

Proceedings of the Thurneysen Fanclub: issue 10

Records of the discussions in the conference room on 09-02-2017

In attendance: David Stifter (chair), Deborah Hayden, Chantal Kobel, Siobhán Barrett, Anne Harrington, Bernhard Bauer (scroller)¹, Lars Nooij (scribe)

Practicalities

After a long break over the Christmas period, the meetings of the reading group now resume. David informs us that the Departmental budget will most likely be able to cover for cookies throughout the semester.

There are fewer participants at today's meeting. Elliott is abroad and Fangzhe is tired.² Gearóid is occupied with administrative tasks for his classes. In general, Romanas will not be joining us in person during this semester, although we will try to set up a computer link, so that he can listen in on the proceedings. Lára will not be able to attend regularly, and Elizabeth is on her sabbatical. On the other hand, Brian Ó Catháin will join us, starting next week, and Michelle Doran has also expressed an interest.

David also uses the opportunity to make some announcements about further activities. Next week on Wednesday 15 February at 4 pm, he will give a (very basic) talk about numerals in Old Irish at Maynooth University's Maths Department. All are welcome, but "if you don't come, I won't be insulted".

Next week on Thursday 16 February at 5 pm, Elva Johnston will kick off the spring season of research seminars offered by the department of Early Irish with a talk on "A Forgotten Frontier? Situating Late Antique Ireland". All are welcome to attend.

At the beginning of April (possibly on the 4th) Elliott will organize another Workshop on Computational Linguistics as part of the ChronHib research project. And in the autumn (possibly in October) Elliott will organize a larger colloquium on syntax.

Finally, David apologizes for the significant delay in sending out the proceedings. They will, as per usual, be uploaded on academia.edu in the near future. In the long run we hope to place these proceedings on a new ChronHib webpage, which is currently under construction. Ideally, this would also allow for readers to add comments. In a similar vein, it would unfortunately seem that academia.edu deletes discussions / comments after a certain amount of time.

¹ During these meetings we tend to project the German *Handbuch* (available on archive.org) on a screen, so that we can check the GOI-version with the original German. Bernhard volunteered to sit close to the computer and scroll along. It was further suggested that he might be given the title "mouse-attendant", which apparently is a genuine term used in laboratoria. Anne Harrington – who used to work in a lab – commented: "If I ever get to mouse-heaven, I'm done for."

² David wishes to congratulate Fangzhe on the very interesting discussion on translating poetry from one language to another in general and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's Modern Irish poems into Chinese in particular that took place at Ireland Literature Exchange yesterday evening.

Matters arising

Brian Ó Catháin sent an email in response to our recent list of other grammars of Early Irish (proceedings #8), noting that *Stair na Gaeilge* should also be included. There was an awkward moment among all present because nobody could explain why this obvious reference had not been made at the time. In any case, there was no design behind the lack of mentioning *Stair na Gaeilge*. Its relevant chapters must, of course, be added to the list. As a side note, Liam Breatnach's chapter on Middle Irish has been translated into Italian by Elisa Roma.

Elliott pointed out a long review (of about 28 pages) of the *Handbuch* by Pedersen (*Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen* 1912; <https://archive.org/stream/GoettingischeGelehrteAnzeigen1912#page/n45/mode/2up>). Curiously, in the last paragraph of this review Pedersen concludes that the *Handbuch* both demonstrates Thurneysen's high qualities as a scholar and offers useful guidelines for students of Old Irish. However, in the preceding 28 pages Pedersen is consistently negative about the work. He notes that it contains many inaccuracies and even misunderstandings. The focus throughout is on the sections on phonology and orthography, which he compared to their counterparts in his own grammar, which appeared at about the same time as the *Handbuch*. In general, he considers his own work to be either similar, or better and thus to be preferred over Thurneysen's grammar. He is also distinctly negative about the etymologies offered in the *Handbuch*. In all, he seems to centre his criticisms on those sections of the language for which his own grammar provided a more extensive description, leaving the areas where the *Handbuch* was more elaborate.

Pedersen's review does include fair criticism of the section on orthography, which we are reading at present and which Thurneysen presented in a rather confusing and unhelpful manner. The review also provides for an interesting read from a modern perspective. On many matters, it goes to show how far our understanding of the language has improved over the past century (e.g. on the matter of palatalization), whereas it is also curious to note that there is a brief discussion on what today would be called the particle theory (where Thurneysen supports some kind of particle and Pedersen argues strongly against it), which is highly reminiscent of more recent debates.

More orthographical exceptions (§24)

As noted for the previous paragraph of the GOI, this paragraph seems rather out of place at the start of the chapter on orthography. Rather than discussing any of the basic values and concepts of Old Irish orthography, Thurneysen seems intent on discussing the exceptions to the norm. His general principle appears to be to compare and contrast Old Irish orthographical practices with those of Latin, assuming Classical Latin norms as a basic starting point which need not be further elaborated upon. This is hardly a clear, organized approach. Moreover, assuming a strong grasp of Latin amongst those who study the Old Irish language is, perhaps, overly optimistic in this day and age.³

As such, we would rather open this part of the grammar with sections on the sounds of Old Irish and the graphical letters used to write Old Irish, before moving on to the actual spelling, or orthography proper, of the language. And all this should be aided by a consistent, phonological transcription of the sounds involved in the discussions. Comparisons with (Late) Latin may still, at times, be useful additions for their bearing on the orthographical practices of the medieval world in general and Irish scribes in particular, given the predominance of Latin writing throughout the Old Irish period.

³ The scribe arguing the role of the optimist in this discussion, whose optimism was immediately quenched by the realism of everybody else present.

“1. The ligature *æ* can be used as in late Latin to represent *e*, including short *e*...”; this is probably true, but one would need to check the actual usage – in the example of *æclis* ‘church’ there may be a Latin influence (*ecclesia* was often written *æclesia*). In some manuscripts it is also frequently used to represent word-final *-ae* (or, by the Middle Irish period, any word-final *-ə*). Indeed, the ligature is found most often after non-palatal consonants, a fact left unmentioned by Thurneysen.⁴

“...most scribes clearly distinguish it [*æ*] from *ae*...”; this is quite a jump from the previous topic, touching on the more general orthographical representation of diphthongs. However, the point thus addressed is extremely specific and one may wonder whether it should be mentioned in a work of this kind.

“2. *c* and *g* before *e* and *i* are never assibilated as in English and the Romance languages...”; this is a matter of phonology, not orthography. If it is retained (as a student’s aid for those whose native language is English, or Romance), it should be moved to the discussion of the pronunciation of Old Irish.

“3. *n*, as in Latin, can represent, not merely the dental, but also – before *g* – the guttural nasal (*ŋ*). Even here, however, it has a dental value when the group *ng* has arisen through loss of an intervening vowel...”; this is essentially true, but presented in a rather unhelpful fashion. We would, for example, rather say ‘syncope’ than “loss of an intervening vowel”. Moreover, the issue it deals with is extremely specific, as the potential for confusion appears to be limited to the spelling *ingen*, which may represent both *ingen* /iŋ’ən/ ‘nail’ and *ingen* /in’γ’ən/ ‘daughter’. The footnote discusses even more minute matter. We may again wonder whether this warrants inclusion in a revised grammar.

“4. *u* is vocalic, never consonantal (*w* or *v*).”, which is followed by the footnote: “In a few archaic sources *u* represents a *w* which subsequently disappeared, e.g. **Conual**, later **Conall**...”. The footnote, which was absent in the *Handbuch*, contradicts the main statement. As such, it should be rephrased. Given the Latinate focus of this, it could probably be relegated to a footnote concerned solely with the *Conual*-matter.

“5. *x* represents the group *chs*...”; this is true, but quite rare. We do not consider it necessary to list quite as many examples in a work of this type. “... *ks* is represented by *cs*... *x* [for /ks/] first appears in Middle Irish manuscripts”; this, on the other hand, could certainly do with examples, illustrating the point.

The letter *h* (§25)

It is unclear why exactly the letter *h* got a paragraph all to itself, unlike the preceding items. Perhaps it is due to the relative size and significance of the topic? At any rate, such a discussion fits in well with a proposed section on the actual letters of Old Irish.

“*h* (except in the combinations *ch*, *th*, *ph*...) has been taken over from Latin as a mute letter only. It has no phonetic value...”; this has, to some extent, been disputed. Peter Schrijver proposed that *h* may sometimes represent a surviving reflex of Proto-Indo-European **p* (> **φ* > *h*). For example, the word *ires* ‘faith’ (< **peri-sth₂ah₂*) is often found written *hires* in the Würzburg glosses. Peadar Ó Muircheartaigh, however, contended that this use of *h* is not phonological, but purely orthographical, arguing that scribes aimed for graphic parallelism with Greek and Latin, to show off their scholarly ability (in this case: Greek *hieros* ‘holy’ being thus linked with (*h*)*ires*, cf. the frequent spelling *Hierosalem* for Jerusalem).

⁴ This does render his examples *foirggae* and *óencheillae* all the more interesting.

In the Old British languages, which similarly derive their orthography from the Late Antique and Early Medieval, British pronunciation of Latin, silent *h* is also quite common (e.g. *hac* for Middle Welsh *a(c)* and Breton *ha(g)* ‘and’, in which the *h* is never pronounced).

“...[it] is arbitrarily prefixed to words beginning with a vowel...”; this is too strong a statement. There are patterns to the practice – some words are regularly written with *h*- and others are not. Moreover, as stated in the preceding, motivations have been proposed. Curiously, in the *Handbuch* Thurneysen stated that these *h*’s were added *als Schmuck* ‘as decoration’.

“...particularly to words which would otherwise be very short, such as those consisting of a single vowel...”; this is true. It would be interesting to look at the statistics of this, at some point.

“It is often prefixed to words beginning with *ui ua*, probably to prevent the Latin pronunciation *vi va...*”; whether the reason offered is correct or not, this is certainly the case. According to David all words starting in *u*- generally are relatively often prefixed with this *h*-, except after *-d* and *-n* (i.e. after the article), but words starting in *ui*- and *ua*- may be prefixed even under these circumstances. However, David notes that, for some reason or other, *uisce* ‘water’ is almost never written *huisce* in the Milan glosses. The present scribe would like to add that in the Stowe Missal *huisque* is the common spelling for *uisce*.

“...also to words which resemble Latin words with *h*-...”; depending on one’s views, the examples offered may either incline one towards Schrijver’s or Ó Muirheartaigh’s theory.

“There are only isolated cases of its use as a mark of hiatus in the interior of words...”; indeed, this is rare and – as Thurneysen notes – most often found in foreign names (e.g. *Israhel*). In native words it is extremely rare. It would be interesting to examine the statistics of this, at some point.

“Though the letter *h* was merely graphic, Old Irish had also a spoken *h*..., for which, however, there was no symbol; the use of Latin *h* to represent it dates from the Mid. Ir. period...”; it would be good to cite examples from Middle Irish sources and contrasting them with OIr. counterexamples.

“In archaic **menmnihi** gl. *animositates*... *h* stands for spirant *ch*.”; is this the only example of this? If so, might it be a spelling mistake and an example of Hiberno-Latin orthographical interference (e.g. in the Latin *Vita Columbae* one often finds *michi* for Classical Latin *mihi*).

Marking of vowel length (§26)

“Length in vowels is often, though by no means consistently, marked by placing over the syllable an acute accent, which probably derives from the Roman apex”; again, the shift of topic is very abrupt. Moreover, it was not actually clearly stated before that OIr. even had a distinction between long and short vowels – this is not particularly user-friendly.

It is certainly true that the use of accents to mark vowel length was not consistently employed in manuscripts from the OIr. period (it is found much more consistent in the Middle Irish period, before decreasing again in the later period). The practice seems to have been largely parallel to that found in

Latin texts from the same region and period, in which long vowels (especially in case endings) are inconsistently marked with accents.⁵

David mentions a more distant parallel with the Emperor Claudius, who showed a particular concern for the proper use of language (he himself was a relatively eager language-learner, having learned Etruscan). For example, he decreed that long vowels be marked by an apex on inscriptions (the practice unfortunately discontinued after his death, but is attested on inscriptions dating to his reign). He also devised a new letter to represent the (purely allomorphic?) nasalized u found for example in the actual pronunciation of *templum* /templũ/. This letter also fell into rapid disuse.

⁵ Similarly, in texts in both OIr. and Latin from this period accents are also sometimes used for – apparently – purely orthographical purposes (e.g. to distinguish the one minim character *i*). In Latin texts glossed in both Latin and the vernacular (whether Irish, or British) copious use of accents is also employed to mark glosses as being in the vernacular (as our venerable scribe has himself investigated in his award-winning Utrecht MA thesis).