PREAMBLE

If a name had to be given to the relatively youthful tradition of which the present study is part, then I suppose socio-historical linguistics (Romaine 1982) would be as concise as any. Briefly put, the main aim of this tradition has been to integrate the fields of historical linguistics and sociolinguistics. The latter term can be taken here to refer loosely to 'variationist' approaches to linguistic analysis; that is, to studies which focus on the variable and dynamic aspects of language, in contrast to the categorical and essentially static orientation of modern theoretical linguistics. The seeds of socio-historical linguistics were already present in the work of such pioneering linguists as Gauchat (1905) and Wyld (1920), but it was not until Labov's seminal study of Martha's Vineyard (1963) that a rigorous application of sociolinguistic methods to the analysis of language change was undertaken. That study and Labov's subsequent work have inspired many to adopt and develop further a variationist perspective on historical linguistics. This approach has proved beneficial in at least two ways. It has made valuable contributions to a general theory of language change; and it has shed new light on many substantive issues in the history of particular languages. In this book I seek to show how a detailed variationist study of a particular nonstandard variety, English as it is spoken in Ireland, can be utilised to offer further insights into a number of these theoretical and substantive questions.

Before the advent of variationist studies of language
Phonological variation and change

change, the primary task of historical reconstruction in phonology was to establish relations of correspondence between temporally separate, cognate segments. Answers to the question of how the transition from one correspondence pole to another occurred depended largely on the theoretical persuasion of the historical linguist. According to the post-Bloomfieldians, structural changes at the phonological level were triggered by an accumulation of gradual shifts at the phonetic level (e.g. Hockett 1965). The classical generative view (as expressed for example in Postal 1968 and King 1969) was the opposite of this: low-level phonetic changes were triggered by categorical rule changes at the phonological level. Until the work of Labov and others, no direct evidence was available which could be brought to bear on the transition issue: 'no one had seen a rule added to a grammar, any more than anyone had seen an allophone drift' (Lass 1976a: 221). Although solid real-time evidence of how change proceeds is still lacking, we now have, thanks to variation studies, considerable evidence from 'apparent time'; that is, from socially and geographically differentiated variation which can be taken to reflect temporal variation. Much of this evidence confirms the view that sound change involves subphonemic shifting by small increments or across phonetic continua (e.g. Labov et al 1972). (Whether this drifting occurs in response to higher-level rule change, as Labov (1981) contends, or itself triggers higher-level responses remains an open question.)

One type of change which apparent-time evidence does show to involve discrete input and output categories is the Redistribution of phonemes across the lexicon. Strictly speaking, this doesn't constitute phonological change proper (although it may eventually have phonological consequences). The phenomenon generally occurs in response to exonormative pressures and in traditional terms would be called borrowing. However, the latter term with its connotations of sporadic superficial change is hardly appropriate for describing the massive adaptive redistribution that is to be observed in
Preamble

conservative dialects whose phonemic incidence is markedly different from standard patterns (see especially J. Milroy 1980). The effects of genuine 'evolutive' sound change and phonemic redistribution can often be very similar, with the result that the differences between them may be masked by traditional methods of historical reconstruction which deal only with correspondences between discrete input and output categories. One of the things that quantitative analysis of phonological variation has allowed us to do is show that the two types of change are qualitatively different and clearly distinguishable while they are in progress. Sound change proper is typically reflected in variation across phonetic continua; phonemic redistribution typically involves alternation between phonetically quite discrete variants.

Another major contribution of variation studies to historical linguistic theory has been to deepen our understanding of the sorts of linguistic and extralinguistic constraints that operate on phonological change. This has been accompanied by a disconfirmation of the neogrammari an hypothesis that sound change occurs in a completely regular fashion in response to universal phonetic laws. We now have evidence that sound change may be sensitive to a whole range of internal (phonological, grammatical, lexical) and external (social, geographical) conditioning factors besides phonetic ones. Through the application of quantitative methods, it has been shown that phonological variation can be constrained by features of the morphosyntactic environment (e.g. Labov 1972b: ch 3) and can be subject to selective diffusion through the lexicon (e.g. Wang 1969). In the same way, it has been possible to test the extent to which covariation between different changes may be determined by higher-order phonological constraints (such as 'space' or 'economy' - see Labov et al 1972) which control the avoidance or implementation of phonemic mergers. This is not to deny the importance of phonetic factors as determinants of phonological variability. In fact, methods of implicational
Phonological variation and change

scaling (e.g. Bailey 1973) and Labovian variable rule analysis have increased our awareness of how different phonetic constraints interact to condition variation. The interpretation of these findings in the light of recent progress in experimental phonetics and psycholinguistics promises to deepen our understanding of the role played by articulatory and perceptual factors in phonological change (e.g. Ohala 1974a, Janson and Schulman 1985).

Of the external dimensions across which phonological change proceeds, it is the geographical that has the longest history of study (at least since the days of nineteenth-century dialectology). Thanks to recent sociolinguistic research, we are now also in a position to understand more fully than before the social dimensions of linguistic change. Quantitative work which has appeared since Labov's (1966) study of New York City has consistently demonstrated correlations between linguistic variation and differences in style, class, age, sex and ethnic group. In some cases, variation of this sort reflects no more than stable social grading. In others, however, socially stratified variation can be considered symptomatic of change in progress, provided the pattern of differentiation can be checked against whatever real-time documentary evidence may be available. Findings such as these have contributed much to our understanding of the influence that social and political pressures exert on the propagation of linguistic change. Previously, it was felt that the prestige which attaches to varieties spoken by economically powerful elites was the overriding social factor that dictated the direction of linguistic change (e.g. Bloomfield 1933: 476ff). This was the usual reason cited for the decline of traditional rural dialects in the industrialised world (idem). However, more recent sociolinguistic investigations of newly-evolved urban vernaculars have demonstrated clearly that overt prestige is only one of a number of social factors that determine the direction of linguistic change. At least as significant in this respect are pressures of group loyalty which ensure that the covert prestige which attaches to local
vernacular norms is often powerful enough to override considerations of overt prestige. Rather than nonstandard varieties being swept away in an inexorable tide of standardisation, the indications are that urban vernaculars are maintaining a vigorous existence and are expanding at the expense of traditional rural dialects (Labov 1972a: 324, 1980a: 252). Having established this, our task now is to investigate the sorts of social and linguistic factors which determine the outcome of competition between conflicting local covert norms.

One of the spin-offs of the detailed studies of modern English vernaculars that have been conducted over the last couple of decades has been to throw new light on a number of substantive issues in the history of the language. This 'use of the present to explain the past' (Labov 1975) has served to reopen enquiries in several areas which remained untouched for some time for want of sufficient evidence. The majority of major works on the recent history of English have been concerned almost exclusively with the development of the Southern Standard. (A notable exception is Luick 1921.) This emphasis is understandable in view of the fact that most of the available historical documentary evidence deals with this variety. Moreover, sporadic references to 'vulgarisms' in the work of early orthoepists are difficult to interpret without a wider knowledge of earlier forms of nonstandard English. However, this concentration on the standard language has robbed historians of English of much important evidence which could have been used to illuminate a number of well-known unresolved problems. Fragments of this evidence have been available at least since the first appearance of work on English rural dialectology in the late nineteenth century. Now thanks to more recent, systematic research into rural dialects and urban vernaculars, there is a wealth of material on nonstandard English at our disposal. Through careful application of the comparative method, this material can be brought to bear on some of the hitherto unresolved problems of English historical linguistics. It should be
clear that this sort of evidence is indispensable to a study of the history of the Southern Standard (SSE), since this variety evolved from and has been in continuous contact with certain regionally restricted dialects. Just as important is the light that this evidence can shed on the history of nonstandard English itself, an area that is only beginning to be explored in a systematic way. Initial results of studies which deal with the subject of time-depth in vernacular varieties are very encouraging (e.g. Labov 1975, Lass 1976b, J. Milroy 1983). One type of English which, because of its characteristic conservatism, is an ideal candidate for this sort of investigation is the variety spoken in Ireland (Hiberno-English).

It is not my aim to provide a unified history of the English language in Ireland, since this has already been undertaken elsewhere (e.g. Hogan 1927, Bliss 1977, 1979, Barry 1982). Rather I wish to concentrate on a number of specifically phonological developments which will form the basis for discussion of the theoretical and substantive issues just referred to. For various reasons, the focus is for the most part on northern Hiberno-English, although I draw on comparative material from southern dialects throughout the book. Firstly and most importantly, northern dialects, in contrast to the relative homogeneity of southern Hiberno-English, exhibit a good deal of diversity within a fairly small geographical area (Adams 1977: 56). This makes the north of Ireland an ideal place to investigate the manner in which competition among conflicting local linguistic norms resolves itself in conditions of dialect contact. A second reason for my concentration on northern dialects is that the detailed historical accounts of Hiberno-English phonology that are already available deal almost exclusively with southern varieties (e.g. Hogan 1927, Sullivan 1976, Bliss 1979). Thirdly, most of my own research has been undertaken in the north, particularly while I was working on the project Sociolinguistic variation and linguistic change in Belfast (see Appendix 1 for details). I have also been able to draw on my own experience as a native of Belfast.
Preamble

Almost everything that has ever been written about Hiberno-English (henceforth HE) stresses the effects of contact with Irish Gaelic on its development. I take up this issue in a treatment of HE consonant phonology in Chapter 3 and give it more detailed attention elsewhere in a discussion of the growth and structure of the HE verb phrase (Harris 1984b). Although this is clearly an important area, it has been much discussed and it is not my intention to go over the same ground here. Rather the focus in this book is on two other aspects of language contact in the north of Ireland. Firstly, I examine the linguistic developments that have arisen from contact between the typologically divergent phonological systems of English and Scots dialects. Secondly, I attempt to isolate changes which appear to reflect contact between nonstandard HE and modern standard British varieties.

Chapter 1 is primarily descriptive and is intended as a necessary scene-setter for the historical developments that are discussed in the later chapters. It provides outline phonologies of the main types of northern HE that can be identified according to the different ways in which the tensions between English and Scots norms have been resolved. The conditions of contact are in many ways similar to those that obtained in the early days of British settlement in North America. It therefore comes as no surprise to discover close linguistic parallels between certain United States and Canadian dialects on the one hand and northern HE on the other. These similarities also reflect the fact that the major British colonisation of Ireland was roughly contemporary with that of North America. Hibernian and American dialects of English display many common seventeenth-century features which have since been lost from standard British varieties.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I identify several areas of northern HE phonology where change can be shown to be in progress and attempt to disentangle the various linguistic and extra-linguistic factors that constrain its direction and rate. Some changes appear to reflect adaptive shifts in the direction of external, standard norms. Others are more likely to
Phonological variation and change

reflect competition between more English-like and more Scots-like patterns. While the outcome of such competition hinges to a large extent on sociolinguistic forces, the rate at which the changes in question diffuse appears to be subject to phonological conditioning. Nowhere is the tension between English and Scots patterns more noticeable than in the area of vowel phonology. Some HE dialects display a typically English system in which vowel length is largely phonemic. That is, in these varieties it is possible to identify one subsystem of lexically long nuclei and another of lexically short ones. In characteristically Scots dialects, on the other hand, vowel length is to a large extent phonetically conditioned. Between these two types lies a range of 'mixed' dialects which show varying degrees of compromise between phonemic and positional length. The diffusion of the English and Scots length patterns across different dialects manifests itself in a series of lengthening and shortening processes which are consistently subject to a hierarchically ordered range of phonological constraints. The ranking of constraints is reminiscent of results obtained elsewhere through methods of variable rule analysis or implicational scaling. In Chapter 2, I attempt to interpret this ordering in terms of a hierarchical model that has been developed within phonological theory. The application of theoretical principles to the study of phonological variation of this sort, I argue, takes us on the first step towards understanding why the ordering patterns are as they are. They can be shown to be governed by natural phonetic factors, specifically certain articulatory and aerodynamic constraints that are inherent in speech production.

In Chapter 3, I turn my attention to the sociolinguistic factors that appear to dictate the direction of linguistic change in northern HE. I attempt a partial reconstruction of the internal history of Belfast Vernacular with particular reference to how the tensions between older rural and newer urban norms are being resolved. By inspecting present-day sociolinguistic variation for signs of change in progress and checking the results against historical records, it is
possible to identify the main phonological developments that have been occurring over the last century or so. Comparative material from the city's rural hinterland dialects and from the descendants of the original British source dialects allows us to chart the continuing competition between English and Scots linguistic features. It is also possible to offer a fairly clear picture of the sorts of adaptive change that have been taking place in the vernacular as a result of contact with external standard norms.

In the final two chapters, I discuss a number of theoretical problems associated with phonological merger against the background of an examination of a couple of specific issues in the history of English. Thanks to its conservative nature, HE provides the historical linguist with an invaluable store of archaic patterns of distribution which were once current in Early Modern English but which have since disappeared from standard varieties. Through direct observation of this material it is possible to gain fresh insights into some of the well-known problematical areas of English historical phonology. One of these, which I take up in Chapter 4, concerns the fate of Middle English (ME) /eː/ (as in meat) in Southern Standard English. According to some interpretations, it merged with ME /aː/ (as in mate), only to reseparate and undergo merger with ME /eː/ (as in meet). Belfast Vernacular is one of several modern dialects in which these vowels, at least potentially, remain three-way distinct. Comparative reconstruction of the changes that have produced the current reflexes in these dialects contributes to our understanding of what might have happened to ME /eː/ in the Southern Standard. In addition, the results have a bearing on the wider issue of the sorts of strategy that can be implemented to avoid merger during chain-shifting. In Chapter 5, I examine the other side of the coin. I identify ways in which phonological merger is achieved and suggest how these might be modelled in terms of rules and representations. I take up the issue of falsely reported mergers and discuss some of the theoretical and methodological implications.
1 OUTLINE OF NORTHERN HIBERNO-ENGLISH PHONOLOGY

1.0 Most attempts at drawing the major dialect boundaries within HE have been based on differences in vocabulary, vowel quality, consonant phonetics, or the lexical distribution of phonemes (e.g. Henry 1958, Gregg 1972, Barry 1981a). However, from the point of view of historical reconstruction, a more satisfactory classification is one which is based on vowel-length differences. This allows us to discern more clearly the competing influences of English and Scots source dialects on HE. According to the typology adopted here, HE dialects can be characterised as 'more English' or 'more Scots'. Dialects that are English in type display phonemic vowel length, having one set of lexically short and one of lexically long phonemes. In typically Scots dialects, on the other hand, vowel duration is to a large extent phonetically conditioned. The manner in which the English language was transported across the Irish Sea has meant that the geography of the Scots-English divide in Britain has broadly speaking been reproduced in Ireland. Thus southern HE is essentially English in type, while the dialects spoken in the extreme north of the island are Scots in type. Between these two lies a range of transitional dialects with vowel-length characteristics that exhibit in varying proportions a compromise between the English and Scots systems. This chapter provides brief phonological descriptions of the three main dialect-groups in the north of Ireland that can be identified on the basis of the vowel-length typology: a north Ulster Scots type, a south Ulster English type, and a 'mixed' type spoken in mid Ulster.