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# Old Irish

Morphology – Part 1: Nominal Morphology



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# Roadmap

- General characteristics of morphology
- Nominal morphology
  - Noun inflection
  - Nominal word formation

## The big picture

- Old Irish is a fusional inflecting language
- Morpheme boundaries are blurred
- Inflection involves
  - Endings
  - Changes to the word-initial sounds
  - Changes to root vowels
  - Changes to the default stem

## πάντα ρεῖ

- *fuil* [fuːlʲ] vs. *m'fola* [molo]  
'blood' 'of my blood'
- *in báduð* [in baːduð] vs. *in báiteo* [in βaːtʲo]  
'the drowning' 'of the drowning'
- *foi* [fo.i] vs. *·roa* [ro.a]  
'you sleep' 'you have slept'

## The big picture

- No synchronic ablaut
- Verbs are polysynthetic
  - Employing prefixation, infixation, suffixation
- Nouns are synthetic with some analytic traits (prepositions, articles)
- Erosion of inflection among pronouns

## Noun inflection

- 5 cases (nominative, genitive, dative/prepositional, accusative, vocative)
- 3 numbers (singular, dual, plural)
- 3 genders (masculine, feminine, neuter)
- Inflection involves changes to
  - Root and stem vowels
  - Quality (palatalisation) of final consonants
  - Mutational effects

## Noun inflection: stem classes

- ‘Vocalic’ stems:
  - *o-*, *ā-*, *jo-*, *jā-*, *ī-*, *i-*, *u-* stems
- ‘Consonant’ stems:
  - *g-*, *k-*, *d-*, *t-*, *nt-*, *r-*, *s-*, *n-*, *men-* stems
- Some ‘irregular’ nouns
  - *ben* ‘woman’, *bó* ‘cow’, ...

feminine	masculine	neuter
–	o-, jo-, u-	
ā-, jā-, ī-	–	–
g-, k-, d, t-, r-, n		
–	–	men-, s-
i-, nt-		

## Noun inflection: stem classes

- ‘Vocalic’ stems:
  - Endings consist of vowels, e.g.  
*túath* (ā) ‘small kingdom’ → gen.sg. *túaithe*, nom.pl. *túatha*  
*muir* (i) ‘sea’ → gen.sg. *moro*, gen.pl. *muire*
  - Tendency towards vowel alternations in roots, e.g.  
*cenn* (o) ‘head’ → gen.sg. *cinn*, dat.sg. *ciunn*  
*tonn* (ā) ‘wave’ → dat.sg. *tuinn*  
*guth* (u) ‘voice’ → nom.pl. *gothae*



## Noun inflection: stem classes

- ‘Consonant’ stems:
  - Trace of eponymous consonant in oblique cases, e.g.  
*tengae* (t) ‘tongue’ → gen.sg. *tengad*, acc.pl. *tengtha*  
*ollam* (n) ‘highest poet’ → acc.sg. *ollamain*, dat.pl. *ollamnaib*
  - One uniform underlying pattern
  - Few root vowel alternations

## Noun inflection

	masc.	fem.	neut.
nom.sg.	∅	+ len.	+ nas.
gen.sg.	var.		
dat.sg.	+ len.		
acc.sg.	+ nas.		
voc.sg.	+ len.?		
nom.pl.	var.; tendency towards overt ending		
gen.pl.	+ nas.		
dat.pl.	ending <i>-(a)ib</i>		
acc.pl.	strong tendency towards vocalic ending		
voc.pl.	like acc.pl.		

# Adjectives

- 4 classes (o/ā-, iō/iā-, i-, u-adjectives)
- Reduced inflection (esp. in i- and u-adj.) compared to noun classes
- Substantivisation leads to transference into noun inflection
- Substantivised adjectives used as abstracts

## Gradation

- 3 suffixal degrees of comparison (positive: *sen* ‘old’, *ard* ‘high’):
  - Equative ‘as X as’ in *-ithir*: *sinithir*, *ardaithir* + acc. of standard of comparison
  - Comparative ‘X-er’ in *-(i)u*: *siniu*, *ardu* + dat. of standard of comparison
  - Superlative ‘X-est’ in *-em/-am*: *sinem*, *ardam*
  
- Prefixal degrees of comparison:
  - Excessive ‘too X’: *ro-X*
  - Elative ‘very’: *ad-X*, *ér-X*, *der-X*, *dí-X*, *imm-X*, *rug-X*, *ro-X*, *so-X*
  - Equative ‘as X as’: *com-X fri* + acc. of standard of comparison

## Stem formation

- 3 major productive strategies of word-formation:
  - Suffixation
  - Compounding
  - Prefixation (esp. important for verbs)

## Stem formation: suffixation

- Normal way of transferring a word from one class to another, e.g.
  - Verbal nouns from verbs: *gaibid* ‘takes’ (root *gab-* + 3sg. *-id*) → *gabál* ‘the act of taking (*gab-* + abstract suffix *-ál*)
  - Denominal verbs: *fírián* ‘just’ → *fíriánaigidir* ‘to justify’ (*fírián* + denominal suffix *-aig-* + 3sg. *-idir*)
  - Abstracts, e.g. from prepositions: *i* ‘in’ → *inne* ‘essence’ (*i<sup>N</sup>* + feminine abstract suffix *-e*)
  - ...

## Stem formation: compounding

- Under a single stress on initial syllable of first element
- First element in plain stem/default form
  - Can be noun, adjective, preposition, verbal stem
- Composition juncture normally lenited
- Normally right-headed ('hystero-centric') compounds

## Semantic types of compounds

- 1. Endocentric determinative compounds, e.g.
  - *béstindrem* ‘idiomatic usage’ ← *bés* ‘habit’ + *tindrem* ‘behaviour’, *etraide* ‘central part of the chariot’ ← *eter* ‘between’ + *suide* ‘seat’
- 2a. Exocentric possessive compounds, e.g.
  - *cambsrón* ‘crooked-nosed one’ ← *camb* ‘crooked’ + *srón* ‘nose’
- 2b. Reversed bahuvrihis (‘armstrong’-type), e.g.
  - PN *Barrfind* ← *barr* ‘top’ + *find* ‘fair, blond’, beside PN *Findbarr* ‘fair-haired’
- 3. Copulative compounds, e.g.
  - *casmongach* ‘curly and long-haired’ ← *cas* ‘curly’ + *mongach* ‘long-haired’, *corpanim* ‘body and soul’ ← *corp* ‘body’ + *ainim* ‘soul’.



## Annals of Ulster 858.4

**Máel Sechnaill** mac **Maíl Rúanaid** co feraib **Érenn** do thuidecht hi tíre **Muman** co·ndeisid .x. n-aithchi oc **Néim**, 7 a n-innred co muir fades iar madmair for a rríga oc **Carn Lugdach**, co·fárgbad ann lethrí na **nDeise**, **Máelchrón** mac **Muiredaig**. Tuc **Máel Sechnaill** iarum gíallu **Muman** ó **Bélat Gabráin** co **Insi Tarbnai** iar **nÉre**, 7 ó **Dún Chermnai** co **hÁrainn nAirthir**.

key:

phrasal names

compound names

simple names

normalised after  
Mac Airt & Mac  
Niocaill 1983

‘Máel Sechnaill (‘devotee of Secundinus’) son of Máel Rúanaid (‘devotee of Rúanad’) coming with the men of Ireland to the lands of Mumu (Munster), and he settled ten nights at Ném; and they were invaded to the south as far as the sea after the defeat of their kings at Carn Lugdach (‘mound of Lugaid’), and one of the two kings of the Deisi, Máelchrón (‘shorn and brown’?) son of Muiredach (‘lord’), was left there (dead). Then Máel Sechnaill took the hostages of Mumu from Bélat Gabráin (‘pass of the little goat’) to Inis Tarbnai (‘island of the bull’) west of Ireland, and from Dún Cermnai (‘fort of Cermnae’) to Áru Airthir (‘western Arann island’ = Inisheer).’

# Ad·tlochur indithim dúib!



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