English has been spoken in Ireland for over 800 years, making Irish English the oldest variety of the language outside Britain. In this paper we tried to trace the development of English in Ireland, to reveal how Irish English arose, how it has developed and how it continues to change. A variety of central issues are considered in detail, such as the nature of language contacts and the shift from Irish to English, the sociolinguistically motivated changes in present-day Irish English, and its special features. Presenting a comprehensive survey of Irish English at all levels of language, this work will be useful to students of English dialects.

The English language has existed in Ireland since the late Middle Ages and has experienced phases of prosperity and decline during all these years. Even a cursory glance reveals that English in Ireland involves many subtypes, traceable to the origin of those settlers who carried English to the country.

This is most obvious in the linguistic and political division between the north and south. However, the linguistic diversity within Ireland is much more subtle than this basic split suggests. Needless to say, over the centuries in which English has been spoken in Ireland, specifically Irish uses of English words and phrases have arisen which contribute to the lexical profile of Irish English. One can also observe semantic extensions which have taken place in Ireland. Although Irish today is spoken natively by about one per cent of the population and although the knowledge of Irish among the majority is, in general, very poor, there is a curious habit of flavouring one’s speech by adding a few words from Irish.