

Proceedings of the Thurneysen Fanclub: issue 28

Records of the discussions in the ChronHib Bar on 17-01-2018

In attendance: David Stifter (chair), Fangzhe Qiu, Bernhard Bauer, Daniel Watson, Romanas Bulatovas, Lars Nooij (scribe)

Apologies: Theodorus Fransen, Nicole Volmering, Elliott Lash

Practicalities

This is the first meeting of what David has taken to calling the “Maynooth Society for the Appreciation of Cookies” in the year of our Lord 2018.

We congratulate Elliott *in absentia* on his wedding. There follows a detailed argument about the ambiguities in Elliott’s email to David confirming his wedded status, in which people seek to ascertain whether he attended á wedding, or indeed his own wedding and to whom he is now married. At any rate, we wish him a happy honeymoon at the Minor Glosses, which are said to be lovely this time of year.

We also congratulate Romanas on having successfully moved back to Ireland.

This slot on Wednesdays from 10 to 12 is not final. Next week things are still flexible, but after that teaching starts again and we shall have to decide on a new day and time (presumably not on Monday).

The Austro-Italian community of Carton Court, Maynooth¹ has generously donated sweets for the benefit of the fanclub. We thank Bernhard kindly for his generosity.

Glides after stressed vowels (§84)

The following paragraphs are filled with rather controversial matters to which we do not always believe to have a definite answer.

For those reading along in the German, the *Handbuch* is now at §80.

The title (“Glides after Stressed Vowels”) is okay, although the exact nature of a ‘glide’ is not straightforward and this is something we shall have to deal with soon.

“In Irish the pronunciation and phonetic quality of every consonant were affected by the flanking, and more particularly by the following vowels.” What period is Thurneysen referring to? The statement is not true for Old Irish, in which consonants had an independent quality of their own. The stage at which consonants were affected by flanking (indeed, chiefly following, but e.g. for palatalization also preceding) vowels is prehistoric and must have been relatively limited. This paragraph, and also the following, unfortunately mixes phonetics with phonemics, orthography with phonology, and synchronic Old Irish with diachronic Irish, without being explicit about it. Additionally, our understanding of the matter is fundamentally different from that of Thurneysen, as we shall shortly address more fully, which will make matters yet more complicated.

A better opening line would be something like: “In Old Irish phonology, consonants can have different qualities (which are, however, not consistently reflected in the orthography).”

“Certain elements in the articulation of neighbouring vowels were carried over into that of the adjoining consonants... which often retained them even after the infecting vowel had itself disappeared.” It is noted that the quality of consonants was allophonic before syncope and that afterwards, when it became

¹ Bernhard: “Don’t give the full address!”

phonemic, the vowels that affected the consonants were essentially gone. It is also mentioned that ‘inflecting’ is a rather odd choice of word. We would rather say ‘affecting’, since we are dealing with tiers of phonetic qualities on which these sounds interact.

“But this variation in the quality of consonants is not directly expressed in writing...” He must mean that consonant quality is not expressed on the consonant itself, i.e. by using a different grapheme for a palatal vs. a non-palatal consonant. This raises the question whether such quality distinctions are ever expressed on the consonants. In most languages with such distinctions that we know (as in Irish), the script is ultimately derived from a language that did not have such a distinction (e.g. Latin), making it relatively unlikely for such a graphic distinction to arise in writing. Moreover, such quality distinctions in consonants tend to arise from allophony, which may cause speakers to think of one underlying arch-phoneme and perhaps also an arch-grapheme. However, if such a language were to develop a script of its own, would they not encode such phonemic distinctions in writing (cf. the Georgian script, which has a grapheme for each phoneme in the language, although it does not have palatal vs. non-palatal distinctions)?

“...in the older language it can only be inferred from the influence which, in its turn, it exerts on the neighbouring vowels.” Thurneysen must mean the way the schwa is expressed and how it is written; as such, he is mixing orthography with phonology.

“This variation in the quality of consonants is of particular importance for the history of the language, as it often enables us to reconstruct the vocalism of lost terminations and syllables.” This is true, but it is irrelevant for the purposes of a synchronic grammar.

The German is identical in this paragraph.

Consonant qualities (§85)

Whereas Thurneysen operated with a three-tier system of consonant quality for Old Irish, we only distinguish two qualities, which correspond to his first two qualities:

1. palatalized
2. non-palatalized (or neutral)

Thurneysen’s third tier, *u*-quality, may also be called ‘velarized’.

We prefer the two-tiered system because it is simpler and because three-tier systems of Thurneysen’s type are typologically very rare in the world’s languages. Most scholars today operate with the two-tier system, the exception being McCone, who in 2011 reintroduced *u*-quality, having adhered to the two-tier system before then. McCone’s article is rather hard to read, as it is very complicated (as we discussed in previous meetings), but contains many interesting points.

On the whole, however, it is hard to say definitely which explanation is correct. Not operating with *u*-quality forces you to have a more elaborate short vowel-system in closed, unstressed syllables, in which there must then have been an opposition between *schwa* and *u*. The latter was probably not some kind of rounded *schwa*. Rounded schwa did also exist, but it was distinct from *u*, often written *o*, and it was an allophonic reflex of *schwa* in labial environments. Operating with *u*-quality, on the other hand, allows one to plainly state that unstressed vowels are always *schwa*.

It may also seem arbitrary to say that all unstressed, non-final short vowels merged as *schwa*, except for *u*, but there do seem to be similar things going in other languages, e.g. in Catalan, where there is a three-way opposition between *schwa*, *i* and *u*, or in Russian, where matters are somewhat similar, albeit more complicated.

On the other hand, using a three-tier system forces one to recognize almost 100 phonemes for Old Irish, which is extremely high for any language. Typologically, languages with a three-tier system of consonant qualities tend to have a very limited vowel system (which may indeed be limited to having just *one* vowel). One could, however, argue that since Old Irish was clearly in the process of reducing its vowel system, this may actually have been in response to pressure from its immense consonant system.

David recalls that McCone's arguments for a three-tier system rest primarily on words like *fogur* 'sound' < **uogarom*. This had no *u* anywhere in its pre-forms, excluding the possibility of *u*-infection (the most common source for *u* in unstressed syllables in the two-tier system), but it is consistently attested with <*u*> in the Milan glosses (and other early corpora). Such forms can be explained by assigning *u*-quality to the surrounding consonants.

However, David prefers explaining it by means of a rather different, phonetic effect of the bordering consonants. According to this reasoning, the 'rounding' effect on vowels, by velars and especially lenited velars (in the case of *fogur*, this is the -*g*-) has something to do with the latter's phonetic features. Another example of this is the word *muirfécht* 'maritime expedition' (with -*fécht* < **uiktā*), which occurs twice in the Annals of Ulster as *muiriucht*. Again, the preform excludes the possibility of *u*-infection, but the attested *u* is found next to a lenited velar, the <*ch*>. It is asked whether *fliuch* also reflects this, but this is not the case since it goes back to **ulik^(u)*- and the *u* is therefore expected.

It should be noted that this *u* that arises under the influence of a bordering (lenited) velar is distinct from the purely allophonic, rounded *schwa* which is for example attested in the final syllable of the name *Conchobor* / *Conchobar* and is found spelled variously as *o* and *a* in the sources.² Unlike the rounded *schwa*, this *u* is consistently written with a *u*.

All in all, we prefer the two-tier system as it is simpler, not so typologically rare, and the exceptions can generally (but not always) be explained by means of natural, phonetic effects.

***i*-glides in closed syllables (§86 – a)**

"Where a stressed syllable ends in a palatal consonant or group of consonants, *i* is inserted as a glide after vowels or diphthongs other than *ī*, *oí*, *óe*, *aí*, *áe*." It is crucial to note that Thurneysen is here talking about closed syllables, although he does not explicitly state this in the introductory sentence. He again combines phonetics, phonology and orthography in this paragraph. We must be much clearer about all this.

"It must have been quite audible, since it is rarely omitted in writing." He is clearly discussing phonetics in this sentence. Thurneysen must have considered the glide vowel to have been an actually pronounced vowel in its own right. However, the fact that it is often omitted in writing seems to weaken his argument.

"It was not a full vowel, however, for it did not combine with a preceding short vowel to form a diphthong, and the syllable remained short." Essentially, this is correct, but it does not explain what the glide vowel actually is. Moreover, what does Thurneysen mean by a 'short syllable'? Unlike for Latin, Greek and Norse, where this is known through the metrics, it is unknown whether a closed syllable with a short vowel was felt to be long or short from an Irish perspective.

"It is clear from the above (as well as from § 160) that a single consonant on the border between two syllables belong to the **second**. But only the **last** of a group of consonants in a similar position belonged to the second syllable." Thurneysen therefore proposes the following scheme of syllabification:

CV.CV.CV
CVC.CVC.CV
CVCC.CV

² David: "*o* is definitely rounded as one can see from the way <*o*> is written."

The first sequence is trivial, since this is natural in language. However, the second is less obvious. For example, in Latin *libri* is divided as *li.bri* and in Greek things are similar, albeit with exceptions. As such, one cannot simply assume that Old Irish would have syllabified such clusters one way or the other. It is not straightforward to determine what happened in Old Irish, although studies of metathesis, the simplification of consonant clusters in the later language and such matters might shed some light on it. At any rate, for Thurneysen this is an important point, for he proposes that one should not have a glide vowel in open syllables, whereas closed syllables should have one. As such, if one assumes that consonant clusters always result in closed syllables one would expect consistency in the insertion of glide vowels there.

Turning to Thurneysen's examples, we would in general use a different way to transcribe the phonetics, e.g. writing /maθⁱ/ rather than *mathⁱ*. We would also indicate the quality of every palatal consonant in the examples, rather than noting only those that are relevant to the discussion at hand as Thurneysen does here, e.g. in *deich*, we would write /dⁱeɣⁱ/ rather than *dechⁱ*, or /d^orⁱsⁱəβⁱ/ rather than *dorⁱsⁱiβ*. Strictly speaking, the quality of initial consonants was allophonic in Old Irish, as the triggering vowels were still present, but it seems best to note this quality in the transcription nonetheless, to avoid giving the impression that the initial consonants were always non-palatalised. Thurneysen's style is especially unhelpful for the reference user, who is quickly looking up a specific form or feature. It is also noteworthy that Thurneysen, although he clearly regarded the glide as a real vowel, doesn't write something like *maⁱthⁱ*.

“**clainde** ‘of children’ for *clanⁱdⁱe*,” It would also be good to indicate the syllable boundaries in the transcription. Moreover, in the case of this specific example, it must be noted that the later assimilation of *-nd-* to *-nn-* might actually indicate that the entire cluster *nd* was part of the same syllable for a speaker of Old Irish.

The shift of pronunciation to the glide vowels in Modern Irish (e.g. in the words *fear* ‘man’ and *bean* ‘woman’) shows that the glide vowels were at some point realized as full vowels. However, it is not clear when this first happened. Should we *a priori* assume that this was already the case in Old Irish, unless we have a good reason to consider it a specifically later feature of the language? On the other hand, we would have to be able to explain how glide vowels may have arisen as fully pronounced vowels if this was not already the case from the start.

“Where the glide is not inserted its omission may usually be attributed to the influence of other forms of the same word, an influence which was perhaps purely graphic;” This is a very weak explanation, since it is unfalsifiable. Thurneysen also seems to be hedging his bets when he adds the ‘perhaps’. It is all very vague. Truth be told, it would require a very detailed statistical analysis of all the relevant forms in the glosses to resolve this matter.

“e.g. **ro·cretset** ‘they have believed’, beside **ro·creitset**, after 3 sg. **ro·creti**, where *t* (= *dⁱ*) belongs to the following syllable;” i.e. glideless forms with an open syllable would have analogically influenced forms with closed syllables where there should have been a glide, according to Thurneysen.

“dat. sg. **leth** (for **leith**) ‘side’ [ML.] 128^a1, **dia æs** (for **éis**) ‘after him’ 57^d3, 72^b17, etc.” David notes that his standard explanation of examples like these is that in the early stages of Old Irish, *e* in monosyllabic words could also indicate that the following consonant was palatalised.

In general, we wonder to what extent there ever was a sense of an underlying, fully consistent regularity, although there may well have been a growing convergence towards certain orthographical practices. Ideally, each contemporary source should be studied separately as reflecting the orthographical practices of a particular scribe. Indeed, in a broad study of the orthography of Old Irish the smaller glossed corpora and the short texts attested in manuscripts from the Old Irish period should be included and considered on the same level as the big three (Würzburg, Milan and Sankt Gallen), each in its own right. The validity of any (orthographical) standard derived from just three sources, no matter their present

prominence, must be considered uncertain at best, given that their prominence in this case is likely merely due to the vagaries of history and chance survival.

It should be noted that Thurneysen's unhelpful mixing of phonology and orthography is especially problematic in this instance. The phonology should be more or less regular for Old Irish as a whole, barring the passage of time and the possibility of dialects, but the orthography may be very irregular between various sources. The two domains need to be separated as far as possible.

***i*-glides in open syllables (§86 – b)**

“Where a stressed syllable ends in a vowel and the next begins with a palatal consonant, *i* is sometimes inserted, sometimes omitted.” i.e. in open syllables. We need solid figures to establish whether there was indeed a different treatment of open and closed syllables in this respect. In this, we should also reckon with the possibility that orthographic practices changed over time. Romanas states that the *Additamenta* to the Book of Armagh do indeed have a distribution that corresponds to Thurneysen's claims.

“In a few instances *e* occurs instead of *i*, e.g. **buachaele** ‘of cowherds’ ... **huaere** ‘because’ ...” This *e* for *i* may be less marginal than Thurneysen makes it out as we can recall a good number of similar cases from the Annals and the Stowe Missal. Jürgen Uhlich has treated this matter in several of his talks, especially those dealing with the Cambrai Homily. These spellings may reflect a late 8th-century ‘fashion’.

David also notes that there is a form written <aís tuæthe> for what should really be *as·toidea* ‘shine’ in Ml. 131d15. In those final pages of the Milan manuscript, there are also some other odd forms (relative to the rest of Milan), which may perhaps reflect either a change of scribe, or the use of a different source. In this particular case, it is noted that the attested form looks rather a lot like ‘village people’ and this raises the possibility that the scribe did not understand the verb and messed things up rather badly. At any rate, it goes to show that even very strong deviations and exceptions definitely occur and we should perhaps not expect the sources to adhere too closely to any underlying orthographical standard.

“The view that already in the O.Ir. period *i* is not a glide, but merely serves (as in the later language) to indicate the palatal quality of the following (or preceding) consonant seems tenable only in regard to (b); here the spellings **guided**, **flaithem**, might be due to the influence of conjunct **·guid**, **·flaith** ‘lordship’, and so on. In (a) on the other hand the existence of an audible sound is suggested by the remarkable consistency with which *i* is inserted...” Thurneysen is now discussing phonetics. Moreover, how do we actually know that we are definitely not dealing with short diphthongs of some kind, which would then be comparable to the (unstable) diphthongs resulting from *u*-infection? That is to say, how do we know that we are not dealing with some sort of *i*-infection (credits go to Romanas for coming up with this suggestion) with a similar shift of peak within the diphthong in the later language whenever the diphthong was preserved (i.e. a shift from *aⁱ* <ai> > *i* to parallel that of *a^u* <au> > *u*)?

In many cases where you would expect an *i*-glide there would have been an **i* in the next syllable in the preform, making such an *i*-infection directly comparable to the circumstances that led to *u*-infection. Moreover, in those cases where the preform had **e*, we should note that both **e* and **i* which were lost through apocope and syncope are thought to have turned into a strongly palatalizing **ĩ* before they were lost.

This also ties in with the question whether the Irish actually felt the need to write the glides, given that – as we discussed in the preceding – many languages with a palatalised versus a non-palatalised set of consonants did not distinguish them using glide vowels. Nothing of this sort is ever found in Russian where the opposition of palatalised vs. non-palatalised consonants is almost perfect. Did the Irish write them because they actually represent infected *i*'s in many cases? The main parallel for using such glides that David can think of at the moment is in Avestan spelling, which has what is essentially a phonetic script (whereas Vedic has a phonemic script). In the case of Avestan this ties in with the need to very accurately maintain the exact pronunciation of religious texts in what was by then a dead language, which may have led to an over-emphatic pronunciation of these palatal consonants – i.e. they may

actually have pronounced the glides as actual vowels in order to be able to clearly distinguish them from their non-palatal counterparts even though these were foreign sounds to the later, non-native speakers who devised the script. Does this imply that the Irish glides were also actually pronounced as vowels?

The arguments in favour of the phonetic reality of the glides as some sort of vowels may be summed up as follows:

- 1) the glides are written down as vowels
- 2) the later Irish realization of the glides as actual vowels
- 3) the parallel offered by *u*-infection
- 4) Modern Irish dialects tend to have diphthong-like sounds in syllables with slender off-sets

If one accepts this and explains it by means of some kind of *i*-infection, this would also tie in nicely with Thurneysen's claim that glide vowels should primarily occur in closed syllables, given that syncope does not yield open syllables (according to Thurneysen's views on syllabification in Old Irish); and if there is no syncope chances are that much smaller that the conditions for *i*-infection would be fulfilled.

It is suggested that there may also be a link between raising and palatalization in that both are a form of *i*-colouring, i.e. they represent different outcomes of a similar, long process? But this is perhaps untenable.³

It is noted that in Modern Munster Irish the word *glas* has the forms: *glais* /glasⁱ/ and comparative *glaise* /glisⁱə/. Does this imply that the openness of the syllable was also crucial for the shift to the glide?

“...and still more by the fact that a word like **immalle**, notwithstanding the palatalized *ll*, is written without *i* (as contrasted with **aill** neut. ‘other’, etc.); in the unstressed pretonic interior syllable full development of the glide could not take place.” Indeed, the spelling <immaille> is strikingly rare. In fact, this has much wider implications for compound verbs, and one wonders why Thurneysen did not mention it (or did not see it). Why do we never, for example, find **dai-bert* ‘he gave it’? It is clear from these examples that the stress boundary played a part in limiting where one could add glides. [LARS: does this not tie in with the allophonic nature of the palatal/non-palatal quality of initial consonants in Old Irish? i.e. if this quality was still entirely dependent on the nature of the stressed vowel, why bother indicating this by means of a glide – it would be superfluous?] [DS: Indeed.]

One could envisage a scenario whereby the spelling of palatalization by means of an *i*-glide spread from closed syllables – where it originally represented a phonetic *i*-glide (as part of some kind of diphthong) – to open syllables where such a vowel was never present in order to indicate the palatal quality of the following consonant. In such a scenario, the *i*-glide would then have represent a real, phonetically realized vowel in some contexts, whilst being purely orthographic in others.

The validity of these hypotheses is far from certain. The fact that glides are written as glide vowels (1), whereas this is rare in other languages, may be due to chance in the context of developing a script. It may also tie in with the sheer importance of the consonant quality distinction in Irish morphology and may have spread from there. As to the later Irish realization of the glides as vowels (2) and the fact that the Modern Irish dialects often have diphthong-like sounds in palatal syllables (4), this may also be explained as resulting from a secondary, strong influence from the consonants, colouring the vowels in the later language. The neat parallel with *u*-infection (3) in itself does not constitute proof one way or the other.

At any rate, we have come up in this session with an interesting hypothesis – *i*-infection – that requires testing in order to establish its own validity and its validity for explaining Modern Irish pronunciation.

³ DS: I admit that even I lost the plot at this stage.

For this, one would have to first establish whether the spelling practices of (preferably all the contemporaneous sources of) Old Irish support an original distinction between forms in which *i*-infection should have yielded an *i*-glide and forms where this is not the case. Secondly, one should trace *i*-infected forms from Old Irish through to Modern Irish to see whether they help explain the dialectal realizations. This seems to be quite a large undertaking. [DS: Given that *ChronHib* will hire a statistician in the course of this year renders this idea less aspirational and more realistic.]

At any rate, it should be noted that these matters are as yet unresolved, although it may be too much to include the entire discussion in a new grammar.

Pages read in this session: 2.