

A Brief History of Languages in County Wexford

As we used to say

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Introduction

In the 2007 edition of *The Past*, I sketched the history of the Irish language in County Wexford since 1851¹ to the present day in the light of reports from censuses of population.

The current article gives a potted history of Yola. I conjecture the timespan when Wexford people gradually ceased to use Irish as a vernacular. Recent linguistic history is also considered.

1. The 1851 census

1.1 The questionnaire

The Census of Population of Ireland in 1851 was the first official census to ask a specific question on use of the Irish language. In that year, out of a total population of 180,158 people in County Wexford, only 800 (less than a half of one per cent of that population) were recorded as Irish-speaking.²

In the 1851 census, the question on Education included the topic of Irish. It carried the following instruction to the enumerator:

The word ‘Irish’ is to be added in the column to the name of each person who speaks Irish but who cannot speak English; and the words ‘Irish and English’ to the names of those who can speak both the Irish and English languages.³

The answers to this qualitative question required an element of subjective judgement by the census enumerators. Those answers could not be quantified with the same reliability as answers to objective questions such as address, religion or occupation.

1.2 Accuracy of the results

Nevertheless, the Irish language data recorded for County Wexford in 1851 are consistent with similar data recorded for other Leinster counties, especially the adjacent counties of Carlow and Wicklow. Those data also flow smoothly into the time-series for subsequent decennial censuses. The historical data on the two main languages are statistically robust. Their geographical share, distribution by age-group and breakdown by socio-economic class all accord with rational expectation.

A historical indication of the reliability of the data from the 1851 census nationwide is apparent when they are compared with the figures from the 1911 census. The proportion of English speakers tended to be significantly higher going from west to east across Ireland in both 1851 and 1911. The gradient of the density of Irish speakers in the population increased as one travelled from east to west.

The trend in the percentages of the population who spoke Irish in most counties in 1911 decreased from the corresponding percentages in 1851. Mathematically, the fractions in most counties in 1911 had decreased to equal roughly the squares of the corresponding fractions in 1851.

Geographically, the percentage of Irish speakers declined westwards in Ireland from 1851 to 1911 as the English language spread under British rule. As there were comparatively few Irish speakers in most Leinster counties in 1851, the decline of the Irish language in Leinster must have occurred before that time.

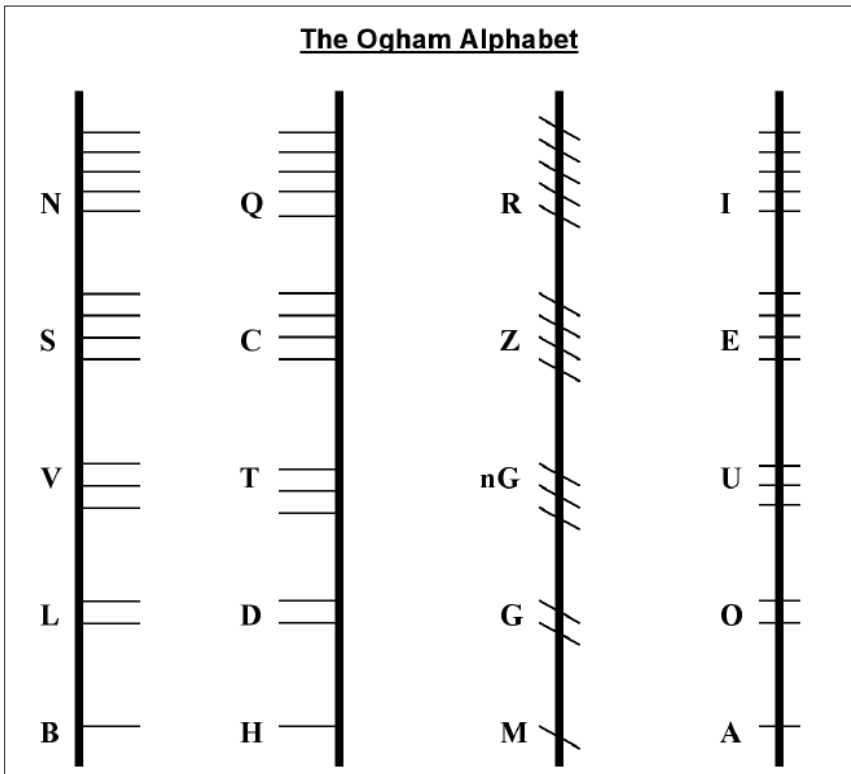
1.3 Precision of the results

The modern science of statistics was only in its infancy in 1851. The computer era had not yet dawned. Yet, our Irish statisticians still achieved remarkable numerical precision using pencil and paper; ready reckoners; tables of four-figure and seven-figure logarithms; slide rules and gear-driven calculation-engines. They had a natural ability and a mathematical expertise, coupled with mental alacrity and clear thinking. Their analyses are monuments to human intelligence, dedication and perseverance.

2. Ogham

Megalithic standing-stones have been found at various sites in County Wexford. Some of these stone pillars had ogham characters chiselled on stem-lines on their sharp edges, beginning from the bottom left-hand side (and continuing upwards, across the top and down the right-hand side for long inscriptions).

The more common uses of Ogham inscriptions were to mark territorial boundaries and to commemorate burial sites.⁴ *Ro tócbad a lia agus ro scribad a ainm oghim* ('His tombstone was erected and his name was inscribed in ogham') as an early medieval scribe noted.



One theory holds that the term Ogham comes from Ogma⁵, the pagan Druidic god of eloquence. The language⁶ of the ogham writing

was proto-Celtic which pre-dated Old Irish and was more closely akin to Sanskrit than to modern Irish.

Early Irish Christianity discouraged ogham writing because of its associations with paganism. Nevertheless, the medieval bards and scholars used ogham as a professional cryptographic code. The key to this code was found in the Book of Ballymote (written around the year 1390), where the ogham characters were corresponded to the Latin alphabet.

3. Early history

It is difficult to reconstruct the language spoken by early Neolithic peoples in Ireland from the 5th millennium BC. It was most probably a remnant of a Palaeolithic language. Its closest relatives would likely have been Pictish, Aquitanian, Iberian or an early prototype of Basque.

It was well into the Bronze Age, between 600 and 500 BC, when the Goidels, the first Celtic-speaking invaders, landed here. They subdued and intermarried with the older inhabitants. Between 300 and 150 BC, two tribes of the Belgae from north-eastern Gaul, who spoke Brythonic, established trading posts in south-east Ireland. The Greek geographer, Ptolemy, called them the Menapii and the Brigantes. Ptolemy's map (c.150 AD) plotted the River Slaney as the *Madonnas* and named the settlement at Wexford Harbour as *Menapia*.

Wexford's name dates from the Viking era. In Old Norse *Veisafjord* or *Weissfjord* meant 'the inlet of the mudflats'. It is likely that Tuskar Rock took its name from a combination of Irish and Norse words (*Dubh skar* – *Black rock*). The name of the Saltee Islands is of either Norse or Middle English origin (*Salt ey* – *salt island*) from the salt-spray that sweeps across those islands during the winter storms.

4. More modern history

In 1551, Robert Recorde (a famous mathematician and physician) was appointed on behalf of the young King Edward VI to be *general*

surveyor of the mines and monies in Ireland.^a He was in charge of the silver mines in Wexford (situated at Clonmines, near Bannow Bay).

The silver mines in Wexford did not become a successful venture for Recorde. There were a great many problems, all outside his control, which meant that the project never had a chance to succeed. The technology needed to mine the silver was the subject of a dispute with German miners who operated the mines.^a

The north-east baronies of County Wexford were planted between 1615 and 1618⁷ by Lowland Scots under King James (I of England and VI of Scotland), establishing their dialect of English in that area.

Cromwellian settlers entrenched a further foothold in 1653. Victorious Williamites consolidated the English-language beachheads after the Flight of the Wild Geese (1691).

5. Yola

In South Wexford, a branch of Middle English called Yola^b (*The Old Language*) evolved. Settlers called *Wessexmen*, from Somerset and Devon, followed Strongbow and Robert Fitzstephens in 1169. *The Annals of the Four Masters* (compiled 1632-36) recorded that Fitzstephens led 70 *Flemings in their Coats of Mail*. A strong West English accent was noticeable in their dialect. For the next 700 years, their descendants preserved a version of Old Saxon⁸ similar to the language in the hinterland of the Bristol Channel.

The now-extinct Fingalian dialect of north County Dublin originated around those times and is believed to have been very similar to Yola. The Dublin historian, Richard Stanyhurst (1541-1610), commented:

Yola only preserved the dregs of ancient Chaucerian English. Yola speakers have so acquainted themselves with the Irish, that they have made a 'gallimaufreere' (or 'mingle-mangle') of both languages, so that the natives of Forth and Bargy speak neither good English nor good Irish.

Yola contained many borrowings from Irish and French. In 1581,

Sir Henry Wallop reported that the baronies of Forth and Bargy generally spoke Old English *of a Flemish origin*. Cromwell's campaign disrupted life in the Baronies when many families were forced to leave.

A report on the dialect in 1680 described it as Old Saxon English with considerable borrowings of Irish words. In his *Tour of Ireland* (1776-'79), Arthur Young found that the people of Forth and Bargy *speak a broken Saxon language, and not one in a hundred knows anything of Irish*.

In 1788, Charles Vallancey, LL.D., noted a decline in the language. Between 1800 and his death in 1827, Jacob Poole⁹, a Quaker, collected¹⁰ a *Glossary*¹¹ of Yola words and phrases.

In 1836, the new Lord Lieutenant, Earl Mulgrave, was addressed *an na plaine garbe d'ouve yola talke* ('in the simple address of our own dialect') by *Dwelleres o' Baronie Forthe, Weisforthe*. In his report on that address in the *Wexford Independent*, the editor, Edmund Hore, wrote:

If the use of this old tongue dies out as fast for the next twenty years, as it has for the same bygone period, it will be utterly extinct and forgotten before the present century shall have closed.

According to Edmund Hore, Yola was spoken slowly. Words of one syllable were usually drawled. In words of two syllables it was usual to stress the second syllable. Normally, *-s* or *-es* was suffixed to form a plural noun, but occasionally *-n* or *-en* was added. Where the letter *f* started a word, it was pronounced *v*. If the letter *s* began a word, it sounded like *z*.

In 1857, Very Rev C. M. Russell DD, President of St Patrick's College, Maynooth, sent a sample of words from the dialect to a Belgian scholar who found in them some Flemish words but nothing which could be regarded as particularly Flemish.

After Stanley's Irish Education Bill of 1830, literacy gradually spread throughout Ireland. The younger people of Forth and Bargy became aware of the limitations of their home language. The unique

linguistic heritage of Yola declined steadily until by 1875 it was extinct.

Diarmaid Ó Muirthe¹² studied the English spoken in South Wexford in 1978 (Ó Muirthe¹³, 1997). He compiled a long list of Yola words still known or in use from people who were between 40 and 90 years old.

6. The Kilmore Carols^c

In 1684, Dr. Luke Wadding, Bishop of Ferns, published his *Pious Garland*¹⁴ in Ghent. It included ten carols for the Christmas season.

Wadding was an enlightened church leader. He tried to emulate the best of Protestant choral liturgy. In order to reach the minds and hearts of his laity, he composed in the colloquial English of his day, which, in general, was somewhat more like Yola than Modern English.

Three of Luke Wadding's carols are among those still heard in Kilmore. Those are the fourth for Christmas Day; the Song for St. Stephen's Day; and the Song for New Year's Day. Editions of the *Pious Garland* were reprinted in London in 1728 and 1731.

Around 1728, Rev William Devereux, the Parish Priest of Drinagh, collected local carols and also wrote some himself. He published his collection in *A New Garland containing Songs for Christmas*.¹⁵

The carols were first sung in the chapel at Kilrane. Tradition indicates that the choir consisted of six men who divided themselves into two groups of three to sing alternate stanzas.

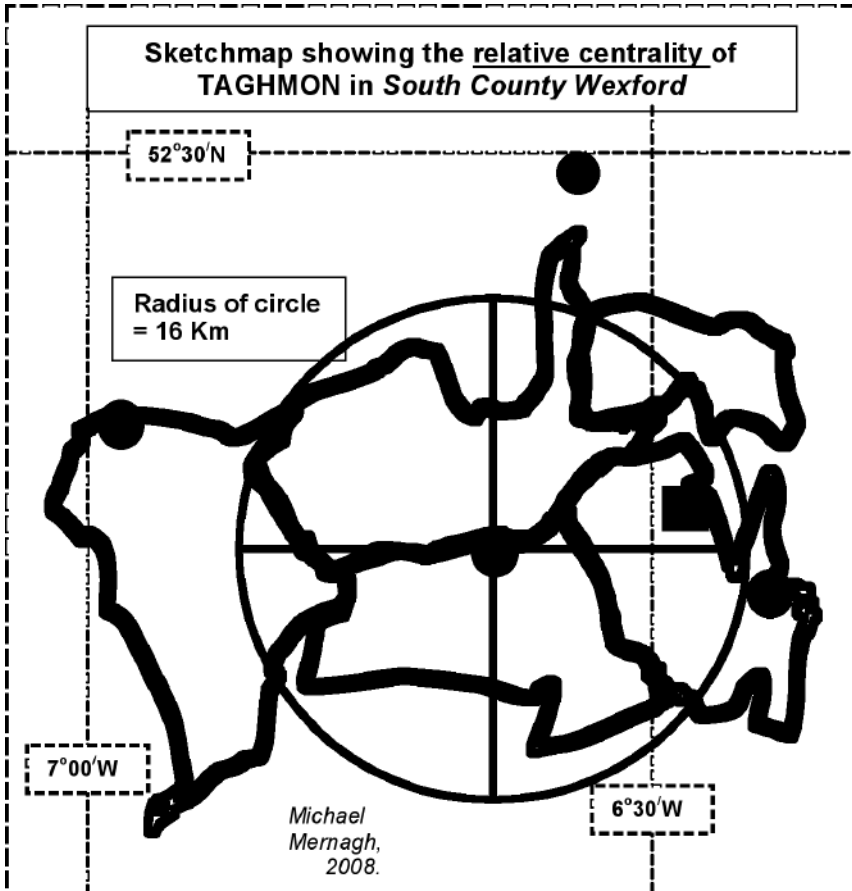
Today the carols that once were popular all over the Barony of Forth are heard only in Kilmore. Voluntary six-man choirs have handed down the words and music from generation to generation.

Geoffrey Palmer, B.Mus., ARCM, who helped Fr Joseph Ranson in editing the music for the Kilmore carols, wrote:

These beautiful Carols belong to an age that is fast leaving us. The air of the Carol for New Year's Day, in the Dorian mode, is obviously very old and should be carefully observed. The Carols should be unaccompanied and they should be sung in free tempo, rubato style, dwelling on certain notes quite part from the time signature, as the singers feel inspired at the time.

7. Taghmon

Taghmon straddles the border of Shelmalere West with Bargy. In the 15th century, it was the cultural gateway between Gaelic Ireland and Yola-speaking south Wexford. Strategically, it lies in the heart of the south county (*vide* sketchmap).



Most of the time, a peaceful trading relationship existed with the Old Irish driving their cattle to *Aonach Teach Munna* (one of the great fairs in medieval Ireland). So a farmer might say *Slán agaibh go fóill* to his wife and children with the good-humored remark *Fágfad*

Éire is raghad go Teach Munna – I'll leave Ireland and go to Taghmon.

My father, Nick, was born in 1911 in Davidstown of farming background. He was a commercial traveller whose customers were the publicans of County Wexford. He often used the expression: *I'm going to leave Ireland and go to Taghmon.* He heard that saying from his father, who had heard it from his father before him. Davidstown is nearly 18 kilometres in distance on a straight line due north from Taghmon.

8. Modern Irish in County Wexford

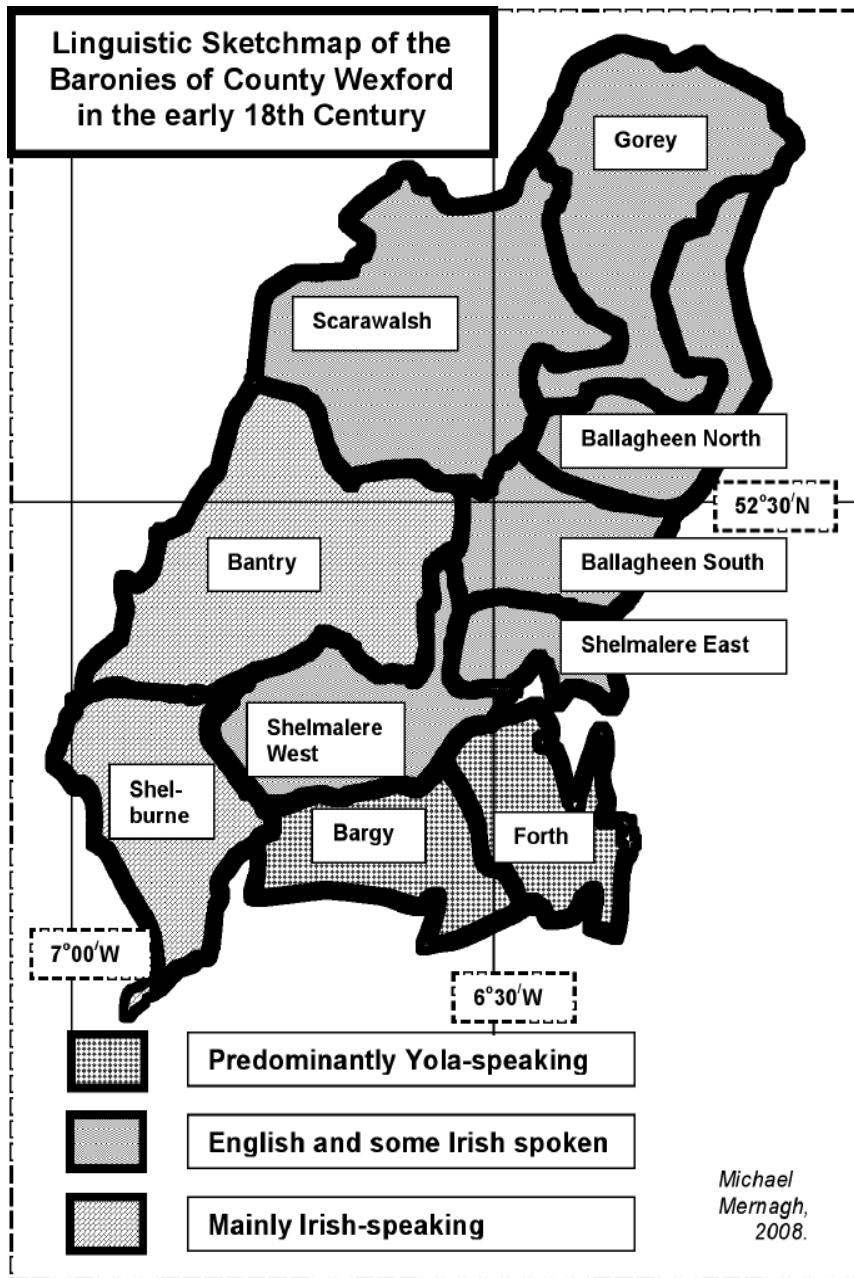
8.1 The 18th century

After the Treaty of Limerick, Irish became the language of the outlaw. Ireland was left without its native rulers. The Irish language ceased to grow. It remained medieval in its vocabulary, much the same as happened to Gàidhlig in the islands and highlands of Scotland.

Writing under a *nom-de-plume* about Arthur Young's tour in County Wexford in the very first issue of *The Past* in 1920, An Ildána* noted:

*The people spoke not only in two languages but in two voices—the truth in Irish, but when using English to the hated masters the moral code was not so binding. 'It would be a sin,' answered an old man who saw the Penal Laws at work, 'to tell lies in Irish,' but, he added (an obvious exception) 'not so if you were speaking English to the foreigners.'*¹⁶

*A good translation of An Ildána would be *The Jack-of-All-Trades*. Another good translation would be *The Polymath*.



8.2 1798

Tom Dunne quotes as follows in *Subaltern Voices – Poetry in Irish, Popular Insurgency and the 1798 Rebellion*:

Apologising to his patron, the Protestant antiquarian, John George Augustus Prim (1821-75), for the delay in sending ‘the four verses relative to the bloody engagement at Ross in ’98’, Ó Doinn, the Gaelic scholar and collector of folk material, explained, ‘but delays are often unavoidable in rescuing from oblivion all that can be gleaned from the native tongue of Ireland in its declining days.’¹⁷

Dunne continues further on:

And yet, in the fullest and best eyewitness account of ‘the bloody engagement at Ross’ on 5 June 1798, James Alexander several times reports them as speaking Irish.¹⁷

Passing by the barrack lane a rebel came out and levelled an old musquet at me, but presently crossed himself and took aim at a soldier, in doing which he was himself shot by a Dublin Militia man. As he fell his piece went off and he exclaimed, ‘Scoil an Deoil!’ (The Devil split you) his last words.^d

8.3 Bishop Patrick Lambert (1755-1816)

Patrick Lambert was born in 1755 in Kildavin, County Wexford. He studied and taught at the Irish Franciscan College in Louvain. In 1806, he took up duty as coadjutor bishop in St. John's, Newfoundland (called *Talamh an Éisc* in Irish).

Society there was composed largely of recent immigrants. During the Napoleonic wars, the cod fisheries prospered. When trade slumped after those wars, Irish fishermen continued to pour into St. John's. Many were from Leinster, where English was spoken. Those who came from Munster were more likely to speak Irish and tended to be more politically radical. Faction fights were common between Leinstermen and Munstermen. This rivalry unnerved Chief Justice Cæsar Colclough (a colonial appointee with a Wexford heritage).

Lambert spoke no Irish. RJ Lahey points out that Munster

immigrants distrusted clergy who could not speak Irish. The historian DW Prowse observed that *neither priests, bishops, Colcloughs, nor justices could have put down the faction fights; they died out in time, and were succeeded by the more legitimate 'diversion' of politics.*

Bishop Lambert retired to Ireland in 1815. He died at the Friary in Wexford the following year. Throughout his episcopacy, he quietly attempted to build institutional Catholicism in Newfoundland. He had made moderate gains in securing religious liberties.^e

8.4 The early 19th century

Rev. James B. Gordon, writing in Mason's *Survey* published in 1813, stated in respect of the townland of Killegney (in the parish of Cloughbawn):

*The language among the peasants, except the Protestants, in their discourse with one another, is mostly Irish, but they all speak English. The only men who could not speak English died a few years ago.*¹⁸

Also writing in Mason's *Survey*, Mr Radcliffe recorded that *English is the language used in Enniscorthy.*¹⁸

Wexford town was an important commercial port situated strategically on the route from Bristol and Cornwall to Newfoundland. As such, it would have been largely English-speaking.

An account published in 1819 by John Bernard Trotter in his book *Walks Through Ireland* stated:

*The Irish language is spoken almost generally in the County of Wexford; we heard it everywhere in the fair (of Newtownbarry).*¹⁹

In the early 19th century, the population of the baronies of Bargy and Forth was still mainly Yola-speaking. This further erodes the quantum of Trotter's assumption that Irish was widespread in the county.

The development of administrative machinery spread a host of officials over the country, and all its operations were carried out in English. Irish was excluded from the national schools set up by Statute in 1831 until 1901. (*Vide* Hayden and Noonan.²⁰)

Some unusual dynamic must have occurred to explain the difference between the accounts written in 1813/19 and the figures recorded in 1851. The demise of the older generation does not fully explain the discontinuity in handing on the language to the next generation.

In the numerical mists of the times, Daniel O’Connell, the first modern democrat and ‘The Liberator’, advised all ordinary people to speak English rather than Irish. The following quotation from O’Hegarty’s *History of Ireland under the Union* illustrates this:

*If the Irish were to hold their own in [the] new world of the Béarla... they had to make themselves proficient in English. That is why O’Connell could not use Irish in his fight, why he expressed himself as sorry he could not but justified it on purely utilitarian grounds, why John Edward Pigott alone of the Young Irelanders supported Davis on the question of Irish, and why all our political movements of the century [were] in English. No Irish leader or publicist understood its value, nobody thought of it otherwise than as a sort of patois, an inferior medium of expression.*²¹

In 1843, O’Connell addressed one of his ‘Monster Meetings’ just outside Enniscorthy. The venue, adjacent to Red Pat’s Cross, is still known locally as ‘the Repeal Field’. O’Connell delivered his speech entirely in English.

The editor of The Nation newspaper (of the Young Irelanders) wrote:

About half the people west of a line drawn from Derry to Waterford speak Irish habitually, and in some of the mountain tracts east of that line it is still common. [‘The Nation’, 30th Dec., 1843.]²¹

In an article on ‘*The Irish Language in Nova Scotia*’, Cyril J Byrne states:

The Irish in Newfoundland derived from the south-eastern counties of Ireland: South Kilkenny, South Tipperary, Waterford, West Wexford and Cork. Until the middle of the nineteenth century these were the same counties whence came the Irish to Nova Scotia, either indirectly via Newfoundland or directly from the homeland. These areas in Ireland with the exception of West Wexford remained strongly Irish-speaking until about the time of the Great Famine of the late 1840s.^f

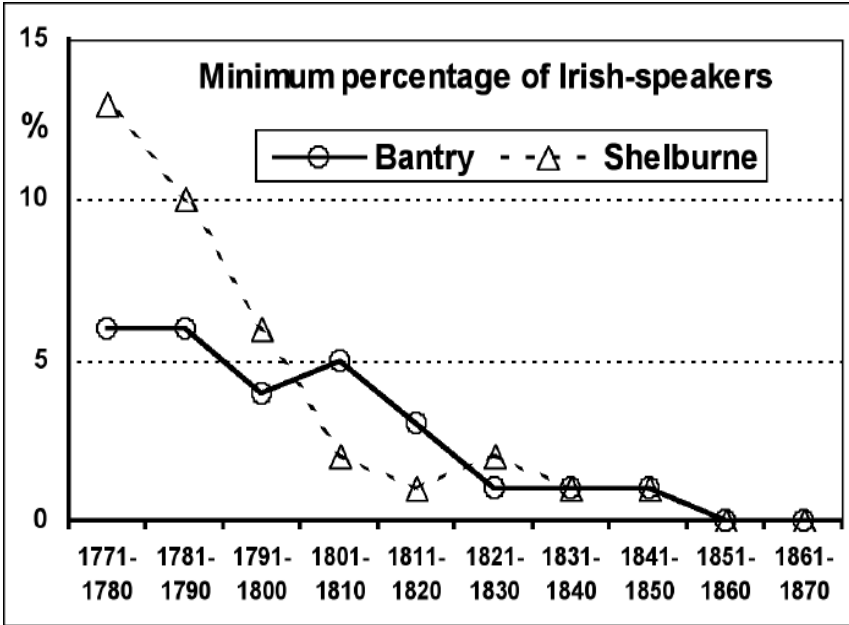
8.5 Research by Dr Garret FitzGerald

8.5.1 1984 paper

In his classic paper²² of 1984, Dr Garret FitzGerald estimated the minimum level of Irish-speaking in each barony in Ireland among the ten successive decennial cohorts ranging from 1771 to 1870. The data (in percentages of survivors born in each cohort) for County Wexford are quoted in the following table.

Decade	Baronies of County Wexford		
	Bantry	Shelburne	All Others
1861-1870	0	0	0
1851-1860	0	0	0
1841-1850	1	1	0
1831-1840	1	1	0
1821-1830	1	2	0
1811-1820	3	1	0
1801-1810	5	2	0
1791-1800	4	6	0
1781-1790	6	10	0
1771-1780	6	13	0

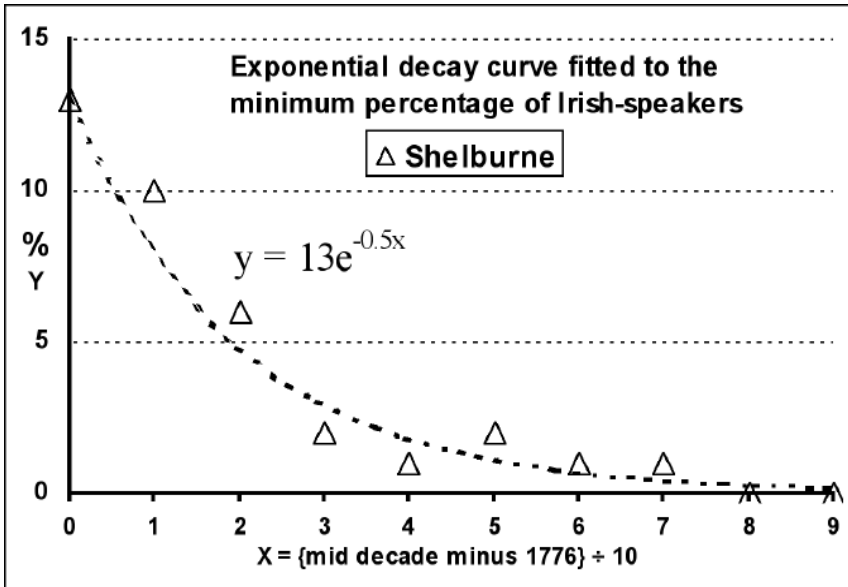
I illustrate the data for Bantry and Shelburne on the following chart.



For comparison, the following table shows the actual percentage levels of Irish-speaking recorded for the Town of New Ross and for the Barony of Bantry in the censuses of 1851 and 1861 for people from 10 to 29 years of age and for those from 60 to 79 years old.

Age-Group	Census of 1851		Census of 1861	
	New Ross	Bantry	New Ross	Bantry
10-29	0	0	0	0
60-79	11	2	3	1

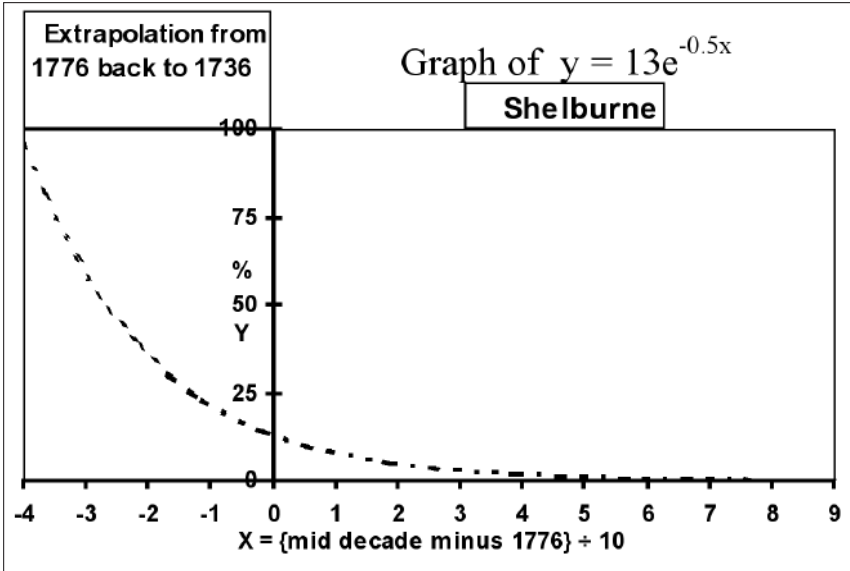
I fitted a negative exponential mathematical model to the data for Shelburne that accounts for 96% of the statistical variation in those data.



Extrapolation of the above model retrospectively indicates that nearly 100% of the population of Shelbourne could have been Irish-speaking in the year 1736. However, because of the variation in the actual data, rigorous calculations based on statistical theory indicate that one might have to go back to 1656 to find the population fully Irish-speaking in Shelburne. (This is compounded by the fact that relevant data are minimum estimates.) This time-frame coincides with the Cromwellian subjugation and Williamite consolidation of power in Ireland.

Shelburne (coastal) and Bantry (mountainous) are geographically contiguous with East Waterford and South Kilkenny respectively. Both of the latter areas had very high concentrations of Irish-speakers in pre-famine times. They were the eastward extension of the then predominantly Irish-speaking province of Munster.

It is ironic that the first place in County Wexford where the Normans came ashore was the last place in County Wexford to lose the continuity of Irish as the medium of daily speech.



8.5.2 2003 paper

In his definitive paper²³ of 2003, Dr FitzGerald studied the census of 1911. He analysed data from the 3,915 district electoral divisions in Ireland (North and South). He derived estimates of the extent of Irish-speaking in the pre-Famine period for people born before 1851 and still alive in 1911. Only 1% of 743 District Electoral Divisions in eight Leinster counties recorded over 2.5% of people aged 60 year and over as Irish-speaking In the 1911 census. In County Wexford, only three localities were above the 2.5% threshold by 1911. Those were Camolin, Kilcomb and Fethard.

Dr FitzGerald’s analyses agree with the macro-statistic that only 0.4% of the entire population of County Wexford could speak Irish in 1851 (from Census data.)

9. Multi-cultural Wexford

The seafaring folk of the coastal baronies of County Wexford traded with England and the continent. This strong cosmopolitanism opened Wexford to European trends of Gothic church building at

the time of the Crusades.

In the 19th century, the middle classes thought it was a sign of vulgarity to speak ‘wild Irish’ and discouraged their children from using it. *Parents wanted their children to learn English, because it was the language of the State, of business, of the professions* (O’Hegarty).²¹

10. The Wexford accent

The linguistic soup from the multi-cultural melting pot moulded the distinctive accent²⁴ that is the mark of a person born and reared in County Wexford in modern times. The baritone tenor of that accent makes it difficult for Wexford people to lose their proud accent, no matter where they wander on the planet. It is a good example of the premise that you can take a person out of their environmental culture, but you cannot take an environmental culture from a person.

It has often seemed to me that the Wexford accent is in close resonance with the timbre of the West Country accent of England. That should not be a surprise. It is a feature of trans-national proximity that can be observed in border regions in many parts of the world.

11. Making history today

Wexford people have a long history of assimilating and integrating other cultures into their county’s ever-evolving socio-economic milieu. They have forged a vibrant detante that has fused into strong community spirit and cohered into trust and tolerance for all.

The Italian, Chinese and Indian communities are long-established in the catering trade in County Wexford. The end of the Second World War saw hard-working German people make Wexford their new home.

During the 20th century, many highly-skilled and respected medical professionals came from Africa and Asia to give invaluable service for which the people of Wexford were grateful.

More recently, the enlargement of the European Union has seen a significant growth in immigration from countries of the former Eastern Bloc, in particular from Poland and from Lithuania. This coincided with a welcome collapse in emigration during the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger. Many of the New Irish have decided to put down roots in their adopted county.

Our National Anthem puts it well: **Buíon dár slua thar toinn do ráinig chugainn** (*'Some have come from a land beyond the sea'*). Sporting people, commentators and organisations would do well to familiarise themselves with accurate pronunciation of diacritical alphabets to include new surnames that have broadened our horizons.

In our recent history, enlightened official policies at both local and national level have tended to obviate ghettoisation and foster integration. Wexford today is not the Wexford of a century ago. Today's Wexford will not be the same in a hundred years' time. Let us work to achieve a truly classless society that will be just, fair and tolerant in welcoming all. We pride ourselves on being *Ireland of the welcomes*. Let our **céad míle fáilte** become global and meaningful.

Conclusion

It can be argued that a larger corpus of documented folklore is extant from counties where the Irish language died out than in counties where it survived. Perhaps because he saw the language around him in decline, Patrick Kennedy, the poet of *The Banks of the Boro*, may have been motivated to record Wexford's traditions for posterity. County Wexford was not fully Irish-speaking, but it was predominantly Gaelic in spirit, culture and outlook.

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- i. <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/popclockworld.html>
- j. <http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page14289.asp>