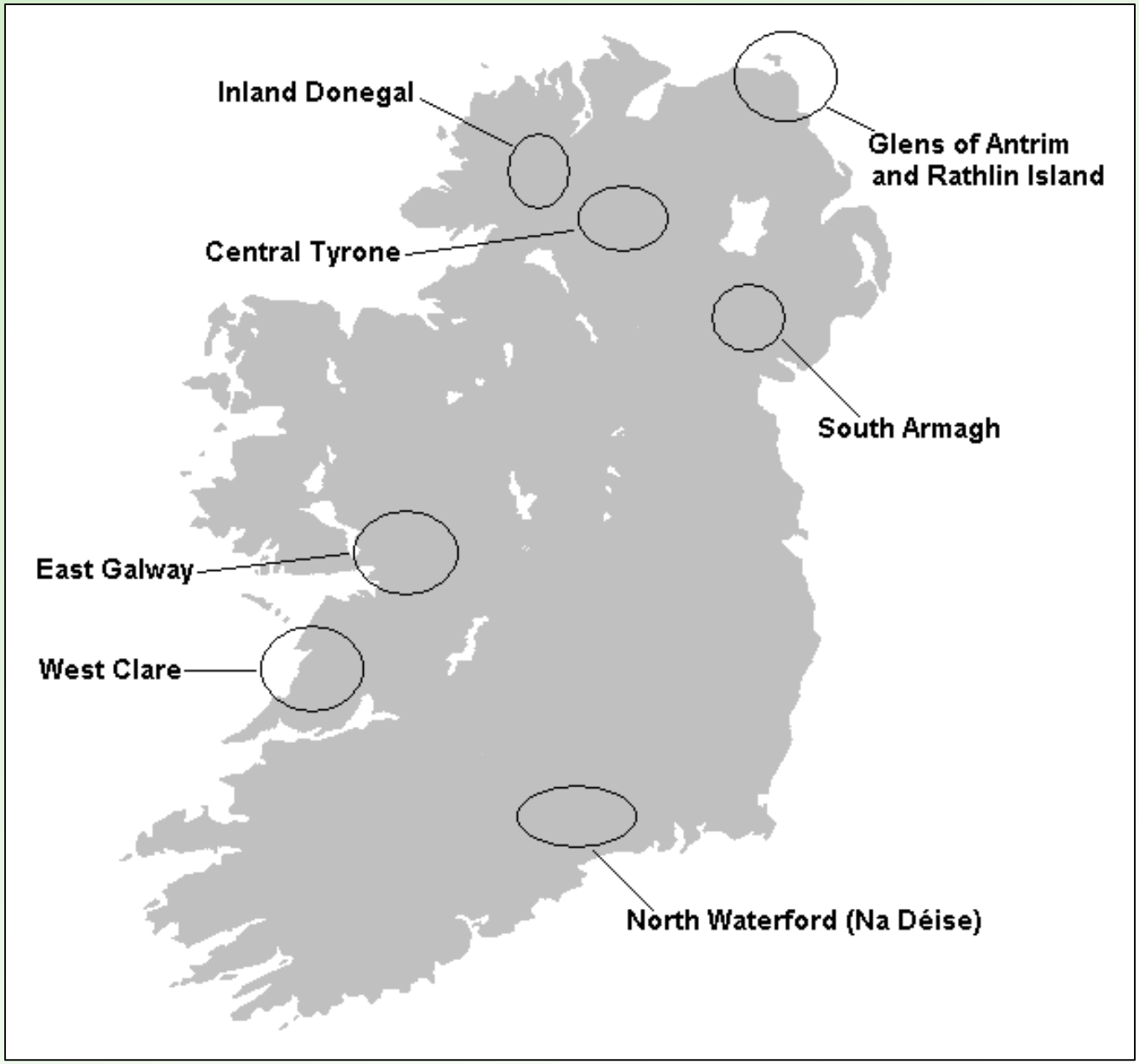
The Great Famine (1845-8)



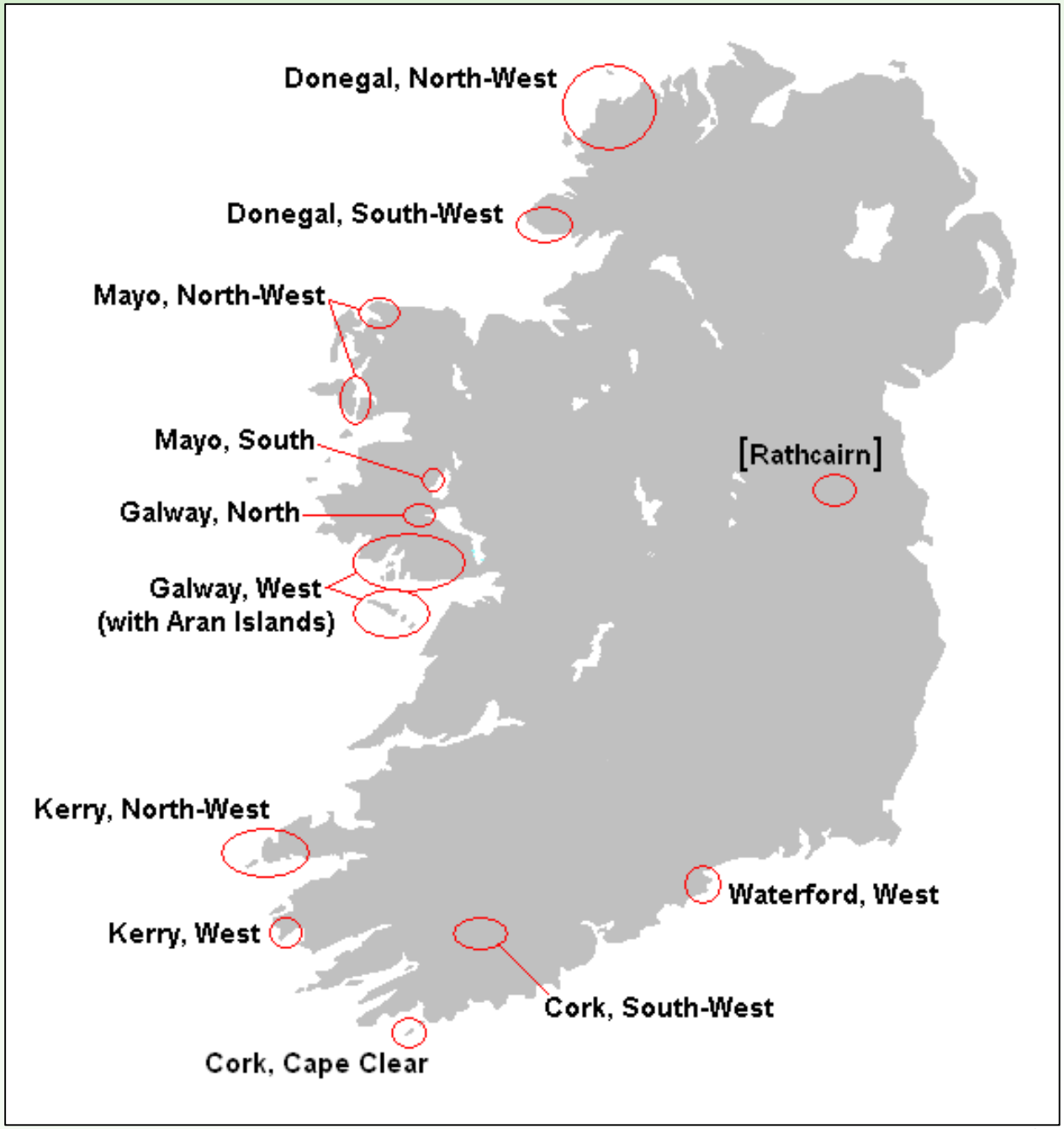
The distribution of Irish immediately after the Great Famine (1845-1848) going on the 1851 census


Newfoundland, 18c and early 19c
East coast of the United States,
late 17c and 18c
19c and early 20c
(also to Canada)
Eastern Caribbean, mid 17c to 18c
Australia and New Zealand, 18c and 19c

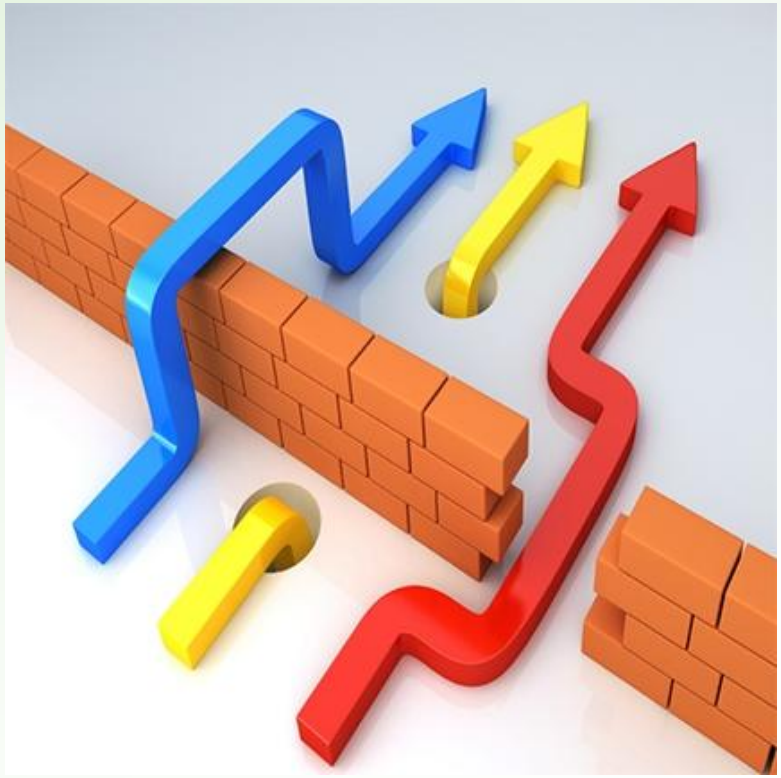
Areas where Irish was still spoken in the early 20th century



Areas where Irish is spoken in present-day Ireland



Modern Irish English: What are the pathways of language change?



Colonial lag in Irish English

Early modern English experienced a lengthening of Middle English /a/ before voiceless fricatives and this is a major distinction between the north and south of England.

Originally the lengthening also applied to the LOT vowel but this was later reversed so the words like *cloth* and *scone* are generally pronounced with the LOT rather than the THOUGHT or GOAT vowel in British English.

But in Irish English long vowels are found in these words, [klɒːt̪] and [skoːn] respectively. Furthermore, in Dublin English the lengthening before /s/ and /f/ is an established feature of all varieties there, e.g. *cross, frost, soft*, all with long vowels.

Other retentions

1) A distinction between WHICH and WITCH (now recessive and confined to rural varieties or older urban speakers).

2) A distinction between MORNING and MOURNING (Wells NORTH/FORCE distinction). Again recessive and only with rural and older urban speakers).

3) The retention of non-prevocalic /r/ as in *car* /ka:r/ and *card* /ka:rd/.

Features which have disappeared

1) General lowering of /e/ to /a/ before /r/ in words of the SERVE type, e.g. *service, search, certain*. Relics of this are found in English, e.g. *barn, dark,* formerly with /e/ and in placenames such as *Derby, Berkshire*.

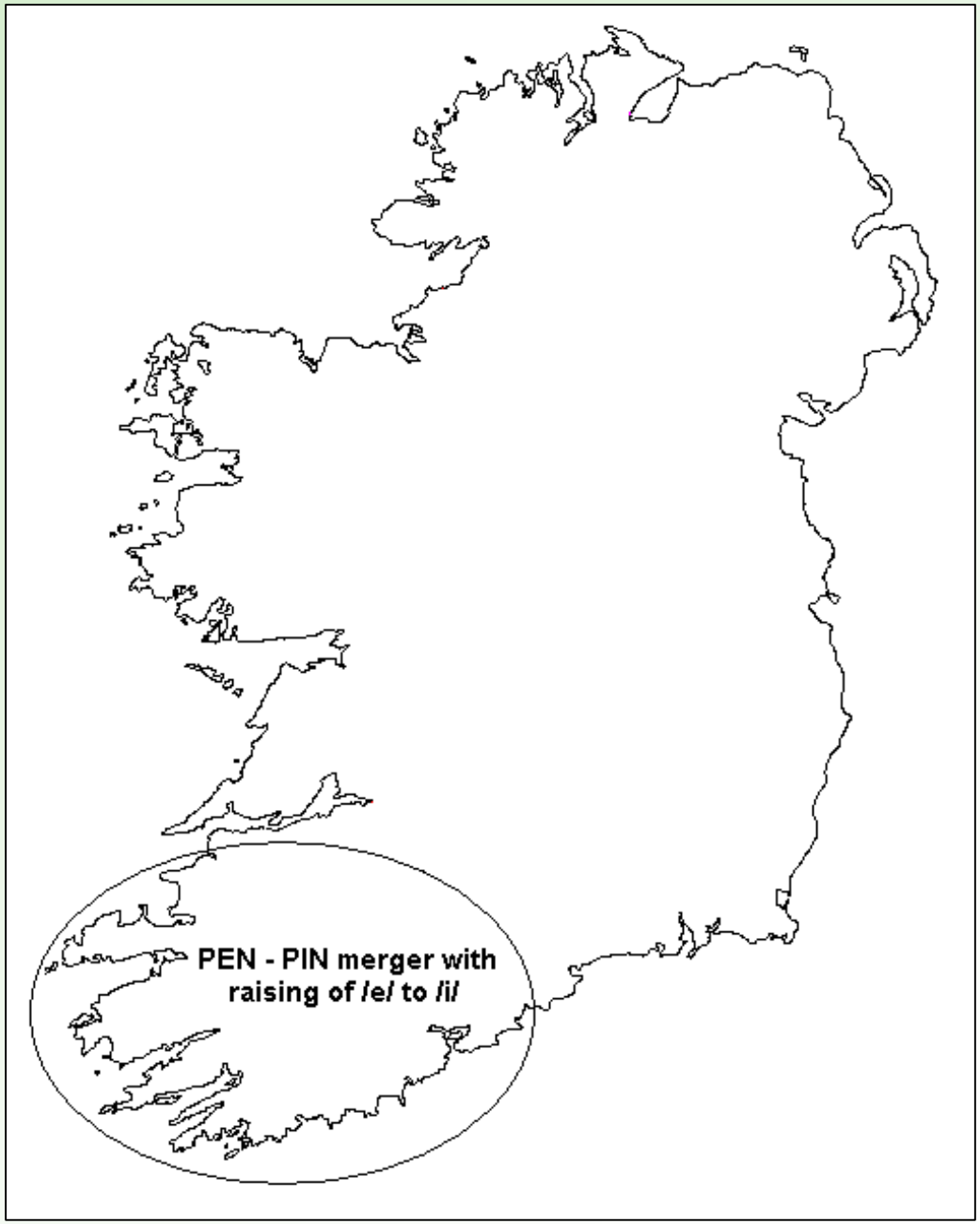
2) S to SH shift, e.g. *shoul* for *soul, wesht* for *west*. Found recessively in rural varieties in the west of Ireland (in syllable-final position).

Features which have disappeared

3) Metathesis in stressed position, e.g. *purty* for *pretty*. Now only found (recessively) in unstressed syllables, e.g. *modern* [ˈmɒdrən] .

4) Raising of the DRESS vowel to the KIT position, e.g. *togither* ‘together’, *ilegent* ‘elegant’ (dialect literature spellings). This is now confined to pre-nasal position and only found in the south-west and partly in the west of Ireland, e.g. *pen* [pɪn], *men* [mɪn].

PEN – PIN merger in south-west Ireland with the raising of /e/ to /i/



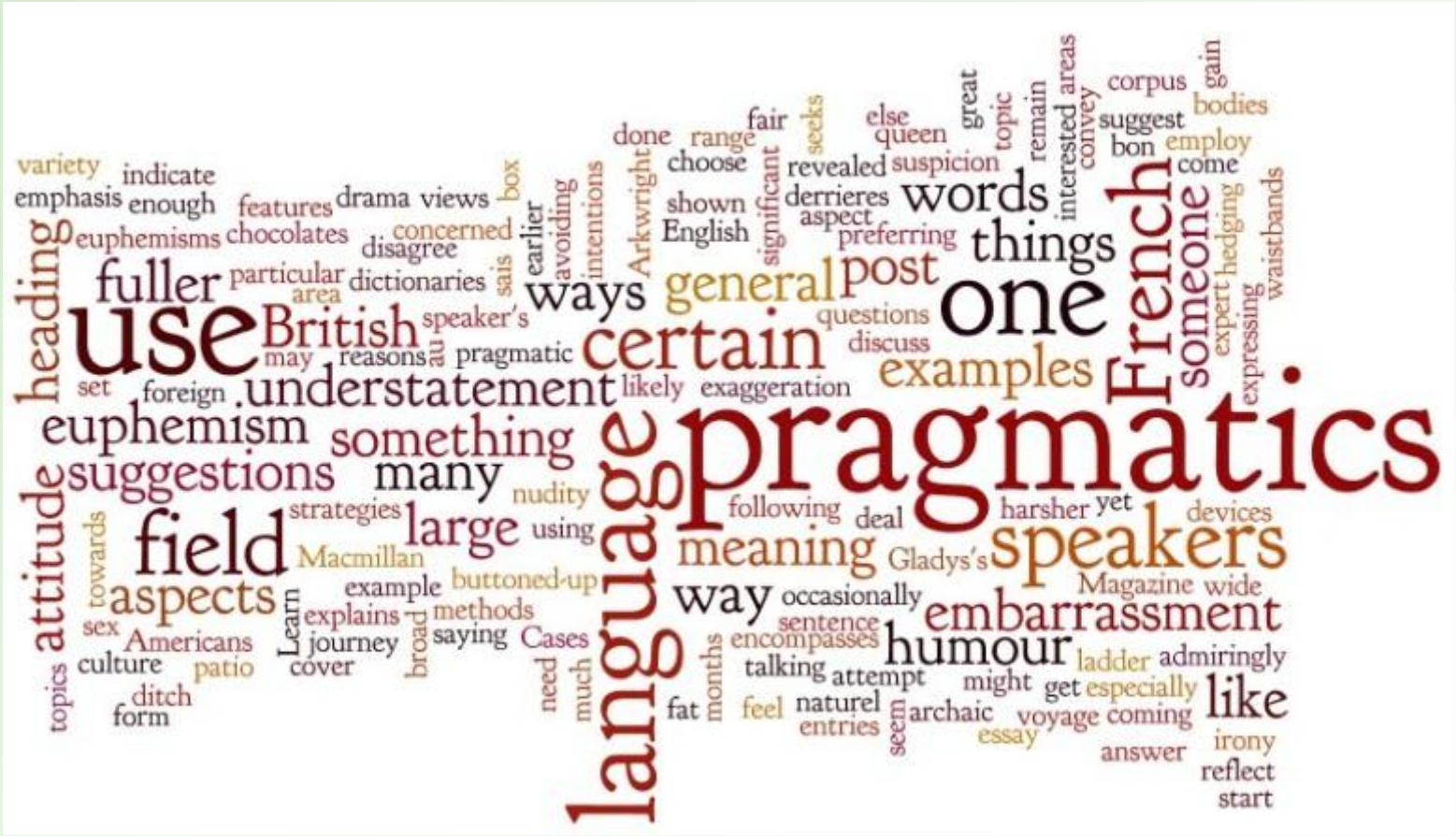
Long vowel realisations

(MEAT / MEET)

One prominent phonological feature which is shared by many conservative varieties of Irish English is the unraised vowel [ɛː] is words of the MEAT class, i.e. [mɛːt̰], which is separate from the MEET class which shows a fully raised [i:], i.e. [miːt̰].

These realisations clearly represent the survival of earlier forms of English, in this case, the early stage of the Great Vowel Shift by which Middle English /ɛː/ was raised through /eː/ and further to /iː/ in most varieties in England but not in many local varieties in Ireland.

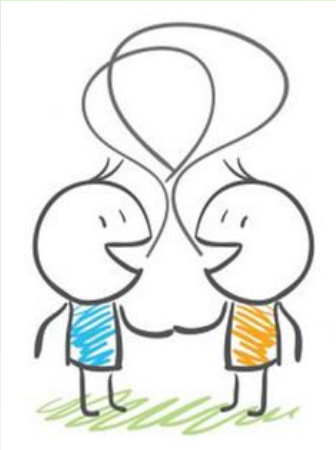
What's cool in Irish English? Answer: Pragmatics



Pragmatics analyses the use of language in interpersonal communication

Varieties of a single language vary greatly in their pragmatics. This variation is a key aspect of a community‘s linguistic identity.

Irish English has very specific pragmatics which differs notably from British English in this respect.



How do Ireland and England compare in this respect?

?

=

Perhaps the key element of Irish English pragmatics is that it is based on agreement between people when talking.

It is very difficult in Irish English to disagree with someone you are talking to. Any disagreement must be well-padded, couched in soft terms to minimise face loss for your interlocutor.

There are elements for emphasing agreement and for putting your interlocutor at their ease, above all the word *grand* which I am sure you use (if you‘re Irish) or have heard hundreds of times a day (if you‘re not Irish).

Because of the primacy of agreement, refusing an offer or an invitation can be difficult in Irish English because it theoretically involves a major loss of face for the person making the offer.

This can also lead to the overuse of *sorry*: potential intrusion on another’s private space (avoid imposing on someone).

Another aspect of Irish English pragmatics concerns narration, i.e. How you tell someone something, something which happened to you, a piece of news, something of common interest.

Of course, when narrating you have to gain and maintain the attention of the hearer: *'Mhere till I tell ya.* (= let me tell you).

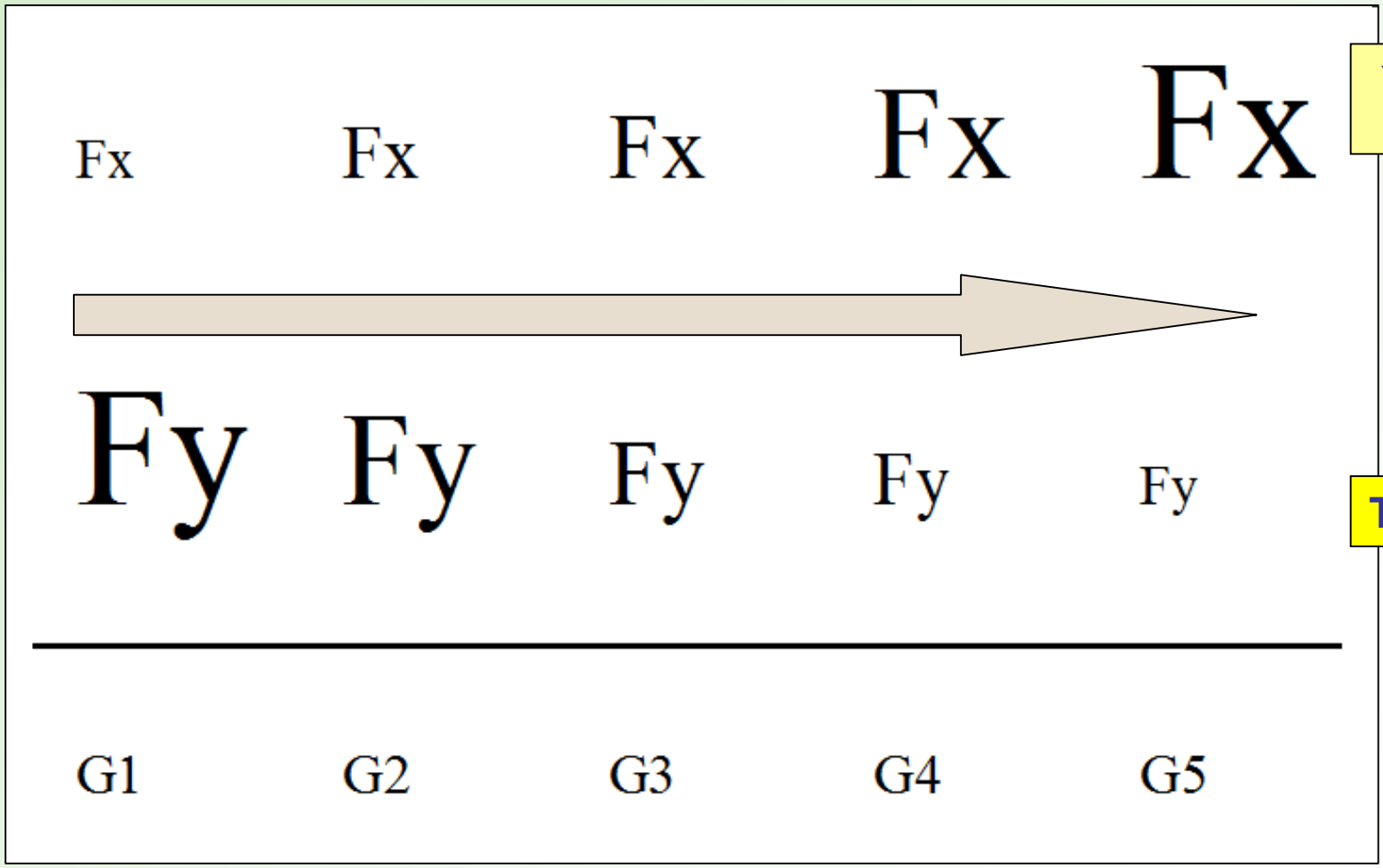
Irish English has a battery of stance-taking adverbs *wicked, fierce, loathsome,* etc.: *the craic was wicked, the game was fierce, the drink was loathsome.*

And importantly, the hearer must also use strategies to show they are interested during narration: *Ah, go away (outta that)! Ah, stop!*

In Irish English you also have means to express that something is inevitable and there is no point in worrying, e.g. *But sure look it, what can we do. Now there we are*. *There you have it.* (*there* is also commonly used in greetings *Hello there*, alongside the ubiquitous *How are you?* [haəjə]).

And how about addressing people, i.e. more than one person?

Handling variation across time: The transgenerational demise of *thou* in the eighteenth century



Filling a gap

Because standard English does not have a specific second person plural form, most vernacular varieties of English have developed some means of realising this grammatical category explicitly.

Transition to non-standard formal marking of second person plural

early-mid 18c: *thou* > Ø, but *ye* (pl.) also disappears from standard English with *you* surviving for both singular and plural.

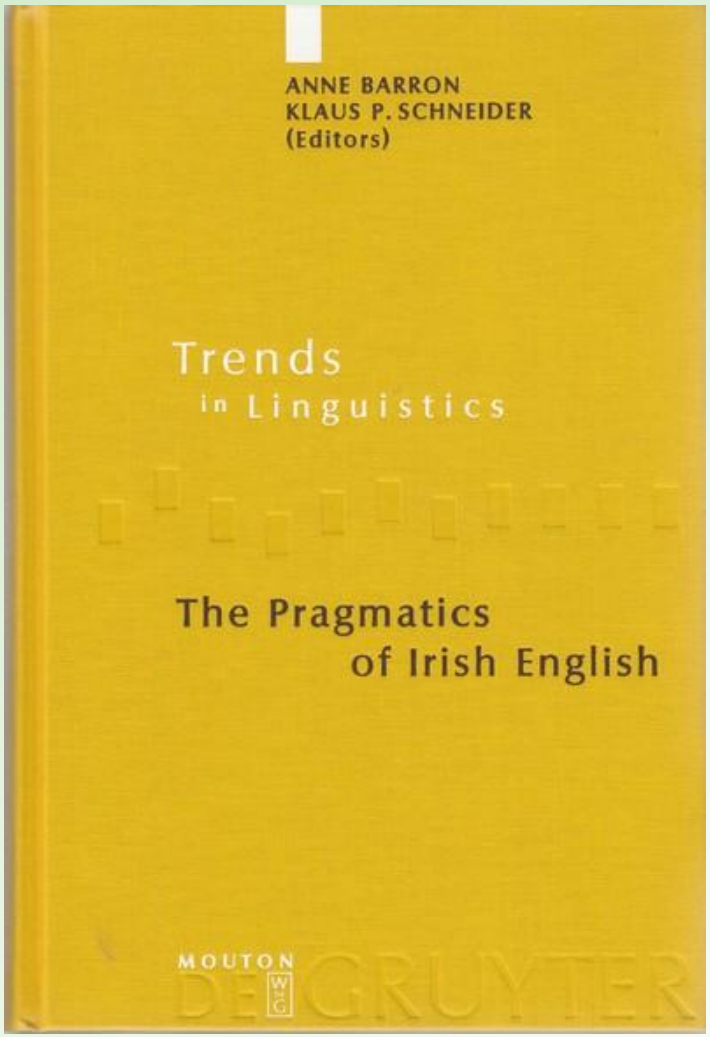
Ye continued as the supraregional form for the plural, already attested in late medieval Irish English.

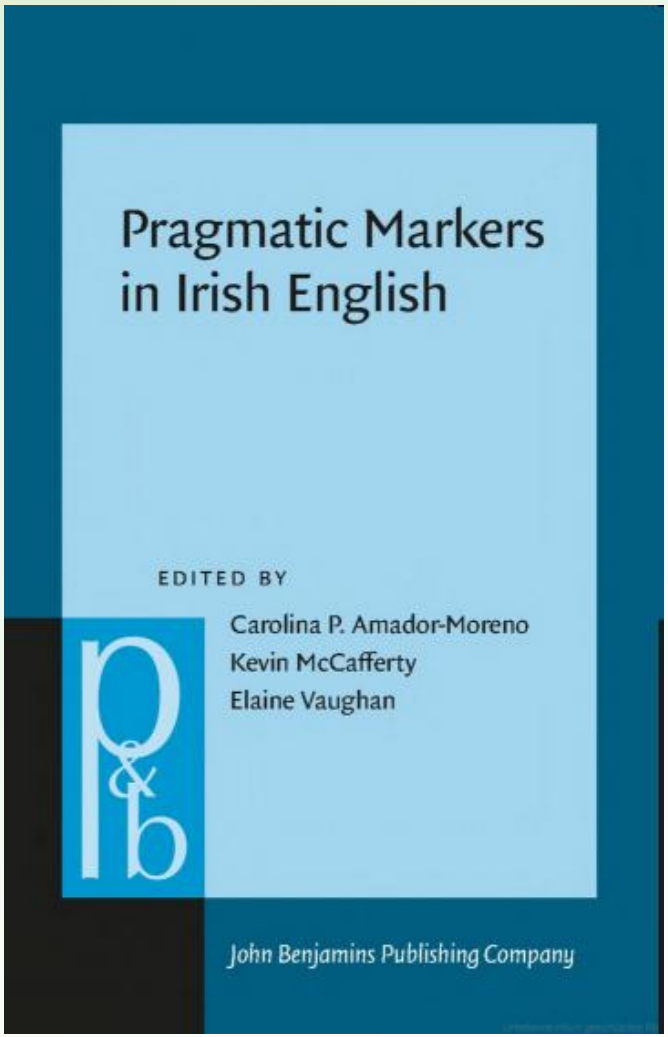
For the plural second person, there are three options, with *youse* and *yeez* being distinctly vernacular.

Second person pronouns in varieties of English

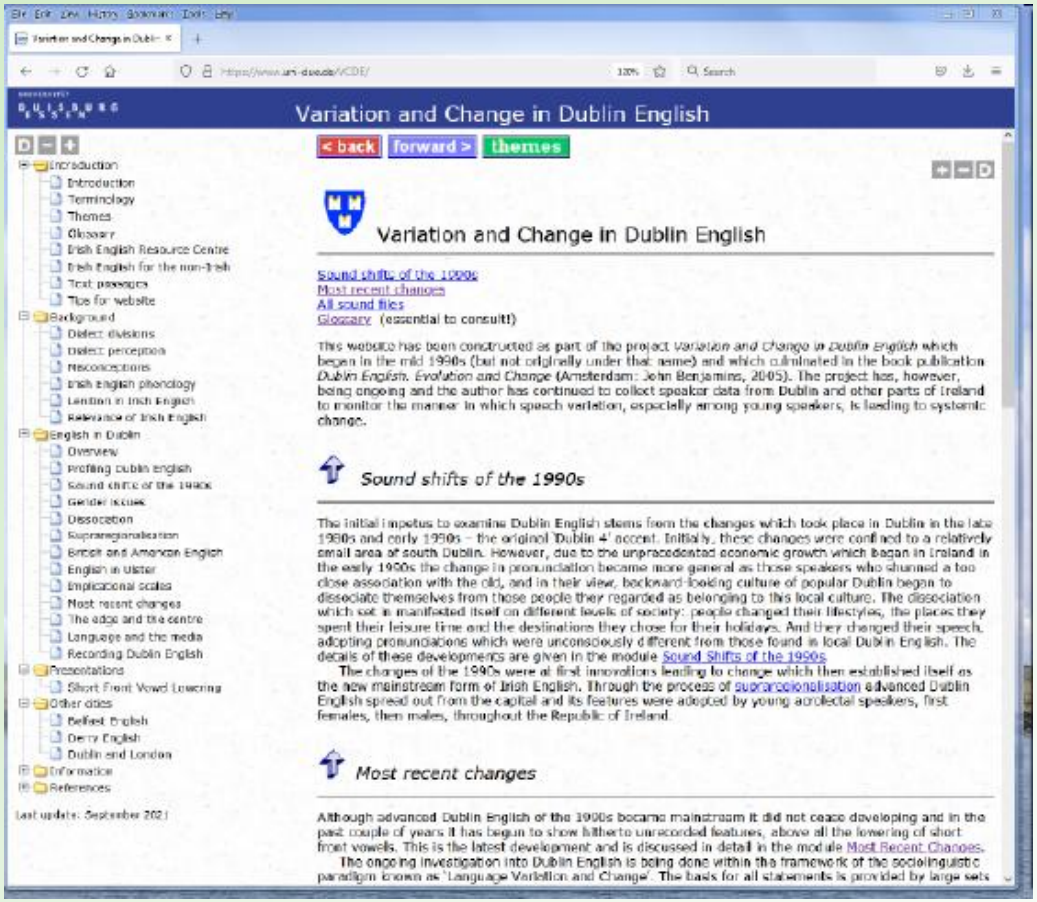
	Singular	Plural
English	you, [*thou* (N), *thee* (W, SW)]	*you, you guys*
Irish English	*you*	*ye, youse, yeez*
Scottish English	*you*	*yous, yous yins*
Newfoundland English	*you*	*ye*
Southern American English	*you*	*y'all, y'uns*
African American English	*you*	*you, y'all*
Caribbean English	*you*	*unu, wuna, yina*, etc.
South African English	*you*	*youse, y'all*
Australian English	*you*	*youse*
New Zealand English	*you*	*youse*
Pacific Creole English	*yu*	*yupela*

The pragmatics of Irish English

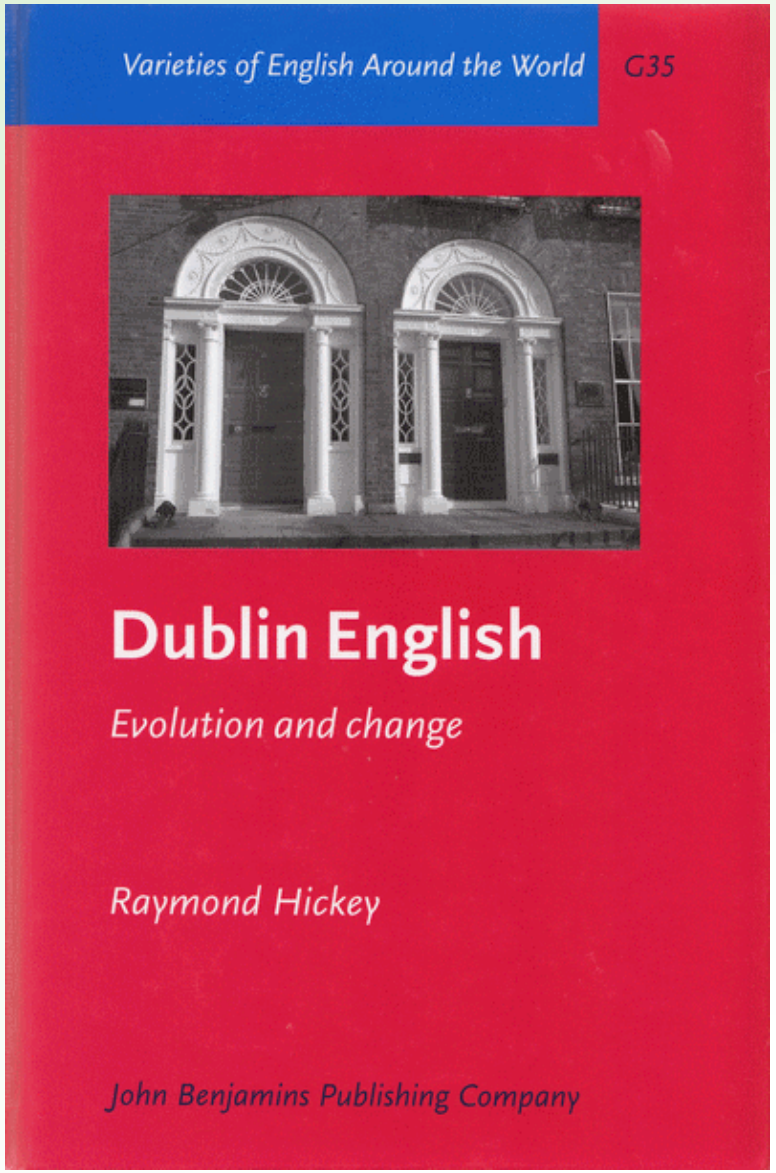




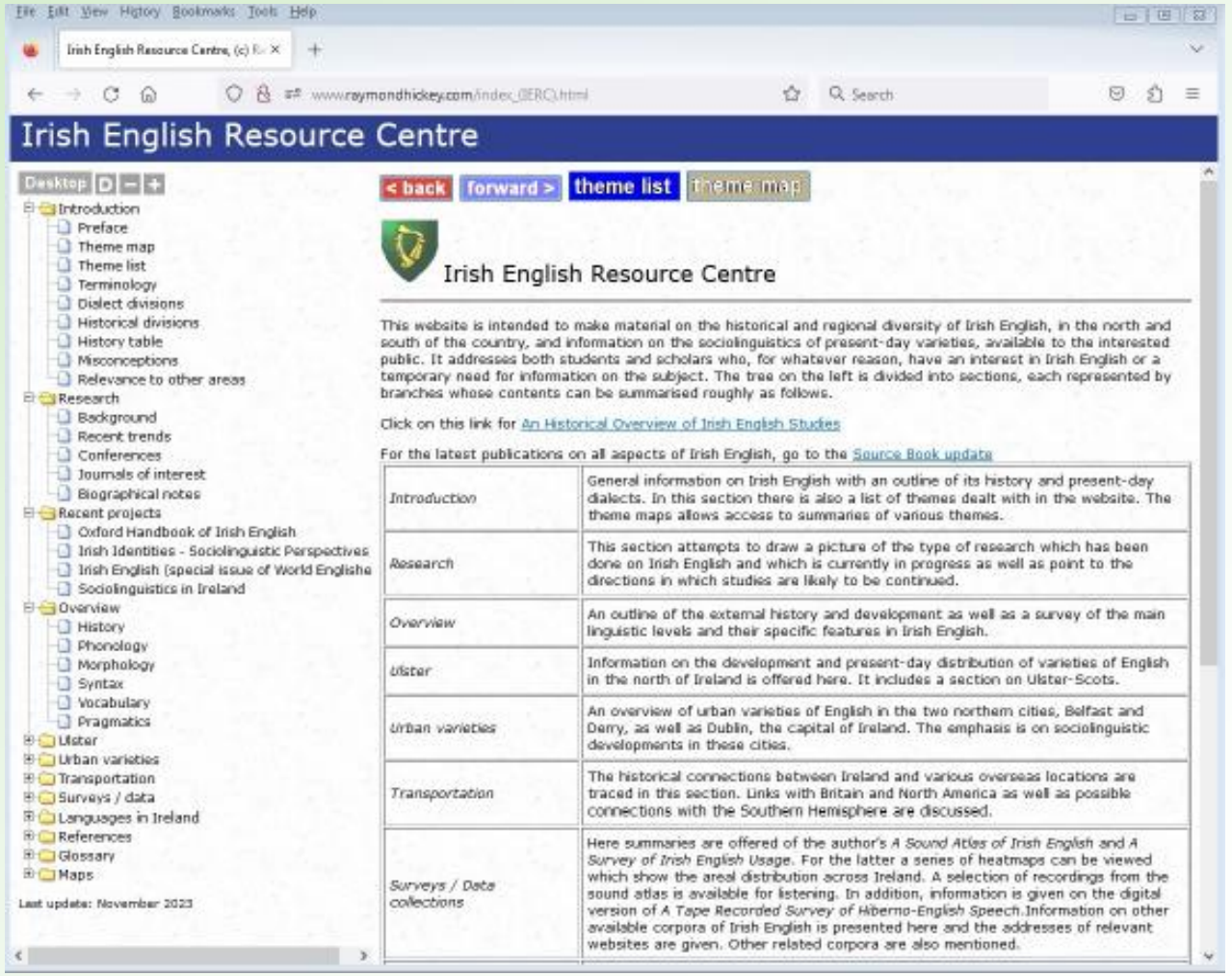
Urban studies from the south of Ireland



Variation and Change in Dublin English:
www.uni-due.de/VCDE



More general information on the English language in Ireland is available at the Irish English Resource Centre: www.uni-due.de/IERC



Internet resources for Irish English studies

Biannual conference for Irish English studies

UNIVERSIDAD DE EXTREMADURA

Cáceres, Spain 16-18 May 2024

Thank you for your attention.

Any questions?

Raymond Hickey
University of Limerick

Email: raymond.hickey@uni-due.de