

‘[T]HE LARGEST MOUNTAN IN NORT AMERICA’: EVIDENCE OF ‘SOUTHERN’ IRISH ENGLISH CONSONANTS IN ULSTER BEFORE 1900 IN THE *CORPUS OF IRISH ENGLISH CORRESPONDENCE*¹

To date, Irish English (IrE) lacks a broad, diachronic, and empirical investigation of its phonology, simply because the available material has been limited. In the *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence* (CORIECOR) – a collection of over 6,000 texts written between the late 1600s and 1940, nearly all of which are Irish emigrants’ letters – many non-standard features of IrE phonology can be found (McCafferty and Amador-Moreno in preparation). The closeness to speech found in many of the letters allows us to trace historical IrE phonology. For many letter writers, their unfamiliarity with the written medium is reflected in spelling variation, revealing features of the authors’ speech.

This paper presents key results from my doctoral thesis which attempted to catalogue phonetic representation of features of Northern Irish English (NirE) in CORIECOR where each letter was individually examined for spelling variations and information about the author and place of origin. The paper takes an empirical look at phonetic representation of what we today would describe as Southern Irish English (SIrE) consonants and documents their diachronic, geographical, and social distribution in the historical province of Ulster between 1700–1940.

The documented consonant features include dental [t̪, d̪] or alveolar [t, d] stops for dental fricatives /θ, ð/ (TH-fortition), [t̪, d̪] for /t, d/ (T/D-dentalisation), voiceless alveolar ‘slit’ fricative [t̪] for post- and intervocalic /t/ (T/D-fricativisation), [ʃ] for /s/ (S-palatalisation), and [ʃ] for [tʃ]. Results show that these ‘typical’ SIrE consonants in fact occurred much further north before the early twentieth century, especially around (recent) *Gaeltachtaí*, than where they are expected today, which could point to language contact and feature transfer between Irish and English.

References

McCafferty, Kevin and Carolina P. Amador-Moreno. (in preparation). *CORIECOR – Corpus of Irish English Correspondence*. Bergen and Cáceres: Department of Foreign Languages, University of Bergen and Department of English, University of Extremadura, Cáceres.

¹ Quote from a letter by George Anderson, New York to James Anderson, Co. Tyrone, 28.06.1833.