Two types of vowel reduction in Gaeilge Chorca Dhuibhne

In this talk, I address vowel reduction in Gaeilge Chorca Dhuibhne (GCD), one of the southern dialects of Modern Irish, spoken in Co. Kerry, Ireland. It has been noted in previous literature that the phonological status of the unstressed schwa vowel in GCD, i.e. whether it's a segment present in the lexicon or a surface segment arising as a result of post-lexical reduction process, is not clear (see Iosad 2013), and I propose a possible answer to this question. The data come primarily from my own recordings of GCD speakers gathered in 2015–2016.

Reduction to schwa is applied to unstressed short vowels (long vowels are hardly ever reduced to it). The lexical stress in southern dialects, unlike initial stress in other varieties of Irish, is dependent upon syllable weight (see Ó Sé 1989, Hickey 2014 among others). By default, syllables with phonologically long vowels count as heavy (H) and syllables with short vowels count as light (L). The stress is attracted to the second syllable if it is H, to the third syllable if it is H and the preceding syllables are L, and on the first syllable in all other cases (Ó Sé 2008: 96, see also Ó Sé 2000 or Iosad 2013 for a finer description).

This rule of stress assignment is, however, not exceptionless, and one exception particularly relevant for the discussion in this paper is presented by words with the string /ax/ in the second syllable (and sometimes, probably, tautosyllabic /a.x/ with /a/ in the second syllable). Such words tend to demonstrate peninitial stress in the absence of H's, e.g. *bacach* [bəˈkax] 'beggar'. On the evidence of this pattern, a unique hierarchy of syllable weight has been proposed for southern dialects of Irish: CVV(C) > Cax > CV(C) (Gordon 2006: 27, based on the analysis from Doherty 1991). I try to show that rather than resulting from the properties of the consonant /x/ in combination with the vowel /a/ (this position is taken not only by Doherty 1991, but by various scholars including Blankenhorn 1981, Green 1996, and Bennett 2017), the aforementioned pattern is due to the presence of an underlying reduced vowel /ə/ in the first (extra-light) syllable, at least synchronically (this idea is previously mentioned in Ó Sé 2000: 38, 53 and Iosad 2013: 100, yet without much detail; see O'Rahilly 1932 for the history of /ax/).

It can be gleaned from the process of stress retraction that there exist two types of vowel reduction. Roughly, stress retraction is a process in GCD which replaces the stress towards the beginning of a given word in situations, where a clash with the stress in the following word could eventually arise (Ó Sé 2000). In word combinations leading to potential stress-clash, like *bacach óg* [bəˌkaˈxoːg] 'young beggar' (also in some non-initially stressed words without /ax/), retraction is blocked, whereas in examples like *buidéal mór* [ˌbɪdʲeːlˈmuːəɾ] 'big bottle' retraction succeeds and

restores the quality of the vowel in the first syllable, cf. *buidéal* [bəˈdʲeːl] ‘bottle’ in the citation form. Thus, one (“phonological”) type of reduction applies on the word level and the other (“phonetic”) follows a phrase-level process of stress retraction, cf. a similar situation in Modern Standard Russian (Iosad 2012).

Another piece of evidence comes from the acoustic analysis of GCD vowels coming primarily from the data of four GCD speakers collected in 2016. Vowels resulting from the two types of reduction are overtly distinct, /ə/ surfacing with formants characteristic of a mid vowel, quite unlike “phonetically” reduced vowels, which demonstrate a more diverse distribution.

Finally, whether this situation, when both a word-level reduced vowel and phrase-level reduction coexist in one variety, can be regarded as a case of rule scattering (Bermúdez-Otero 2010) will also be discussed.

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