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Old Irish

Phonology – Part 2: Spelling



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Roadmap

- Spelling
 - Consonant signs
 - Vowel signs
 - Marking of palatalisation

The 18 characters of Old Irish writing

A B C D E F G H I L M N O P R S T U

* H is only a diacritic; the letters
K, Q, X, Z occur only marginally

- Plus the diacritics ´ *'fada'* (for vowel length) and ` *'punctum delens'*
- Have to represent 57 phonemes and a dozen diphthongs of Old Irish
- The value of a letter depends on whether it occurs
 - Word-initially
 - Word-internally/finally
 - On the surrounding letters
 - On the phrasal context

Consonant signs: *p t c b d g m*

- Word-initially [p t k b d g m]
 - *port* [port] ‘place’
 - *tír* [tʲi:r] ‘land’
 - *coin* [konʲ] ‘dogs’
 - *bán* [ba:n] ‘white’
 - *dér* [dʲe:r] ‘tear’
 - *gol* [gol] ‘weeping’
 - *mór* [mo:r] ‘great, big’

Consonant signs: *p t c b d g m*

- Word-internally and -finally [b d g β ð γ β̃]
 - *ap* [ab] ‘abbot’ *topur* [tobur] ‘well’
 - *bot* [bod] ‘penis’ *fotae* [fode] ‘long’
 - *óc* [o:g] ‘young’ *ocus* [ogus] ‘and’
 - *dub* [duβ] ‘black’ *lebor* [lʲ:eβər] ‘book’
 - *fid* [fið] ‘wood’ *buide* [buðʲe] ‘yellow’
 - *mag* [maɣ] ‘plain’ *maige* [maɣʲe] ‘plains’
 - *lám* [l:a:β̃] ‘hand’ *domun* [doβ̃un] ‘world’

Consonant signs: *p t c b d g m*

- As well as in mutating contexts [b d g β ð γ β̃]
- *b d g m* in leniting contexts:
 - *in ben* [in β^hen] ‘the woman’
 - *a dán* [a ða:n] ‘his craft’
 - *di gail* [di γal^h] ‘from valour’
 - *mo maicc* [mo βak^h] ‘my sons’

Consonant signs: *p t c b d g m*

- As well as in mutating contexts [b d g β ð γ β̃]
- *p t c* in nasalising contexts:
 - *co pecthaib* [ko bʲekθəβʲ] ‘with sins’
 - *in teinid* [in dʲenʲəðʲ] ‘the fire (acc.)’
 - *ar catt* [ar gat] ‘our cat’

Consonant signs: *p t c b d g m*

- The rules are haphazard in consonant clusters, esp. after *r, l, n*, e.g.
 - *derc* = [dʲerg] ‘red’ and [dʲerk] ‘hole’
 - *altae* = [alte] ‘was reared’ and [alde] ‘they who rear’
 - *alma* = [alβa] ‘herds, flocks’ vs. *almi* = [almi] ‘we rear’

Consonant signs: *ph th ch*

- In all positions [f x θ]

- *a thecosc* [θʲegəsk] ‘his instruction’ *bith* [bʲiθ] ‘world’ *cathair* [kaθəɾʲ] ‘city’
- *ón chridiu* [çɾʲiðʲu] ‘from the heart’ *tech* [tʲex] ‘house’ *fiche* [fʲiçe] ‘20’
- *in phuirt* [fʲurʲtʲ] ‘of the place’ *oíph, oíf* [oʲf] ‘beauty’ *sephainn, sefainn* [sʲefənʲ:] ‘played (an instrument)’

Consonant signs: *p(p) t(t) c(c) m(m)*

- Word-internally and word-finally [p t k]

- *sopp, sop* [sop] ‘wisp’

- *bratt, brat* [brat] ‘cloak’

- *ícc, íc* [i:k] ‘payment, cure’

- *camm, cam* [kam] ‘crooked’

- *coppóc* [kopo:g] ‘dock-leaf (a plant)’

- *eitte, eite* [etʲe] ‘wing’

- *peccad, pecad* [pʲekəð] ‘sin’

- *cummae, cumae* [kume] ‘shape’

Consonant signs: *r / n*

- Word-internally and word-finally, simple spellings for lenited sounds and geminate spellings for unlenited sounds are distinguished

- *corr* [kor:] ‘heron’ vs. *cor* [kor] ‘putting’
- *toll* [tol:] ‘hole’ vs. *tol* [tol] ‘desire’
- *caillech* [kalj:əx] ‘nun’ vs. *cailech* [kaljəx] ‘cock’
- *benn* [bʲen:] ‘peak’ vs. *ben* [bʲen] ‘woman’

Consonant signs: *r / n*

- Word-initially *r / n* represent the lenited sounds in leniting contexts, but the unlenited sounds elsewhere; occasionally they can be spelled geminate as well
 - *a lebor* = [a lʲeβər] ‘his book’ and [a lʲ:eβər] ‘her/their book’
vs.
 - *a llebor* = [a lʲ:eβər] ‘her/their book’

Consonant signs: *nd mb*

- In Late Old Irish *nd mb* [nd mb] become [nː m], this leads to confusion

Old Irish

- *lann* [lːanː] ‘plate, blade’ >
- *land* [lːand] ‘piece of land’ >
- *im, imm* [im] ‘around’ >
- *imb* [im^jb^j] ‘butter’ >

Middle Irish

- land, lann* [lːanː]
- land, lann* [lːanː]
- im, imm, imb* [im]
- im, imm, imb* [im^j]

Consonant signs: dotting your *fs*, *ss*, *ns*

- From the 9th century, lenited *f* and *s* are indicated by a *punctum delens* above

Early Old Irish

- *a fuil* [a u^{l̪}] ‘his blood’ >
- *a fuil* [a fu^{l̪}] ‘her blood’ >
- *a fuil* [a βu^{l̪}] ‘their blood’ >
- *a sáethar* [a hajθær] ‘his labour’ >
- *a sáethar* [a sajθær] ‘her/their labour’ >

Late Old Irish

- a fúil*
- a fuil*
- a fuil*
- a sáethar*
- a sáethar*

Consonant signs: dotting your *fs*, *ss*, *ns*

- From the earliest sources, *ṅ* is sometimes used to indicate nasalisation, e.g.
 - *iṅgen* [iŋˠgʲən] ‘nail, hoof, claw’ vs. *ingen* [inˠgʲən] ‘girl, daughter’
 - *in mbith*, *in ṅmbith* [in mˠbʲiθ] ‘the world (acc.)’

Consonant signs: *(h)aitch*

- [h] is either
 - The lenition of *s*, in which case it is written *s* or *ś*, e.g.
mo súil, mo śúil [mo hu:lʲ] ‘my eye’
 - Or the effect of aspiration on a vowel, in which case it is not written at all, e.g.
a ech [a hex] ‘her horse’, *a ocht* [a hox̥t] ‘eight’, *a Érin* [a he:rʲənʲ:] ‘out of Ireland’

- When *h* is written before a word, it means nothing, e.g.
 - *hi* [i] ‘in’, *hÉriu* [e:rʲu] ‘Ireland’, *hires* [irʲəs] ‘belief’

Vowel signs: *a e i o u*

- In the stressed syllable and in absolute final position [a e i o u]
 - *dam* [daβ] ‘ox, stag’
 - *fer* [fʲer] ‘man’
 - *rind* [rʲind] ‘constellation’
 - *tol* [tol] ‘desire’
 - *dub* [duβ] ‘black’
 - *túatha* [tuaθa] ‘tribes, nations’
 - *céile* [kʲe:lʲe] ‘client’
 - *céili* [kʲe:lʲi] ‘clients’
 - *folo* [folo] ‘of blood’
 - *biru* [bʲiru] ‘I carry’

Vowel signs: *á é í ó ú*

- Vowels with the fada represent the long vowels [a: e: i: o: u:]
 - *dán* [da:n] ‘gift’ *lebrán* [lʲ:eβra:n] ‘little book’
 - *fér* [fʲe:r] ‘grass’ *cenélae* [kʲenʲe:le] ‘race, sort’
 - *fír* [fʲi:r] ‘truth’ *ainmín* [anʲmʲi:nʲ] ‘uneven’
 - *ór* [o:r] ‘gold’ *senóir* [sʲeno:rʲ] ‘senior person’
 - *dún* [du:n] ‘fort’ *impúd* [impu:ð] ‘act of turning’

Vowel signs: diphthongs

- The most important diphthongs are *áe*, *aí* [aj], *óe*, *oí* [oj], *éo*, *éu* [e:w], *ía* [ia], *úa* [ua]
 - *máel*, *maíl* [majl] ‘shorn, bald’
 - *clóen*, *cloín* [klojn] ‘crooked’
 - *céol*, *céul* [kʲe:w] ‘music’
 - *dían* [dʲian] ‘swift’
 - *cúan* [kuan] ‘haven’

Not to be confused with hiatuses or with monophthongs followed by a palatalization marker!

Vowel signs: marking palatalisation

- A consonant followed by a front vowel (*e, é, i, î*) is usually palatalised
- Silent *i* before a consonant and silent *e* before a word-final *o* or *a* also mark palatalisation
 - *beirid* [bʲerʲəðʲ] ‘carries’
 - *gobainn* [goβənʲ:] ‘smiths’
 - *doirseá* [dorʲsʲa] ‘doors’
 - *toimseo* [toβʲsʲio] ‘of a measure’

Vowel signs: marking palatalisation

- *a* after a consonant indicates non-palatalisation
 - *berait* [bʲerədʲ] ‘they carry’
 - *gobainn* [goβəni:] ‘smiths’
 - *carmai* [karmi] ‘we love’
 - *scélae* [sʲkʲe:le] ‘tale’

Vowel signs: marking palatalisation

No·meilinn léini mbithnuí; indíu táthum ... ná·melainn cid aithléini

[no·mʲelʲənʲ:]

[na:·mʲelənʲ:]

‘I used to wear an ever-new shirt; today I am in such a state that I wouldn’t even wear a worn-out shirt’

(G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics*, 1956, no. 2]

Vowel signs: schwa

- Schwa [ə] only occurs in closed, unstressed syllables
- Its spelling depends on the quality of the surrounding consonants
 - *CaC*, e.g. *molad* [moləð] ‘praise’
 - *C^jeC*, e.g. *claideb* [klað^jəβ]
 - *CaiC^j* and *CiC^j*, e.g. *canaid* or *canid* [kanəð^j] ‘sings’
 - *C^jiC^j*, e.g. *claidib* [klað^jəβ^j] ‘swords’
- Next to labials, schwa can be written *o* or *u*
 - *Conchobur* [konxəβər] (a name)

Ad·tlochur indithim dúib!



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