

An Introduction to Irish Orthography

by

Sandra Chung and James McCloskey

University of California

Santa Cruz

The way that Irish orthography relates to the pronunciation of Irish is not straightforward. This is in part because the orthography represents a fairly abstract level of Irish phonology, as will become clear below. Here we describe the basics of the orthography and how it connects to the phonology/phonetics of the Ulster (Donegal) dialect.

1. The Representation of Consonants

Irish consonants occur in pairs of palatalized (slender) vs. nonpalatalized (broad). The only exception to this generalization is /h/, which has no palatalized counterpart. In the orthography, both palatalized and nonpalatalized consonants are represented via the consonant symbols shown below:

	Bilabial	Dental	Velar	Glottal
Stops				
vceless	p	t	c	
vced	b	d	g	
Fricatives				
vceless	f/ph	s	ch	h/th/sh
vced			dh/gh*	
Nasals	m	n	ng	
Liquids		l		
		r		
Glides	bh/mh			

*In word-initial position only; see Section 7.

In the chart, symbols or groups of symbols separated by a slash are different spellings for the same sound.

The orthography does represent the palatalized vs. nonpalatalized distinction, but indirectly, via the quality of the adjacent vowel symbols. If the adjacent vowel symbols

are front (*e* or *i*), the consonant is palatalized; if the adjacent vowel symbols are back (*a*, *o*, or *u*), the consonant is nonpalatalized. The vowel symbols themselves may either (a) represent real vowels or (b) be diacritic—that is, serve purely to indicate the manner of articulation of the consonant. Thus, one of the complications of Irish orthography is figuring out which of a series of vowel symbols represents the vowel phoneme, and which are purely diacritic.

Some examples follow. Note that we use /ə/ for schwa, /V:/ for long vowels, and /C'/ for palatalized consonants:

<i>ceist</i>	/k'est'/	<i>e</i> is the real vowel; <i>i</i> is diacritic
<i>bain</i>	/ba:n'/	<i>a</i> is the real vowel; <i>i</i> is diacritic
<i>geata</i>	/g'atə/	the <i>a</i> 's are real vowels; <i>e</i> is diacritic
<i>síos</i>	/s'i:s/	<i>í</i> is the real vowel; <i>o</i> is diacritic
<i>croí</i>	/kri:/	<i>í</i> is the real vowel; <i>o</i> is diacritic
<i>suí</i>	/si:/	<i>í</i> is the real vowel; <i>u</i> is diacritic
<i>Gael</i>	/ge:l/	<i>e</i> is the real vowel; <i>a</i> is diacritic
<i>téad</i>	/t'e:d/	<i>é</i> is the real vowel; <i>a</i> is diacritic
<i>Caitríona</i>	/kət'r'i:nə/	<i>i</i> and <i>o</i> are diacritic
<i>buídeach</i>	/bi:d'ax/	<i>u</i> and <i>e</i> are diacritic

2. The Surface Realization Of Palatalized Vs. Nonpalatalized Consonants

Palatalized consonants are pronounced in the way one might expect, except that palatalized *s* is [ʃ] and palatalized *bh/mh* is /v'/. In general, palatalization is more audible before back vowels.

Nonpalatalized consonants also display secondary features of articulation. Nonpalatalized labials are labialized before a front vowel. Nonpalatalized dentals are velarized. And nonpalatalized velars are articulated very far back, especially when they precede a front vowel.

3. More On The Representation of Consonants

The orthography employs consonants as diacritics to represent two morphophonological alternations, called mutations, that affect word-initial consonants. The alternations are lenition (sometimes known as 'aspiration') and voicing/nasalization (called 'eclipsis').

In the orthography, a following diacritic *h* indicates that the consonant is lenited. See the consonant chart in Section 1 for examples. The way that voicing/nasalization is indicated is a bit stranger; the symbol for the voiced or nasal consonant (that is, for the output of eclipsis) is followed by the consonant symbol for the INPUT to eclipsis. We

have omitted examples of this sort from the chart above.

The following chart, adapted from Nancy Stenson's *Studies in Irish Syntax* (Ars Linguistica 8. Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1981, p. 19), summarizes the effects of the mutations and their orthographic representation.

Consonant	Lenited		Voiced/Nasalized	
	Orthography	Phonology	Orthography	Phonology
p	ph	/φ/	bp	/b/
b	bh	/w/	mb	/m/
t	th	/h/	dt	/d/
d	dh	/ɣ/	nd	/n/
d'	dh	/y/	nd	/n'/
k (orthog. c)	ch	/x/	gc	/g/
g	gh	/ɣ/	ng	/ŋ/
f	fh	—	bhf	/w/
s	sh	/h/		
m	mh	/w/		

In general, consonants paired for palatalization preserve their values for this feature, but otherwise lenite in the same way. The only exceptions to this are /d/ and /d'/, whose lenited forms are shown above.

4. The Surface Realization of Lenited Consonants

Though the list above gives the basic pronunciation of lenited consonants, there are a few curiosities worth noting.

Before the liquids *r* and *l*, the lenited forms *bh* and *mh* are realized as the voiced bilabial fricative /β/. Similarly, before *r* and *l*, *dh* and *gh* are realized as a voiced palatal fricative (which can be characterized impressionistically as 'heavy y').

dh and *gh* are phonetically realized only when word-initial; elsewhere they are not pronounced. See Section 7 for more details.

5. The Representation of Vowels

The vowel inventory contains five long vowels, the corresponding five short vowels, plus schwa (/ə/). There are also two diphthongs and a triphthong.

In the orthography, vowel length is marked by the acute accent. The chart below gives a rough summary of how vowels other than /ə/ are represented:

	Short		Long	
	Front	Back	Front	Back
High	i	u	í/ao	ú
Mid	e	o	é	ó*
Low		a		á

*Sometimes represented *eo* word-initially.

Here are the diphthongs and triphthong and their orthographic representations:

Orthography	Phonology
ia	/iə/
ua	/uə/
-uaidh/-uaigh	/uəi/

Some examples:

chuaigh /xuəi/ 'went'
thuaidh /huəi/ 'north'

6. The Surface Realization of Vowels

Stress placement and the pronunciation of vowels are two areas of the phonology where there is substantial dialect variation. In the Ulster dialect, primary stress falls on the initial syllable. Short vowels that do not bear primary stress are reduced to /ə/; long vowels that do not bear primary stress are shortened.

It should be noted that stressed short vowels are lax.

7. Unstressed Final Syllables

As the result of a series of historical changes that served to reduce unstressed final

syllables, there are special correspondences between orthography and pronunciation in this position. In the Ulster dialect:

Orthography	Phonology
-adh/-amh/-(a)bh	/u/
-(a)idh/-(a)igh	/i/

(The *a*'s in parentheses are diacritics indicating lack of palatalization.)

Some examples:

<i>creideamh</i>	/k'r'ed'u/	'belief'
<i>talamh</i>	/talu/	'ground'
<i>garbh</i>	/garu/	'rough'
<i>bualadh</i>	/buəlu/	'hit (verbal noun)'
<i>cogaidh</i>	/kogi/	'war (genitive)'
<i>imigh</i>	/im'i/	'leave'