

# The perception of Standard Irish as a prestige target variety

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## INTRODUCTION

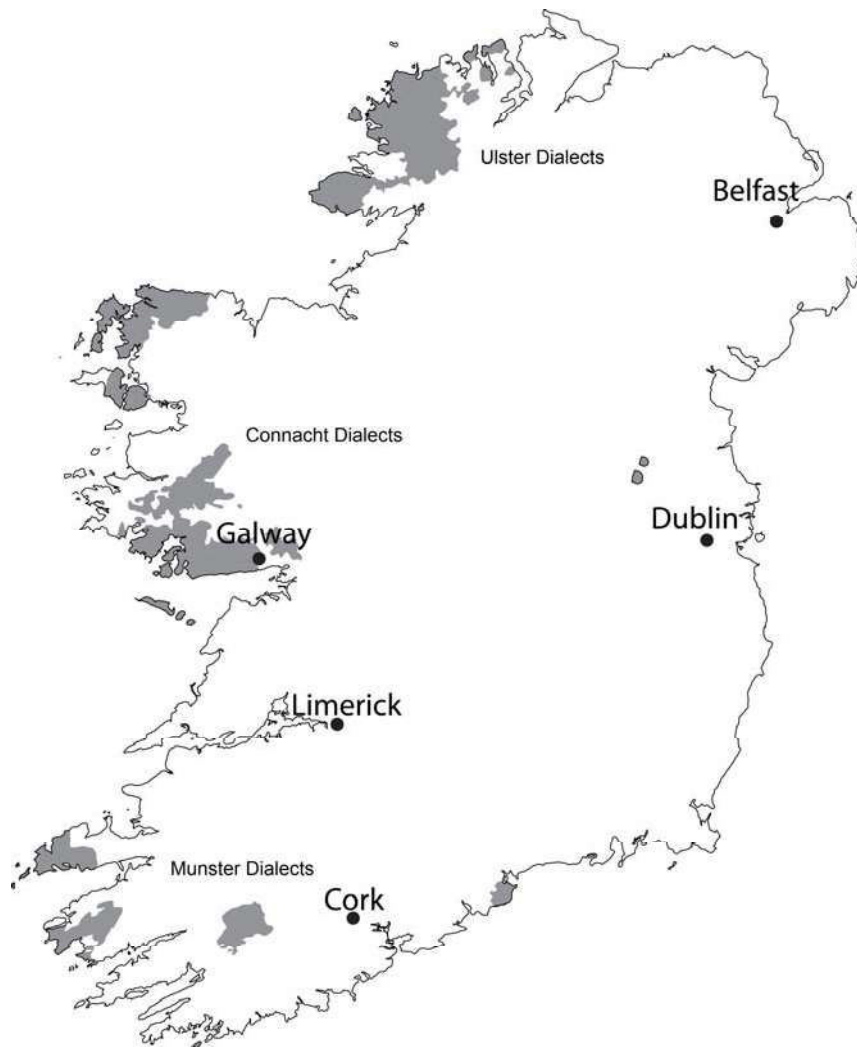
This contribution describes the current state and status of Official Standard Irish, *Caighdeán Oifigiúil na Gaeilge*, the standard language variety of the first of the two official languages of Ireland. The other official language is English, called *Sacs-Bhéarla* in the Constitution, clearly referring to Standard English, rather than any Irish variety. Standard Irish, as in many other national contexts, has had the function of providing a unified linguistic tool for the practical purposes of state governance and education. Although it was first defined for official purposes and explicitly does not ban other varieties, in the contexts of an historic popular language shift to English and the ideologically driven national language revival project, it has also played a central role in providing the target learner variety for the majority population who do not speak Irish as a home language.

The standardisation process can be contextualised by the role ascribed to Irish by the nineteenth century nationalist movement, through the resultant state-building of the early twentieth until its codification and publication in 1958 (Rannóg an Aistriúcháin 1958). Its development conforms closely to the stages of language planning in Haugen's model (Haugen 1959), based on Norwegian, with which the standardisation of Irish was contemporary, and reflects the power of European state administrations in the period to impose such language choices. The handbook of Standard Irish was published, however, just as substantial adjustment and innovation occurred in the way that the state interacted with the population with regard to Irish and in the nature of governance style. During this period the Gaeltacht was first defined by statute in order to define the geographical area of action for the new Department of the Gaeltacht (set up in 1956), one of a number of changes that led to the political 'Irish language revival question' being located within specific areas of action rather than its previous place across all aspects of Irish governance and society, language policy becoming increasingly regarded in terms of management of a remnant linguistic minority on the one hand and concentration on language as heritage and a school curriculum subject for the majority population on the other. Ó Riagáin (1997) has argued that state policy on Irish thus went into stagnation and retreat for lack of the clear goals of the pre-1960s. However, this period also saw the rise of new forms of Irish language pressure groups, particularly in the Gaeltacht areas, demanding higher status for the language as a right. It also saw the start of a trend for the national authorities to launch consultations with the public, through national opinion surveys and commissions of enquiry, in a late modern construction of democratic inclusiveness in language policy, which nevertheless resulted in much indecisiveness on issues of linguistic development and the status of Irish in the national arena (Ó hIfearnáin 2009, for a detailed discussion).

## DEFINING AND REFORMING STANDARD IRISH

Ideologically, the standard's origins are in the cultural nationalist revival movement of the nineteenth century, and contain a fundamental paradox. The movement sought a unified na-

tional language but also had an ideological commitment to the development of *caint na ndaoine*, ‘the speech of the people’, a dialectally diverse language with an impoverished spread of domains of usage. Irish is generally described as having three main regional varieties which correspond approximately to the three (of four) provinces where there is a residual traditional native speaker community.



**Map 1:** The Gaeltacht areas (shaded) and main regional dialect regions

Numerically the most widely spoken group of dialects is that of Connacht, which includes the coastal region west of Galway city, Conamara and the Joyce Country mountains further west and north, the Árann islands and parts of Co. Mayo in the far northwest of the province. The dialects of Ulster are the second most widely spoken Gaeltacht varieties, and are concentrated in the West Ulster dialect area of Donegal. Munster varieties are spoken in the diverse Gaeltacht regions of the south and southwest. Traditional varieties are classically described (O’Rahilly 1932) as being on a geographic dialect continuum with poles in the northeast and south where different innovations started in the late medieval to early modern period and gradually exerted influences south-westwards and northwards respectively. Among the most striking differences between southern and northern dialects is the stress pattern within words. In Old and Middle Irish (before c.1200 AD) stress was on the first syllable of the word. This became accentuated in Ulster where long unstressed second and final syllables became shortened. In Munster Irish the stress shifted to the second syllable of two-syllable words if the second vowel was long and to the third syllable of three-syllable words if the third vowel was

long but the first two short. In his contemporary study of Corca Dhuibhne Irish (West Kerry, Munster), Ó Sé (2000: 46) calls this lexical stress pattern the ‘principle of the heavy syllable’, which marks where the listener’s ear falls, and argues that this is a most salient feature of that Munster dialect, common to all speakers who grew up in the first half of the twentieth century. In addition to the stress patterns, the popular perception is that Munster dialects generally distinguish themselves markedly by a range of pronunciation features, certain syntactical constructions and in particular a preference for synthetic over analytic verb forms and the use of some verbal particles which are obsolete in other regional dialects. This folk linguistic perception is based on historical linguistic facts, but all dialects are currently experiencing regional and national levelling as well as some internal innovation, in the context of a speaker population which is bilingual with English gaining functional dominance. Contemporary dialect studies such as Ó Sé (2000) in Kerry and especially Ó Curnáin (2007) in Conamara, have shown how regional features are becoming less marked and the spoken language has become unstable, with wide variation among younger speakers.

The small size and disparate nature of the rural Gaeltacht population has resulted in planned linguistic development in the national context most often being concentrated on the community of professional language users, mostly in education and administration. The Official Standard was the work of *Rannóg an Aistriúcháin*, the translation service of the Irish parliament. Its origins are in the need for internal consistency in the provision of Irish translations of government and legislative documentation. The major work in establishing the final content took place under great pressure during 1957. In the standard handbook’s introduction, it is declared that ‘helpful advice was given by native speakers from all the Gaeltacht areas, from teachers, and from other people who had particular knowledge of the language, and it was agreed with the Department of Education that this booklet should be published as a standard for official usage and as a guide for teachers and the general public.’ (translation of *Rannóg an Aistriúcháin* 1958, viii). The standard was thus developed by a small group of language professionals who sought advice from unnamed experts and acquaintances for the specific purposes of government administration. Having developed this useful tool for internal use, it was crucially then adopted by the Department of Education, and so guaranteed its central position through schooling. The standard was set out in more detail in 1960 in *Graiméar Gaeilge na mBráithre Críostaí* (the Christian brothers’ Irish grammar), revised in 1999 to take account of a number of implicit revisions based on Niall Ó Dónaill (ed.) *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (the standard Irish-English dictionary) and advice from *Rannóg an Aistriúcháin*. In the absence of authoritative volumes on ‘good usage’ that exist in many other languages, these three volumes are thus the references for official standard practice. Since then, small revisions on points of grammar and the expansion of lexicon have been proposed regularly by An Coiste Téarmaíochta (the national terminology commission).

The Official Standard is undergoing revision. Firstly, a government body had to assert ownership of the Standard as its original authors, *Rannóg an Aistriúcháin*, were no longer its primary users. It is being reviewed by a committee within the Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht Affairs. That Department is also responsible for *Foras na Gaeilge*, the state agency responsible for the new English-Irish Dictionary and the commissions for terminology and place names. Since announcing a public consultation on reforming the Standard in May 2010, the committee has invited opinions on a number specific proposals.

While setting out its preferred forms, the current standard’s handbook professes not to impose itself as the only acceptable language norm:

Tugann an caighdeán seo aitheantas ar leith d’fhoirmeacha agus do rialacha áirithe ach ní chuireann sé ceartfhoirmeacha eile ó bhail ná teir ná toirmeasc ar a n-úsáid [‘This standard gives recognition to particular forms and rules but it does not remove the validity of other correct forms, nor does it forbid their usage’]

Rannóg an Aistriúcháin (1956, viii)

The aim was to provide a neutral written tool for state purposes, but however much the authors may have wished to reconcile the existence of the standard with the continued vitality of the regional dialects, the two have not existed in total harmony. The dialects, being the native forms of Irish, have continued to lose their vitality as part of a well documented language shift that continues in the Gaeltacht, and are given negligible recognition from the education system and state agencies precisely because the standard is the prescribed variety for official and semi-official matters, which dominate the use of language in the public space. The standard does not prescribe a particular dialect word over one widely used in another region, for example, but in unifying the spelling such words may no longer reflect local pronunciation. It prescribes certain verbal forms which many dialect speakers see as non-traditional. After more than half a century of usage, professional practitioners have come to see many regional features as incompatible with standard usage, despite the original aims of its authors. In professional workshops on good practice for editors and writers, Mac Lochlainn (2010) remarks, for example, a strong tendency for participants to ‘correct’ regionalisms which are actually acceptable within the standard. It is the perception and practice of the standard rather than its theoretical basis which has most impact on regional varieties. Indeed, the decline of the dialects may not simply be a coincidence but partially a consequence of the promotion of the standard as a prestige form (Ó hÍfearnain 2008).

#### THE STANDARD AS A SPOKEN VARIETY

*Caighdeán Oifigiúil na Gaeilge* is a written standard, emphasised by entitling its replacement *Caighdeán Oifigiúil do Scriobh na Gaeilge 2011* [2011 Official Standard for Written Irish]. Its association with a prescriptive spoken standard variety has only been addressed peripherally in academic research. Ó Baoill (1986) first proposed the *Lárchanúint* (‘middle dialect’) resulting from a working group that established a pronunciation guide for the 1986 pocket Irish-English-Irish dictionary, *an Foclóir Póca*. It was widely welcomed, in theory, particularly by educationalists at all levels who saw in it a useful tool to guide learners in the first stages of acquisition, with potential benefits for teachers and the broadcast media. However, in a review of the proposal, Ó Baoill (1990) himself highlighted a number of areas where agreement would still need to be reached, for example suggesting that some alternative pronunciations should be allowed to accommodate certain stress features of the Munster dialects in particular, and in the pronunciation of single syllable words that end in double consonants in the various regional varieties.

Most Irish speakers who live outside the Gaeltacht regions tend to gravitate towards one of the regional dialects, broadly defined, as a target speech variety, either because of direct association with one of the regions or because of experience through school of one such variety. Areal koinés (Ó Dochartaigh 2000: 22) based on the core features of west Ulster, southwest Connacht or Munster dialects provide the spoken targets favoured by the education system from primary schooling through to third level. However, as Mac Mathúna (2008: 87–89) says, the tendency is put under great strain when revivalist groups, often associated with *Gaelscoileanna* (Irish-medium schools), do not have constant access to such traditional language models, and adds that ‘most non-native speakers of Irish converse almost exclusively with other non-native speakers, interaction with the Gaeltacht community being peripheral to their social and economic needs and interests’. This has led to the emergence of a variety of Irish which is often described, pejoratively, as *Gaelscoilis*, which does not share the common core of all traditional Gaeltacht Irish varieties as described, for example by Ó Siadhail (1989). There is a perception in some Gaeltacht communities that the standard and this learner speech are elements of the same variety. This impression is not completely unfounded in that fifty years of using the standard as the dominant, if not only written variety has led to its oralisation among learners and professional users of the language. The emergence of levelled lan-

guage varieties, be they spoken forms of the written standard through education or by speakers' accommodation of different dialectal varieties through the broadcast media and general social mobility, is a reality, but little studied. The Irish of young Gaeltacht speakers, however traditional their linguistic background, is now also moving very rapidly from the local variety to one that is influenced by English, but also by the kind of Irish practiced in the broadcast media, at school and in the non-native revivalist speech community. This is heard at phonological, lexical, grammatical and syntactical levels in everyday speech. As neither the traditional local variety nor the standard target variety provided by schools appears to exercise linguistic authority in contemporary times, it is important to understand how the prestige attributed to different linguistic forms plays a role in the language practices and ambitions of the younger generations.

### THE STANDARD AS A LEARNER VARIETY

Current initiatives and discourse on Irish language revitalisation efforts focus, almost solely, on patterns of language use and intergenerational transmission in the Gaeltacht to the neglect of robust debate on the variety of Irish acquired and promoted within and beyond the Gaeltacht. Subsequently, target language varieties and targets for language excellence remain ambiguous.

While the dialectal speech of the Gaeltacht has traditionally been valorised, some argue for the promotion of a more unitary and standard spoken form of Irish to function as a high variety, and as a target variety for education and for learners, i.e. a prestigious spoken standard (Ó Dónaill 1951; Ó Baoill 1990; 2000). It can be hypothesized, however, that such a variety may already exist in the form of Irish particularly prevalent in Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht and, to a certain extent, in the broadcast media, although it may not meet the conservative criteria typical of a high prestige standard.

As is the case with many other minoritised languages, for example the case of revived forms of Breton, sometimes described as *néo-breton* (Jones 1998: 302–304), this variety of Irish, associated with the Gaelscoil movement and non-Gaeltacht speakers, operates with an independent set of norms. Ó Duibhir (2009) in his analysis of the speech of Gaelscoil pupils' spontaneous speech describes 'frequently occurring features that deviate from native speaker norms', mainly those of syntax. Maguire (1991: 191, 200–201), describes the speech of a large group of people who were brought up with Irish as their home language in Belfast as that of 'second generation learners', and divergent from traditional varieties in several important manners: the case system, particularly the genitive case where initial mutation and morphological alteration are somewhat redundant; English influence on the phonemic system, on vocabulary, on morphology and on syntax; omission of grammatical lenition; and overall simplification of the target language. She also notes that some traditional grammatical and phonological norms are actively rejected. Non-Gaeltacht speakers, therefore, operate without frequent interaction with more traditional speech communities (Mac Mathúna 2008) and independently of what Ó Duibhir refers to as 'native speaker norms'.

While Jones (1998) describes the learner variety of Breton as a *xenolect*, George (1986: 321) remarks that *néo-breton* equates to 'standard speech', a view which has now become widely held in Brittany (Ó hÍfearnáin 2011) where the revival variety is often described in French by its users as *breton littéraire*, adopting a term previously mainly used for the literary style and register used by creative writers and the clergy, as opposed to the spoken, dialectal *breton populaire*. In so doing, they discursively create the notion of the learner variety as a proto-national prestige standard form. Similarly, there is now a common perception among Gaeltacht speakers that non-Gaeltacht Irish is in effect a spoken form of the standard, although lacking overt prestige. This issue was investigated in the winter to spring of 2009–2010 in the context of a wider project on Munster Gaeltacht teenagers' perceptions of differ-

ences between varieties of Irish and their own linguistic affinities and practices, which is more fully described in Ó Murchadha (forthc.).

Using a development of the matched guise technique, following Kristiansen (2003), 259 15–19 year-old participants were asked to listen to and evaluate 15-second recordings of 11 female speakers extracted from Irish language radio programmes. The speakers represented three varieties:

- i. *Traditional Gaeltacht speech*: conservative local dialectal speech, showing little or no influence from English and especially prevalent among Gaeltacht speakers born before 1960;
- ii. *Non-Gaeltacht speech*: non-Gaeltacht speakers practise a broad spectrum of speech styles and varieties, some of which are close to or identical to the core features of traditional Gaeltacht speech, but it is widely accepted that a learner variety with its own norms has emerged among the revival speech community, which we label ‘non-Gaeltacht speech’ for the present purpose.
- iii. *Gaeltacht youth speech*: displaying many features of traditional Gaeltacht speech, particularly in terms of prosody and pronunciation, also displaying some features common to non-Gaeltacht speech, especially English influence on syntax, vocabulary, and the phonemic system where English phonemes are used in cases where Irish consonants and clusters differ from those in English.

Participants evaluated local Gaeltacht youth speech and non-Gaeltacht speech as more ‘standard’ than traditional local speech, despite the fact that *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil* remains neither a learner nor a spoken variety. Non-Gaeltacht speech is a variety governed by its own norms, operating independently of traditional targets and while ‘speaking in a standard manner’ may or may not be the speakers’ overt aim, frequent substantial deviation from both the prescriptions of the standard and from the traditional Gaeltacht dialects on which it was based illustrate that the learner varieties tested should not be considered as a spoken form of the written standard in purely linguistic terms, but are actually considered as such by Gaeltacht speakers.

Although increasingly prevalent (Nic Phóidín 2003), these learner varieties are nevertheless overtly regarded pejoratively by Gaeltacht speakers and language professionals. The use by the Gaeltacht teenagers in this experiment of predominantly derogatory labels such as *Gaeilge na Leabhar* [‘Book Irish’], *Gaeilge Bhaile Átha Cliath* [‘Dublin Irish’], *Gaeilge na Scoile* [‘School Irish’] and indeed *Gaeilge Chaighdeánach* [‘Standard Irish’] for this variety are indicative of its perceived inferior status. As one participant says:

*Níl aon bhlas acu. Níl sí nádúrtha, níl siad in ann í a labhairt go nádúrtha.*  
[‘They don’t have the right sound. It’s not natural, they can’t speak it naturally.’]

The legitimacy and correctness of dialectal Gaeltacht speech was, however, also contested by some speakers of this non-Gaeltacht variety, as indicated by interview data from one such speaker, a non-Gaeltacht university student:

*Amanta anseo cuirtear sprioc os ár gcomhair go mba cheart go mbeimis in ann dul dtí an Ghaeltacht agus nach n-aithneofaí nach as an nGaeltacht dúinn. Níl sé sin mar sprioc agam riamh. Níl sé mar sprioc in aon chultúr eile san Iarthar go mbeifeá ag iarraidh labhairt ar nós gur duine tuaithe tú chun ardchaighdeán teanga a bheith agat.*  
[‘Sometimes a target is put before us here that we should be able to go to the Gaeltacht and that we would not be recognised as not being from the Gaeltacht. That’s never my

aim. It's not the aim in any other Western culture that in order to speak high-standard language you try to speak as if you were a rural person.']

This attitude was also noted among second generation learners in Belfast (Maguire 1991: 151). Hindley (1990: 218) refers to it as stigmatized and 'a jargon of the middle-class, incomprehensible to native Irish speakers'. If a schism exists between traditional Gaeltacht Irish and revival Irish (Kabel 2000) it is, however, a divide more concerned with issues of authenticity, legitimacy and prestige than social class or intercomprehension. The speaker-evaluation experiments with teenagers in the Gaeltacht indicate that while overtly downgraded, there is a covert value system which valorises non-Gaeltacht varieties of Irish and that prestige is actually attributed to them in this manner.

### NON-TRADITIONAL SPEECH AS A PRESTIGE VARIETY

Overt evaluations from the speaker evaluation experiment yielded the expected value judgements in respect of traditional local speech, local Gaeltacht youth speech and non-Gaeltacht speech. As in the case of Welsh (Robert 2009), traditional local varieties were evaluated most positively, followed by contemporary local varieties, then by the revival variety. The experimental evaluation was further confirmed by participants during focus group interviews. However, participants' evaluations of the speakers' personality traits on adjective scales during the same speaker evaluation experiment indicated a hidden value system operating in relation to the evaluation of speech forms. Significantly, speakers of non-Gaeltacht speech are evaluated most positively; followed by local Gaeltacht youth speech; and then traditional local speech.

In conclusion, while overt evaluations of the speakers confirmed the traditional hierarchy of values, covert evaluations suggested that traditionally low prestige non-Gaeltacht speech and contemporary youth Gaeltacht speech are valorised through a process of covert prestige, where speakers of non-Gaeltacht varieties are consistently held to be more intelligent, self-assured and fashionable. Results support the contention that, in the context of contemporary Gaeltacht teenage culture, a value system below the level of consciousness accords prestige to and reinforces the use of overtly stigmatised speech forms and legitimises non-traditional linguistic features. In a speech community undergoing continuing language shift to English, where access to conservative speaker models is becoming more scarce (Ó Curnáin 2007; Ó Cuív 1951), the attribution of prestige to non-traditional speech varieties and their identification with a perceived national standard is highly salient.

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