Linguistic Perceptions of Irish English in Nineteenth-Century Emigrant Letters: A Micro-Perspective Analysis of John Kerr's Letters

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we look at the real voices of Irish English speakers in the nineteenth century. By turning to the *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence* (McCafferty & Amador-Moreno, 2012), we analyse the perceptions that letter writers had of their own language use. We apply a micro-perspective analysis to the language of John Kerr, an Irish emigrant to America, in his letters to his uncle James Graham of Newpark (Co. Antrim, N. Ireland). We examine Kerr's incisive comment on language use alongside metacommentary found in different Late Modern works, including dictionaries, essays on Irish English, as well as contemporary fictional representations of the variety of English spoken in Ireland during this period. Through this small batch of letters, we explore how the real voices of Irish English speakers echoed an enregistered Irish repertoire that may have raised awareness shaping their perceptions of their own dialect.

1. INTRODUCTION

Historical perceptions of the variety of English spoken in Ireland can be found in commentary offered by grammars, dictionaries and treatises, as well as in literary or fictional renderings of

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the dialect, where we find different written testimony of how the Irish were perceived. From Elizabethan theatre to the prescriptive grammars of the nineteenth century we find many examples where different writers and language observers offer their views on the way the Irish use the English language (Leersen, 1996). The terms *bulls*, *blunders* and *brogue* are all used in metacommentary to describe (often in a critical tone) the English spoken in Ireland.[1] While the term *brogue* refers to strongly marked Irish English (IrE) accents, and it was used with negative connotations in the past, *blunders* and *bulls* are terms used extensively in various publications over time to comment on 'errors' or 'deviations from the norm' ascribed to speakers of IrE.

In *An Essay on Irish Bulls* (first published in 1802) Maria Edgeworth investigates the nature of the 'Irish Bull' and explores the stigma attached to the 'Irish brogue': "Much of the comic effect of Irish bulls," she explains, "or of such speeches as are mistaken for bulls, has depended upon the tone, or *brogue*, as it is called, with which they are uttered" (Edgeworth, 1802: 77). Her ironic approach to the topic leads her onto further elaboration:

> The first Irish blunders that we hear are made or repeated in this peculiar tone, and afterward, from the power of association, whenever we hear the tone we expect the blunder. Now there is little danger that the Irish should be cured of their brogue; and consequently there is no great reason to apprehend that we should cease to think or call them blunders.

The text, as can be seen, touches on all three terms: *brogue, bulls* and *blunders*, providing an interesting insight into this particular author's perception of how IrE was received during the nineteenth century. By way of contrast, the Edgeworthian perspective, provided as an insider's point of view, can be compared with Daniel Dewar's observation of this specific variety of English from the outside (as a Scotsman). In the following paragraph from *Observations on the Characters, Customs, and Superstitions of the Irish* (1812), which was published ten years after Edgeworth's text, Dewar (cited in Crowley, 2002: 142), refers to the use of bulls when discussing the Irish language (which he refers to as 'the Irish' here):

> The Irish is very idiomatic, and possesses so little in common with the other languages of modern Europe, except the Celtic, and at the same time so very figurative, that it is difficult for anyone who thinks in it not to make bulls. It is partly on this account that an unlettered Irishman speaks in glowing and metaphorical diction. It is impossible for him to separate the language of his early years from his habits of thinking; he, therefore, very naturally accommodates the acquired tongue to the idiomatic construction and phraseology of his own, and imperceptibly enriches it with all the tropes and figures with which his mind is familiar […].

While the focus of our paper will be on the concept of the 'brogue', we point out the connection between all three terms as a way of illustrating at a glance how they are all part of the process

of attitude formation from a historical perspective. Both Edgeworth's and Dewar's perspectives are selected here in order to show the general awareness that existed in the early 1800s in relation to the use of IrE. Amador-Moreno et al. (2015: 1) defend the value of these types of documented perceptions of IrE, suggesting more scholarly attention be paid to them as they "provide useful starting points for academic study."[2] In this sense, this paper presents our first joint effort to explore such perceptions within the third-wave sociolinguistic framework of *enregisterment* (Agha, 2003) using a combination of sources that can be employed to provide an overview of how the perception of IrE has evolved over time.

In the present paper we take a micro-perspective approach to the letters of nineteenth-century Irish emigrants. By focusing on the correspondence of John Kerr (1843–1847) that is now recorded in the *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence* (CORIECOR), we take a preliminary look at linguistic attitudes and self-perceptions of language use, with special attention to the so-called *Irish brogue*. Our aim is twofold. On the one hand, we aim to ascertain whether Kerr's linguistic evaluation of IrE, while brief and based on only three letters, shows the impact of contemporary ideologies about the Irish and their dialect. On the other hand, we seek to determine whether the voices of Irish emigrants, as preserved in historical correspondence and represented here by John Kerr, echo an enregistered repertoire of IrE features that may have influenced their awareness of and perceptions about their own and others' speech, as well as their ideas about language correctness. Our focus will be on two pronunciation traits that Kerr comments on in the letters analysed the pronunciation of /r/ and consonant lenition. The argument is made that historical evidence from untapped emigrant letters can provide us with more fine-grained evidence of linguistic perceptions and the dissemination of linguistic norms, while they can be taken to reflect the enregisterment of certain features. In addition, we claim that, though scant, the evidence preserved in the correspondence of John Kerr can be taken to illustrate the impact that Late Modern English (LModE) (1700–1945) accounts of IrE had on writers' self-awareness of their own dialect.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a historical overview of the representations of IrE and the Irish in (non-)literary discourse, with special reference to salient 'Irishisms' discussed in different sources. Then, we situate such representations in the context of the third-wave sociolinguistic model of *enregisterment* and pay attention to the comments documented in LModE pronouncing dictionaries on IrE. Section 4 describes CORIECOR and the related CORVIZ project so as to frame the historical evidence scrutinised in this paper. Hence, the following section deals with the correspondence of John Kerr, from which we analyse selected passages that are discussed in Section 6. Section 7 provides some concluding remarks.

2. REPRESENTATIONS OF IRISH ENGLISH

The analysis of fictional representations of a dialect is a form of perceptual (or folk) dialectology, [3] in the sense that authors (i.e., non-linguists) filter through their own personal perception how dialects are used by speakers in different contexts. Such filtering circulates ideas that have an immediate impact on popular ideologies about how those dialects are employed by their users. At the same time, these fictional portrayals contribute to promoting self-awareness and ideas about 'incorrectness' that can often be traced back in time.

The type of dialect perception that operates through the filter of fictional representation has received some attention in the Irish context. Bliss (1979) was the first extensive study to use language samples from literature. Other earlier works with a focus on the language of Irish literature, such as van Hammel (1912), Taniguchi (1955), or Sullivan (1976) are discussed in Amador-Moreno (2010: 89–114), where attention is drawn to how fictional renderings of IrE have typically been used either with satirical or propagandist aims, especially historically by non-Irish writers. Such representations, as we discuss in section 3 below, not only gave rise to a stereotypical portrayal of IrE as a dialect, but they have also acted as a marker for the stereotyping of Irish people more broadly.

The stereotypical IrE speaker was embodied through the Stage Irishman caricature, which was perpetuated in literature for centuries. The earliest instance of this caricature is a play called *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, which was performed for Queen Elizabeth in 1588 (O'Neill, 2017). Fictional Irish characters are found in English Elizabethan drama, providing us with an interesting insight into how IrE was perceived by non-Irish authors. By pursuing speech characterization, these playwrights were possibly recording Early Modern IrE (with a higher or lower degree of accuracy). Their selection of linguistic features was also dictated by what their audiences were able to recognise as Irish. A number of studies, including Duggan (1937), Bartley (1954), and Leersen (1996) have dealt with the traits in which the recurrent figure of the Irish Stageman was characterised.

These perceptions of IrE are not only noticeable in literature. Nineteenth-century magazines like *Punch* in Britain to see the kind of drawings which exported an image of the Irish around the world that supported stereotypical 'Irishisms', such as the pronunciation of *rent* as *rint* in the caption below, where the prosecuted is referring to the payment of a rent (Figure 1).
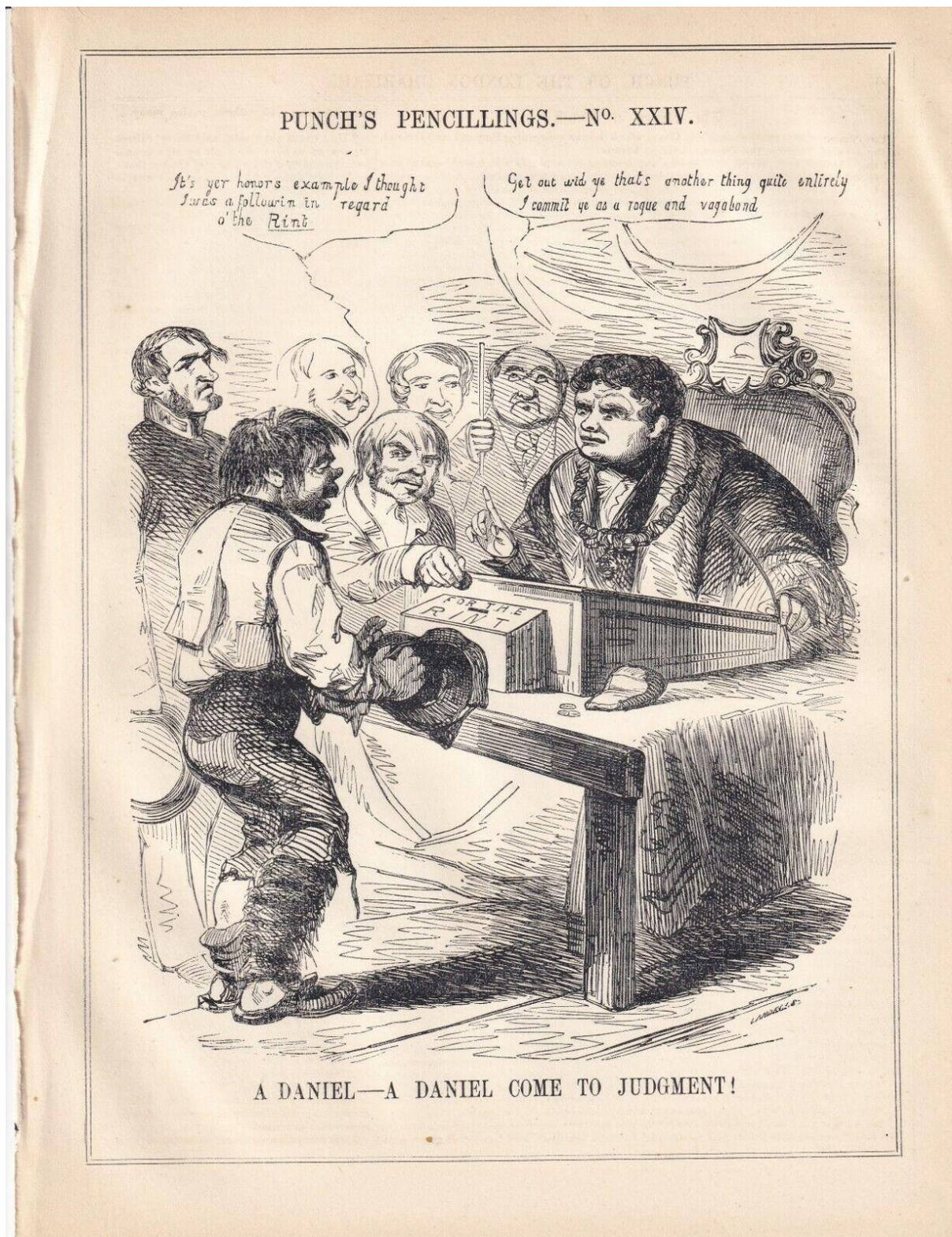
Figure 1. Illustration from the political cartoon *Punch* (Cartoon 24. Daniel O'Connell Lord Mayor of Dublin come to Judgment), 1842.

Language observers such as P. W. Joyce (1910), writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, also draw attention to how the Irish were caricatured in *Punch.* In a rather prescriptivist tone, Joyce (1910: 74–77) refers to how the English publication reflects the use of the auxiliary *will:*

> The incorrect use of *will* in questions in the first person singular ('Will I light the fire, ma'am?' 'Will I sing you a song?'—instead of 'Shall I?') appears to have been developed in Ireland independently, and not derived from any other correct usage: in other words we have created this incorrect locution—or vulgarism—for ourselves. It is one of our most general and most characteristic speech errors. Punch represents an Irish waiter with hand on dish-cover, asking: 'Will I sthrip ma'am?'.

Observations stretching back over two centuries note – and overwhelmingly condemn – this Irish[4] 'inability' identified by Joyce to use *shall* and *will* correctly (Beal, 2004: 96f.; Hickey, 2007: 179). By these accounts, then, the Irish difficulty "in [the use of] these auxiliaries [...] putting will for shall with the first person" (Fogg, 1796, vol. II: 129; cited in Sundby et al., 1991: 191) seems to have emerged by the mid-eighteenth century at the earliest (cf. Sundby et al., 1991: 190–192, 392). This view of IrE usage is also reflected in the title of Molloy's grammar *The Irish difficulty, shall and will* (1897), which "besides providing meticulous analyses of the StE usage of the auxiliaries *shall* and *will* […] contains more or less anecdotal accounts of typical 'errors' and 'bulls' occurring in the speech of Irish people, followed by advice on the 'correct' uses" (Filppula, 2002: 20). And later commentaries on IrE appear to confirm the persistence of this situation through the nineteenth century (e.g. Biggar, 1897: 46f.; Molloy, 1897). The commentary found in relation to the use of *will* vs. *shall* is just one example of the type of perception of IrE that was recorded in writing. Other linguistic traits associated with IrE were also commented on or fictionalised, following similar stereotyping.

Hume (1878), for example, noted that grammatical features like the BE + *after* + V-ing construction in sentences like "I am after seeing him" (113) was "rudely constructed […] [i]n imitation of the Irish [language]" (113), whereas "[i]n the uneducated circles" (114) verbal -*s* was the norm "with nouns, whether one plural or several of the same or different numbers form the subject of the verb" (114). His remarks, however, were driven by his antiquarian pursuit to record "the Hibernic dialect" (Hume, 1858: 53) before it was lost.

Other language observers like Stoney (1885) treat some of the dialectalisms of their time as 'errors' and 'defects'; and Biggar (1897) talks about 'blunders' and declares that "Ulster people need correction" (Biggar, 1897: 48). In terms of literary portrayals, Amador-Moreno and O'Keeffe (2018) analyse 5 historical works from 1800 to the present, and compare them with 49 contemporary works from 20 Irish writers from 1951–2007. They use historical and contemporary literary texts from Hickey's *Corpus of Irish English* (2003),

which, as part of his *Corpus Presenter* suite, comprises a small collection of (mostly dramatic) Irish Medieval through twentieth-century texts. Among these texts we find, for example, Farquhar's *The Beaux's Stratagem* (1707) where an Englishman called Archer is trying to pass himself off as Irish. Both the author's indication in brackets and the second character's use of the word *brogue* is telling:

(1) Arch. (In a brogue) Saave you my dear cussen, how does your health?

Foi. (Asside) Ah! Upon my shoule dere is my countryman, and his brogue will hang mine.

(George Farquhar, *The Beaux's Stratagem* 1707)

Another literary testimony of the use of the term *brogue* appears in *Captain O'Blunder, or the Brave Irishman* (1774), by Thomas Sheridan (1719?–1788), whose elocutionist legacy we return to in section 3 below. The author plays with the double meaning of *brogue* and the Irish Gaelic word *bróg* (Eng. shoe), which is often mentioned as the term that gave birth to the concept of 'thick pronunciation', which is what is meant by Sconce in this scene:

(2) *Capt. (To Sconce.)* Shir, your humble sharvant, you

seem to be a shivil mannerly kind of a shentleman, and I shall

be glad to be gratified with your nearer acquaintance.

(Salute)

Sconce: Pray, Sir, what part of England are you from?

Capt. The devil a part of England am I from, my dear,

I am an Irishman.

Sconce. An Irishman! Sir, I should not suspect that, you have not the least bit of the brogue about you.

Capt. Brogue! no, my dear, I always wear shoes, only now and then when I have boots on.

(Thomas Sheridan, *Captain O'Blunder, or the Brave Irishman,* 1774)

Hickey (forthcoming) provides some more examples of literary texts from the Early Modern English period to the twentieth century (see also Amador-Moreno, 2010: 89–114). Two interesting cases in the context of the nineteenth century, which is the period more directly relevant for the discussion of Kerr's letters below, are William Carleton (1794–1869) and Dion Boucicault (1820–1890), both of whom deal with Irish themes and use dialect for characterization purposes. The two excerpts below are good illustrations of the rendering of some of the key features represented in fiction at the time:

(3) "She's one o' the baker's dozen o' them, plase your honor," observed a
humorous little Presbyterian, with a sarcastic face, and sharp northern
accent--"for feth, sir, for my part, A thenk he lies one on every hill
head. All count, your honor, on my fingers a roun' half-dozen, all on
your estate, sir, featherin' their nests as fast as they can."
(William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, 1881)

(4) *Father T* Maybe, afther all, ye'd have done better to have married Myles there, than be the
wife of a man that's ashamed to own ye.
Eily He isn't—he's proud of me. It's only when I spake like the poor people, and say or do
anything wrong, that he's hurt; but I'm gettin' clane of the brogue, and learnin' to do nothing—
I'm to be changed entirely.
Myles Oh! if he'd lave me yer own self, and only take away wid him his improvements. Oh!
murder—Eily, aroon, why wasn't ye twins, an' I could have one of ye, only nature couldn't
make two like ye—it would be onreasonable to ax it.
Eily Poor Myles, do you love me still so much?
(Dion Boucicault, *The Colleen Bawn*, 1860)

These texts equally provide us with different written testimonies of how the Irish were
perceived in fiction. As pointed out above, Hickey (forthcoming) contains other literary
examples that provide textual record of how IrE was perceived. Many of these perceptions have
lasted until the present, while others, as Walshe (2011) shows in his study of IrE and humour
on TV, belong to the past.

3. THE ENREGISTERMENT OF IRISH ENGLISH

The literary and non-literary works referred to in the previous section offer a valuable glimpse
into historical perceptions of IrE and their speakers over time. The commentaries about and the
representations of the language documented in these texts testify to awareness of a linguistic
repertoire and a set of related social values which can be read through the lens of third-wave
sociolinguistic models like *enregisterment*.

Enregisterment was defined by Agha (2003: 231–232) as "the processes through which
a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognised register
of forms". In other words, as Agha and Frog (2015: 15) explain, it is a "reflexive process
through which register formations are differentiated from each other and emerge as apparently
bounded sociohistorical formations for their users". Indeed, such register formations can be
traced back to and accounted for by sociohistorical practices whereby specific linguistic
forms take on and index sociocultural meaning, and thus

"metapragmatically circulate and reproduce in social interaction, permeating discourse" (Hernández-Campoy, 2016: 150). This includes literary representations of dialect, such as those we have seen, as well as dictionaries and glossaries in which selected items are claimed as distinctive of a variety, providing "models for the performance of local identity" (Beal, 2009: 140). By circulating habits of speech, either of perception, recognition or production, these social practices raise public awareness of the meanings indexed by particular linguistic forms, as well as collective ideas about the varieties with which they are associated. It is worth noting that the model of enregisterment is coupled with Silverstein's (2003) three orders of indexicality, which refer to ascending levels of linguistic awareness and reflexivity. In this regard, the first order refers to the correlation between a linguistic form and a social category (e.g. class, gender), which is observable for outsiders to the speech community, for example for a linguist. At the second order, there is awareness of the link between that linguistic feature and its meaning, whilst third-order indexicality shows that those socially meaningful forms are "deployed as part of deliberate and reflexive identity performances" (Bucholtz & Lopez, 2011: 681).

As is well known, Agha (2003) introduced the concept of enregisterment to explore the rise and spread of what is now known as Received Pronunciation. As he explains, from the 1700s onwards the prescriptivist input of pronouncing dictionaries and the overt metalinguistic judgments documented in a variety of sources (e.g. newspapers, novels, manuals, etc.) contributed to the circulation of a set of forms that were gradually identified with a supra-local standard and status symbol in Britain. These features, as Johnstone et al. (2006: 80) assert, "have been represented collectively in the public imagination as a stable variety and maintained across time and region via metapragmatic practices that reiterate the value of this variety and its link to social status and correctness".

In the context of IrE, the prescriptivist comments of LModE elocutionists and grammarians such as Thomas Sheridan (1719? –1788), John Walker (1732–1807) and Stephen Jones (1763–1827), amongst others, had a remarkable impact on the association of specific values with the pronunciation of English in Ireland. By highlighting which variants were desirable, their comments linked others such as those of IrE with notions of incorrect or unacceptable speech. In this regard, as Agha (2003: 261) notes, "Sheridan, Walker, and their followers had sought programmatically to transform public perceptions of the vernacular tongue". Sheridan, himself an Irishman, materialised this enterprise in the list of 'Rules to be observed by the natives of Ireland to attain a just pronunciation of English' (59–61) appended to his *A Rhetorical Grammar of the English Language* published in 1780. Here, he remarked on some of "[t]he chief mistakes made by the Irish in pronouncing English" (59), which, he wrote, "lie for the most part in the sounds of the first two vowels, *a* and *e*" (59). Elsewhere in his grammar, Sheridan (1780) likewise commented on consonant features such as lenition,

which he exemplified with the "vicious pronunciation" (16) of /d/ in comparative forms such as *louder* and *broader*: the Irish, he pointed out, "thicken it by an aspiration; and sound it as if it were written loudher, broadher" (15). Hickey (2010a: 266) explains that the rules listed by Sheridan are "in general archaic traits of Irish English, for example where the long vowel shift had not taken place as in *matron* with a long [a:] or *beat* with [ɛ:/e:]" (see further Hickey, 2008). In this sense, London-born John Walker accused him "of being old-fashioned" (Beal, 2004: 131) even though he reproduced from Sheridan's pronunciation dicta in his celebrated *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* of 1791. Yet Walker (1791: x) commented on additional forms whereby he sought to supplement Sheridan's account. He referred, for example, to "the jarring pronunciation of the letter R", which he described as one of "the strongest characteristics of the pronunciation of Ireland".[5] As already noted, such peculiarities were commonly evaluated as errors that explained the asperity of the dialect and the harshness of the accent, as Walker (1791: xii, 50) underlined. In fact, their being treated as the "chief mistakes" that Sheridan (1780: 59) sought to correct set the stage for a longstanding tradition of derisive and contemptuous attitudes towards the dialect, which, as Kallen (2013: 39) notes, has been referred to as brogue-speak and circulated widely, as we showed above.

Comments like these thus contributed to the enregisterment of these variants as IrE while they perpetuated their negative associated values over time and overseas. This is especially the case of Walker's dictionary, which had run into 100 reprints by 1904 and was "also the basis of over 20 other dictionaries published in the nineteenth century" (Beal, 2004: 129). Its first American edition published in Philadelphia in 1803 had an unquestionable impact on American speech and in particular on their "ideas about proper pronunciation" (Sheldon, 1947: 130), as contemporary voices like John Kerr's reflect (see section 5). This way, the values associated with the IrE pronunciations noted by Walker were maintained whilst being claimed as markedly salient characteristics of the dialect that continued to shape speakers' perceptions of language during the long nineteenth century.

It is clear, therefore, that the evidence preserved in these LModE pronunciation dictionaries exhibits clear indexical links between a set of linguistic features evaluated as characteristic of IrE and distinct meanings that were in turn commonly associated with a recognizable social persona. Even though Sheridan's and Walker's observations are not especially rich in this regard, contemporary works like those previously described show that the dialect was often attributed to a recognizable social type, one that took different shapes, including the excitable, proud and pugnacious stage Irishman of seventeenth and eighteenth-century drama (Hickey, 2010b: 122), alongside the simple yet lawless peasant, and the "conservative priest of the Penal Days to the strong, fearless priests of the days of the Famine" (Kelley, 1939: 3). More often than not, these indexical associations were put on display along with linguistic features like those noted by LModE elocutionists, and thus

contributed to the dissemination and maintenance of norms about language and character with an obvious effect on popular ideologies about the Irish and their dialect. At the same time, they

promoted self-awareness and ideas about (in)correctness in linguistic performance, whilst they shaped speakers' and writers' perceptions of their own and others' language.

As in other varieties of English, literary representations of Irish speech offer a clear illustration of how such norms have been circulated and maintained, largely because they are crucial in the reflexive construction of dialect and character inherent to this social practice. As a matter of fact, the literary representation of consciously-selected linguistic features like those found in Edgeworth's, Carleton's and Boucicault's[6] works, as well as those commented on in the LModE sources that we have described, can be interpreted as implicit metalanguage on the dialect. It reflects their treatment and overt association with IrE, whilst showing that they were recontextualised and acted as semiotic devices to enact linguistic identities that writers deployed with varying purposes. Similarly, there is historical evidence from private correspondence suggesting that letters relied on and reflected such norms because, as Watts (2015: 10) highlights, letter writing was "a self-reflexive activity, a form of performance in which the writer had an opportunity to present" themselves in a specific way.

So far, scholarly work on historical dialect enregisterment has been chiefly concerned with literary representations of speech, with special emphasis on varieties of English (see e.g. Beal, 2009; Cooper, 2013; Ruano-García, 2020; Schintu, 2020), alongside some work on American (Picone, 2014) and IrE. We may refer to Hickey (2016: 31–34), who provides a historical overview of the most relevant phonological (e.g. unraised realisation of <ea> in *tea*), grammatical (e.g. second person plural pronoun *youse*) and lexical enregistered items (e.g. *grand* to express approval or reassurance), whilst Amador-Moreno and McCafferty (2015: 184–194) focus on the enregisterment of the discourse marker *sure*, which they explore in late modern literary and non-literary works like emigrant letters.[7] Certainly, this is an isolated piece of research that considers Agha's framework in relation to historical evidence of IrE preserved in personal correspondence (cf. Paulsen, 2022 with regard to American English). Amador-Moreno and McCafferty (2015) examine data from the *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence* (CORIECOR), showing the potential of letter writing to explore processes of dialect enregisterment in the past. The increasing availability of such historical materials is making it possible to open new windows into uncharted territory thus far. This is the case of the CORVIZ project, which we describe in the following section.

4. CORIECOR AND THE CORVIZ PROJECT

CORIECOR is a corpus of Irish emigrants' correspondence that allows researchers to trace the emergence and development of features of IrE and study syntactic, morphological, stylistic, regional and social variation. The letters are from 1731–1940, which spans the period during which Ireland became overwhelmingly English-speaking. Most letters were written by people of all social and geographical backgrounds who were in the process of emigration or who had

emigrated to different parts of the world, while a smaller proportion of the letters are from relatives or friends at home in Ireland. The corpus, which contains also some business letters, provides an empirical base for studies of historical change in IrE.

Letters produced by people of Irish or Anglo-Irish background have been added to CORIECOR since the corpus started to be compiled in 2009 (see Amador-Moreno, 2022). The compilation of CORIECOR proposed to gather as much evidence as possible for early IrE into a corpus that would permit longitudinal diachronic study. The aim was to produce a corpus of vernacular documents representing speakers from all over Ireland which would for the first time allow researchers to trace the emergence and development of features of IrE, including stylistic and social variation. The corpus so far has been used for empirical comparisons of IrE with data from other sources for the LModE period. More recently, the analysis of language choice, based on the concepts of enregisterment, style-shifting, intra-speaker variation and emotions discourse have also become part of the research agenda, through the project 'CORIECOR visualized. Irish English in writing across time (a longitudinal historical perspective)', which is shortenend into the acronym CORVIZ. The CORVIZ project, funded by the Agencia Estatal de Investigación, Spain (Project Reference number PID2019-106609GB-I00) and hosted at the University of Bergen (https://corviz.h.uib.no/index.php) allows us to explore the potential of letter writing to tap into processes of dialect enregisterment in the past.

One of the aims of CORVIZ is to examine some of the IrE features in the context of qualitative metalinguistic discourse so as to gain more refined insights into the ideologies behind the use of certain dialectal forms. In this regard, by studying prescriptivist attitudes towards some variants, we aim to explore how certain linguistic traits take on sociocultural meaning in the context of IrE. Such an approach allows us to determine whether these indexical meanings have shifted over time. Indeed, it may be possible to trace the decline of non-standard usage over time by focusing on how some features of IrE became recognised and evaluated as distinct by the letter writers themselves, as well as in other accounts of this variety by grammarians, dictionary makers, fiction writers and other observers. As mentioned above, this approach engages with the recent turn to the third wave of (historical) sociolinguistics, where intra-speaker variation or meaningful individual choices to project and construct social personae have taken center stage (e.g. Conde-Silvestre, 2016; Hernández-Campoy and García-Vidal, 2018). By analyzing individual prescriptivist attitudes towards some dialectal features, our aim is to explore attitudes and self-perception in language use. Thus, one of the goals of CORVIZ is to assess how certain text types (e.g., literary representations of dialect and dialect dictionaries/glossaries) are immediately relevant to the diffusion and consolidation of sets of linguistic forms. Such forms index and evoke identifiable sociocultural meanings which speakers see as a socially recognised register of forms upon which they draw to perform identity.

Following from those aims, the present paper will now focus on the letters of John Kerr, an Irishman who emigrated to America. Kerr's letters to his uncle James Graham of Newpark (Co. Antrim, N. Ireland) contain incisive commentary on language use, which allows us to contextualise his own perception of dialectal use. We observe his attitude alongside metacommentary found in different LModE works, as discussed above, as well as contemporary fictional representations of the variety of English spoken in Ireland during this period. By applying a micro-perspective analysis to the letters of John Kerr, we take account of how the real voices of IrE speakers echoed an enregistered Irish repertoire that may have raised awareness shaping their perceptions of their own dialect.

5. PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS IRISH ENGLISH: THE CORRESPONDENCE OF JOHN KERR (1843–1847)

The Kerr family letters contribute 7908 words to CORIECOR, but here we focus on the 12 letters written by John only. John Kerr emigrated from county Antrim to America, arriving in New Orleans in the spring of 1842. His letters home to his uncle James Graham were collected by R.H. Foy as part of a booklet published by the Antrim & District Historical Society in 1989, under the title *Dear Uncle: Immigrant letters to Antrim from the U.S.A., 1843-1852: The Kerr letters with accompanying notes on their background.*

What we know about the social background of the Kerr family is what comes from this publication. John Kerr was the son of a Protestant farmer, David Kerr, who was born in 1791 and married Elizabeth Graham, from Newpark. He inherited his parent's farm at Tannaghmore. Elizabeth died at the young age of 31 (in 1836). David was unsuccessful in managing the farm and was deeply in debt when he died in 1840, at the age of 49, leaving his six children penniless. After their father passed away, the children went to live with their Graham uncles and aunts at Newpark. John Kerr was the oldest, and the first to emigrate to the USA in the 1840s. His letters to his uncle James Graham provide us with a detailed picture of the immigrant experience. We know from the letters that he moved frequently, seeking employment as a tutor or clerk, and at various times lived in places near New Orleans, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, New York, etc. John died of tuberculosis on July 27, 1852, in Phillipsburgh, Pennsylvania. Other information about his brothers William, James, David, and Samuel, all of whom followed John to the USA at different stages, is also contained in the letters.

Apart from the fact that James Kerr was attending a private Academy in Antrim before he emigrated, we do not know much about the educational background of the siblings. They were Protestants growing up in Antrim. For most of the period covered in CORIECOR, literacy was highest in the wealthiest, Protestant dominant north-eastern regions of the island (see Fernihough & Ó Gráda, 2022: 1610, 1616), so we have to assume that all the siblings would have received some education. Like in the Irish-Australian emigrant letters analysed by

Fitzpatrick (1990: 498–499), John Kerr's letters contain commentaries on the importance of schooling and education, as we will see below in more detail.

The state, its major institutions, and the public identified education as an improving force (Doyle, 2018: 359), and this is clearly noticeable in the context of Irish emigration. The national school system was introduced in Ireland with the Education Act of 1831. Before the introduction of national education, and even well after the widespread dissemination of the school, home schooling was not uncommon in Ireland, as recorded in the Census of Ireland,[8] where separate tabulations for household tutoring were made. Private schooling had been available prior to the 1830s (see Clear, 2007: 43; Ó Gráda, 2013: 113). However, in the absence of a public education system until then, the so-called hedge schools, where pupils and teachers were forced to carry out their schooling, had been the rule throughout the eighteenth century. Schooling contributed to the promotion of English as a language, and to the consequent decline of the Irish language. The dramatic expansion in the number of schools during the nineteenth century was in part due to the demand for literacy. While until the 1880s the illiterates in the population were the most likely to emigrate, from then onwards this tendency was reversed (Fitzpatrick, 1990: 172). In the case of the Kerr family, no indication whatsoever emerges from their correspondence that could lead us into thinking that they were not the authors of their own letters, so we have to assume full literacy. John Kerr's comments in relation to pronunciation and use of English, as we will see in the sections below, indicate an acute concern with 'correctness' and clear dialect awareness.

Our analysis of John Kerr's correspondence takes a micro-perspective qualitative approach and focuses on three passages. They have been selected to show that Kerr's views on IrE and the Irish speaker reflect the impact of LModE pronunciation norms while they were shaped by widespread ideas concerning the Irish brogue and related enregistered features.

5.1. Overt comment on the speech of others

In the following excerpt, from a letter penned by John, he makes interesting remarks about his brother David's pronunciation, shortly after his arrival in America:

> I will make David write to you and if he spells as he pronounces, he will write a funny letter. He speaks like the Dunenae people and murders the Queen's English horribly. I am trying to break him of it, but it is a hard task. He says it is not matter how one speaks, an observation quite characteristic of an Irishman.
>
> (John Kerr, New York, to his uncle David Graham, Newpark, Co. Antrim, 29th September 1847)

The excerpt gives us some clues as well in relation to John's critical views of what is characteristic speech production for an Irishman, according to him, as well as his own attitude to what he refers to as 'the Queen's English', and the prestige that he attaches to it.

5.2. Dialect contact and perception

A few years earlier, after his own arrival in America, John Kerr's observations show admiration for the dialect of his host country, and open disregard for the Irish way of speaking:

> Everyone here speaks well, or as well as he can. No one is ashamed to pronounce properly. Not so in Ireland. Many there, who are able, will not speak well.

> (John Kerr, unknown origin, USA to the Grahams in Newpark, Co. Antrim, 1840s).

As we can see, Kerr's explicit comment on the Irish way of pronouncing suggests that he took American English and Americans as models against which his own perceptions and evaluation of IrE were built, which do in turn offer a valuable glimpse into shared ideologies about and attitudes towards IrE and the Irish. Their linguistic carelesness, at least in matters of speech, allowed Kerr to demarcate the distance between bad and good English, which he judged on the basis of proper pronunciation, as it was commonly dictated by contemporary norms. In fact, as the following passage shows, Kerr was fully aware of them and of the works where they were disseminated.

5.3. Direct reflections on language use

In a longer letter, also from the 1840s, but with no specific date provided, we read:

> I give some of the peculiarities of the manner of speaking and pronouncing in this country. I give none of the corruptions, or what I consider an improper pronunciation, but it is that mode which is sanctioned by the dictionaries and what I consider is correct. The standard dictionary is Walker. First may I remark that there is no brogue, no patois in the language here. The brogue, you know, consists in a very rough pronunciation of the letter r and likewise that peculiar sliding of the tongue between the teeth in pronouncing such words as dross, drum, dirt, etc. The patois is a forcible breathing before the vowels, such as notwithstanding for notwithstanding [sic]; this patois is not common in the north but it is in the south of Ireland. The brogue is common everywhere in Ireland, but you are taught to avoid it in reading.

> (John Kerr, unknown origin, USA to the Grahams in Newpark, Co. Antrim, 1840s).

This excerpt testifies to Kerr's awareness of enregistered repertoires and norms that clearly shaped his self-perceptions about correct language use. His metacommentary of the brogue, which he defines explicitly and illustrates with features likewise highlighted in LModE

pronunciation dictionaries, underscores and reproduces the indexical link between place, those forms and the Irish speaker type referred to in the previous passages. At the same time, his words are framed within a dialectal environment where he finds himself in a position of prestige above the Irish vernacular. Of special interest is his adherence to Walker's dictionary, which Kerr claims to take as the reference norm. Indeed, his description of the salient features that distinguish the brogue can be systematically compared to Walker's observations on IrE, which, as we discussed in section 3, he linked with incorrect pronunciations such as consonant lenition, or "that peculiar sliding of the tongue", and "the jarring pronunciation of the letter R", as Walker (1791: x) himself wrote. Kerr's evaluation of the dialect not only testifies to the popularity of Walker's dictionary in shaping his ideas of correct pronunciation, but also, and more interestingly perhaps, to awareness of specific features that were enregistered as core constituents of the Irish brogue in and thanks to works like Walker (1791).

6. DISCUSSION

Though brief and rather occasional, the evidence preserved in the correspondence of John Kerr is incisive and prescriptive enough to illustrate both the influence that LModE accounts of IrE had on language perceptions and popular ideologies about the dialect, while they reveal indexical associations between place, speaker and speech. His acknowledgment of LModE prescriptive works such as Walker (1791) not only speaks to the source of his own attitudes towards language use, but likewise, and more importantly here, informs us about his understanding of what IrE and speaking like an Irishman were like. By emphasizing salient features that were also associated with the brogue in literary representations and metacommentary found in pronunciation dictionaries (i.e., the pronunciation of /r/ and consonant lenition), Kerr's correspondence offers valuable testimony to his awareness of an enregistered repertoire that indexed values of incorrectness, carelessness, etc. An Irishman teaching in America, Kerr's comments thus prove especially interesting and should be read within a context of intense debate on linguistic correction where proper speech was often defined by pointing to what it should not be like. His letters home from the US not only echo and reproduce popular beliefs about the Irishman and their linguistic neglect, but also reveal the stigma attached to some enregistered features that he overtly proscribed and took to define linguistic (in)correctness. In this regard, Kerr's correspondence played an important role in the maintenance of such indexical associations and enregistered IrE features. His letters could be seen as artifacts in the speech chain whereby "particular messages about the social value of accent" (Agha, 2007: 217) were transmitted, while they witnessed and contributed to the ongoing process of enregisterment.

As a matter of fact, some of Kerr's attitudes towards IrE can still be observed in the twentieth century, as Clery's blunt comment (cited in Kallen, 1994: 186) shows:

we certainly have not learned how to speak English, for we have not acquired its sounds [...], we have merely learnt how to make ourselves understood by a system of mispronounced English words, incapable of literary development. (Clery, 1921: 552)

In their section dealing with locutions "universal all over Ireland", Hayden and Hartog devoted a section of their article to 'solecisms that have arisen from imperfect assimilation of the alien tongue'; the term 'solecism' is used throughout their article, and they explain the abundance of such items as being 'due to the lack of any innate feeling for the genius of the English language' (Hayden & Hartog, 1909: 942). This deprecation of IrE is also still at play sometimes in the use of the term *brogue* in present day contexts (see Croghan, 1986; Amador-Moreno, 2010: 9).

7. CONCLUSION

Our paper has provided a preliminary approach to the impact that historical accounts of IrE have had on language perceptions and popular beliefs about the dialect. By focusing on the letters of John Kerr, we have shown that private correspondence provides potentially useful yet untrodden evidence on speakers' awareness of enregistered repertoires and norms. The case study presented here shows the potential that private correspondence can have when it comes to exploring processes of dialect enregisterment in the past. As we have discussed here, John Kerr's letters are a path of access to the real voices and perceptions of individuals. His commentary on the idea of the Irishman, his views on others' language and his criticisms of language carelessness show the stigma associated with the Irish brogue. At the same time, his sharp rejection of the English produced by his fellow countrymen provides us with a complementary picture of the proscription of (enregistered) Irish pronunciations, following the model of LModE elocutionist works that, like Walker (1791), shaped his views of (in)correct pronunciation. This illustrates that letters had an impact on the dissemination and maintenance of norms about language (and character), while echoing and contributing to the enregisterment of an IrE repertoire with an obvious effect on popular ideologies about the Irish and their dialect. The increasing availability of such historical materials is making it possible to open new windows into a territory that invites further exploration. The CORVIZ project, which we have described here, is a small step into that new territory.

NOTES

[1]While not exclusive/restricted to this variety, in this paper we narrow down the discussion of these terms to the context of Irish English.

[2]For a comprehensive modern overview of bulls see Earls (1988) and also Walsh (2015).

[3]We will not pursue here either a discussion of the term nor a history of folk linguistic and perceptual studies. The definition of perceptual dialectology and its development within the area of sociolinguistics may be consulted in Preston (1999). A more recent survey is Montgomery & Beal (2011).

[4]As one reviewer points out, and as argued in McCafferty and Amador-Moreno (2015, this was not only regarded as a feature of IrE. Eighteenth-century Scots who aspired to speak and write in English, were criticised for their "incorrect" use of *shall* and *will*. It was included amongst lists of Scotticisms to be avoided. See, for example, *The Scots Magazine*, vol. 22, (Dec. 1760): 686–687.

[5]It is worth noting, however, that such negative views on the Irish "faulty manner" (Walker, 1791: x) of speech were counterbalanced with remarks on realizations that were not thus evaluated. Hence, Sheridan (1780: 59) observed that in the "combinations of *ee* and *ie*, the Irish never mistake; such as in *meet*, *seem*, *field*, *believe*, &c.", whilst "they sound the *d* right in the positive *loud* and *broad*" (Walker 1791: x). As such, Sheridan's and Walker's criticism of specific characteristics of IrE should be seen within their broader endeavour to regularise pronunciation, one that, as Sheridan (1762: 205) put it, advocated for "the establishment of an uniformity of pronunciation throughout all his Majesty's British dominions" (cited in Beal, 2010: 28). In this vein, Mugglestone (2003: 69) highlights that "[c]ommand of those features specified as desirable in the accent which Sheridan and others intended to extend as a non-localised norm for the nation was, in such ways, thus deemed to symbolise much more than mere articulatory control" (see further Hickey, 2012a: 5–11). There is further historical evidence that testifies to positive views that claimed the legitimacy of the dialect. For instance, Crowley (2002: 85) underlines that antiquarian John Keogh (c.1650–1725) "echoing Swift's piece 'On Barbarous Denominations' and anticipating Maria Edgeworth in her 'Essay on Irish Bulls', denounces the stigma attached to the Irish 'Brogue'." Hickey (2012b: 17–20) discusses attitudes towards IrE, noting that positive and negative views on the dialect are not mutually exclusive.

[6]See Hickey (forthcoming) for a full catalogue of the most representative phonetic representations from the EModE period to the twentieth century.

[7]Recent research on IrE that likewise draws upon enregisterment and related third-wave models includes work on modern representations and media covering fiction (Terrazas-Calero, 2020), radio advertising (O'Sullivan, 2020), films (Walshe, 2016) and sitcoms (Murphy & Palma-Fahey, 2018).

[8]The 1841 Census was in fact the first census to include a comprehensive survey of literacy in Ireland but should be approached with caution, as Ó Gráda (2013: 114) warns, because it is based on self-evaluation.

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