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Proceedings of the Thurneysen Fanclub: issue 38

Records of the discussions in the Conference Room on 30-04-2018

In attendance: David Stifter (chair), Fangzhe Qiu, Bernhard Bauer, Daniel Watson, Siobhán Barrett, Theodorus Fransen, Romanas Bulatovas, Sanne Jongeleen, Lars Nooij (scribe)

Apologies: Elliott Lash

Practicalities
David has had only very little time to prepare for this session of the fanclub.

Last proceedings
Elliott sent us a rather long reply to last week's proceedings, which David needs to read more thoroughly before commenting upon it. Chantal Kobel sent David some comments, which he has adopted.

Lenition (§118)
The title of this chapter seems fine.

The reference to Pedersen is probably unnecessary at this stage; moreover, most people will probably not be able to read the Danish easily.

"Lenition (formerly called aspiration) is the term used to describe a mutation of consonants which normally originated in a reduction of the energy employed in their articulation." We can drop the fact that it was once called 'aspiration', given that that term has gone out of use entirely. 'Lenition' is now the fully accepted term, except amongst speakers of Modern Irish, who call it *séimhiú*, which we avoid.

Otherwise this first sentence is essentially correct, but decidedly imprecise. It is also unclear what 'normally' means in this context. David would rather say that for lenition 'the occlusion typical of a consonant is reduced and there is no full closure, but rather some air flowing' when the consonant is pronounced. This description works well for stops, but does not cover *s* > *h*, nor the lenition of *l*, *r* and *n*. We should therefore allow for various groups of lenition, namely that of stops, liquids and *s* respectively. We must distinguish two different meanings of 'lenition': 1) the diachronic, prehistorical sound-change and 2) the synchronic, morpho-syntactic grammatical feature of the attested language. Essentially, David's proposed definition works best to describe 1) the sound-change, whereas other features were incorporated into 2) the morpho-syntactic, mutational feature of the language.

"It affected not only medial, but also such initial consonants as were closely associated with the preceding word…" Again, the phrase 'closely associated' is rather vague. It should also be noted that no matter the starting points of the development, matters like these were certainly open to grammatical reanalysis over time.

"It is earlier than the loss of vowels in final and interior syllables…, for it presupposes the continued existence of these vowels." It would probably be better to say that these vowels were 'still present'. The German more or less has the same with its *"noch bestehend"*, where David would prefer *noch vorhanden*.

"A further proof of its antiquity is that parallel mutations are found in the Britannic dialects." We would now say languages, rather than dialects. As to the argument itself, yes, the British languages do have lenition, but the phonetic realization is different. The parallels between the British and the Gaelic languages are nonetheless strong, given that it has become a morpho-syntactic feature of those languages (whereas other languages which had similar starting points did not develop it). Gaulish and Celt-Iberian had word-internal lenition, like the Insular Celtic languages, but David considers there to be no solid evidence for initial mutations in Continental Celtic.[1] This means that word-internal lenition was probably a feature of Proto-Celtic, but that the word-initial lenition of voiceless stops cannot be said to be firmly established with the same time-depth.

Phonetic context of lenition (§119)
Given that this paragraph deals with purely historical, diachronic matters, we skip it.

Lenition of *l, r, n* (§120)
The same is true for the main text of this paragraph, but the small-print deals with matters of synchronic spelling variation, starting from the second small-print segment on page 75.

"Examples of sounds which were lenited before the development of syncope but afterwards delenited are…" This essentially comes down to homorganic delenition. The example *mad aill dúib* 'if it were pleasing to you' shows that is also happens across word-boundaries.

What about the negative evidence, however? In the vast majority of the cases the sounds are, of course, not spelled double. Should this be taken into consideration? Not necessarily, given that this need not be at all meaningful. In general, when these sounds are written with a single sign, it does not signify whether it is lenited or unlenited. Therefore, the cases where only a single consonant is found are not very significant; it is only when these sounds are spelled double that one can say that the scribe deliberately spelled out that they were unlenited, or delenited.

In terms of the ordering of the grammar, a relatively marginal discussion like this should really be preceded by a paragraph on delenition, where the concept is properly established.

Going through the examples: *digallre, airnne* and *comairlle* should not be delenited according to David's system. Are these just spelling inconsistencies, or do they have some deeper significance? As to *ma no-s·comalnnamar*, should *-ll-* rather than *-nn-* have been written here? One wonders whether there was an orthographic variation that allowed one to sometimes choose to write one of the consonants in a cluster double. This needs to be addressed in a chapter on orthographic variation.

"It is probable, though not absolutely certain, that original geminates were, as in the modern language, lenited after consonants, for they are never written double…" Can we say this with any certainty? In Modern Irish only Donegal has a distinction between *L* and *l* in initial position. How about medially? In other words, does the Modern Irish language offer us much in establishing the original phonetic

[1] Peter Schrijver is more optimistic about this, arguing on the basis of some forms in difficult-to-interpret Gaulish inscriptions such as Châteaubleau (L-93), but David remains sceptical about the issue: the loss of final consonants is not necessarily evidence for syntactic lenition.

realisation of this feature? And is this just a matter of orthography, or indeed, as Thurneysen believed, phonologically significant? In general, there was quite some orthographic licence in the early language – but perhaps this particular feature was a strong, orthographic convention?

It does actually seem a bit odd, given the immense orthographic variation found in the early language, that there are apparently *no* examples of original geminates being written double after consonants. Such orthographic consistency is markedly unusual. Assuming that this means that this is phonetically significant, might this be part of the homorganisation of consonant clusters, e.g. a spread of the lenited feature of the first consonant to the second consonant?[2]

"cp. also long *e* in **im·timc[h]élfam** 24[a]7, 1 pl. fut. of **im·timchella** 'surrounds'…" What does Thurneysen mean by this statement? We do not follow his reasoning here at all. Do any of our readers understand what he means?

"Occasionally unlenited consonants seem to have spread to other positions…" Are these real features of the language, or scribal errors? In Thurneysen's first example a case could be made for minim confusion. As to *línn* and *fínn* for *lín* and *fín*, the double spellings are extremely rare – are they truly significant, or can we ignore them as too sporadic?

Persistently unlenited consonants (§121)
This paragraph is purely diachronic, we skip it accordingly.

Lenition of stops (§122)
"By lenition the stops *c, t,* (and *p* in loanwords), *g, d,* and *b* are transformed into the spirants *ch, th, ph* (= *f*), *γ, δ, β,* the last three of which are written *g, d, b*…" This essentially is the synchronic rule.

"The phonetic values of *ch, ph* (= *f*), *γ* and *β* are still directly attested by modern pronunciation." This does of course assume that Modern Irish here reflects Old Irish, which need not be the case.

"Neutral *ch* represents the velar voiceless spirant (as in German *ach*), palatal *ch* the palatal voiceless spirant (as in German *ich*)." This should be in the section on orthography and phonology.

The *Handbuch* claims that a lenited *g* before a front vowel was pronounced as /i̯/, which is incorrect for Old Irish. This was rightly left out of *GOI*.

"*β* (Mod.Ir. *bh*) was doubtless bilabial *v* (neutral and palatal) in O.Ir., as it still is in some modern dialects, although in others non-palatal *bh* = English *w*." Not ideal in its formulation, as [v] is not a bilabial sound. Also, the 'doubtless' is certainly too strong: we just do not know the phonetic realisation of Old Irish sounds. It is hard to decide whether the Modern Irish pronunciation preserves the Old Irish form, or whether it has been internally changed, or altered under the influence of another language, such as English.

In terms of terminology, *β* is a bilabial fricative, *v* a labiodental and *w* a glide.

We assume that *b* was originally lenited to *β* simply by adding airflow to the stop. By the Modern Irish period this has come to be realised as *v* or *w*. We simply do not know what it sounded like in Old Irish.

"The modern pronunciation of *th* as simple *h* is well attested from the 12th century on. But two facts show that *th* was not so pronounced in the earlier period: it alternates frequently with *d* (= *δ*) in writing,

[2] A somewhat more outlandish proposition is also discussed: might there have been a distinction between voiced and voiceless consonants here? If one were to – rather radically, yet pleasingly to the scribe – propose that Old Irish had a voiceless fricative /ɬ/ as in Welsh, this would indeed be rather difficult to pronounce in a cluster like <chl> /χɬ/ clearly, which could trigger a reduction of some sorts.

and it is transliterated *þ* or *ð* in ON., *th* in O. and Mid.E. and Mid.W. sources. It was a voiceless interdental spirant like English hard *th*." The *Handbuch* offers very nice examples of Irish names in Old Norse sources, where *th* is indeed given as either *þ* or *ð* (the interchange between *þ* and *ð* is not significant for Old Irish, given that this reflects the language-internal distribution of these sounds in Old Norse itself). It is a pity that this examples were omitted from *GOI*.

David does not believe that *th* was a voiceless interdental spirant, but rather that it was a voiceless alveolar spirant. This hinges on whether *t* itself was an alveolar or a dental sound. David prefers to assume that both *t* and *th* were alveolar, given that it seems easier to get from an alveolar *th* to /h/ than from an interdental *th*. Then again, lenited *s* also became /h/ and more radical shifts have certainly been observed. Unfortunately for David, it is raised that in Modern Irish the alveolar pronunciation of *t* is new and arises under the influence of English, whereas most good speakers apparently still have a dental *t*. If this is indeed the case, it rather speaks against David's theory.

"*δ* (Mod. Ir. *dh*) eventually came to be pronounced as *γ*. The earliest examples of this are found (for palatalized *δ*) about the end of the eleventh century, and the fusion must have been complete by the thirteenth. The fact that the interchange of *g* and *d*, so frequent in later times, never occurs in O.Ir. indicates that they still represented different sounds. The representation of *δ* in other languages, e.g. *ð* in ON. sources, shows that it was a voiced spirant (Eng. soft *th*)." This is true enough, the merger of *δ* and *γ* happened after the Old Irish period. The *Handbuch* is vague on the dating of the merger, but again offers nice examples of Old Norse renditions of Irish names.

Old Norse had a prehistoric sound-change of **nr* > ðr (e.g. **manr* > *maðr* 'man', nom. sg.). This must explain how the Scottish form *Duncan* of the name *Donnchad* arose, namely as an Old Norse reinterpretation of *Dungaðr* (i.e. *Donnchad* with the nom. sg. m. ending *-r* after it) as reflecting an underlying root *Dungan-*.

David raises the question (to our non-speakers of German) whether *anlaut* is a good term? He is partial to it himself, but you could of course also replace it by means of an English descriptive term. Is the meaning of German words like this[3] apparent to English-speakers? The native English-speakers present at our meeting are not very enthused with these terms.

Lenition of stops (§123)
"The gen. sg. **saído** Thes. II. 296, 5, instead of **saítho**, may have been suggested by nom. **said** beside **saíth** 'trouble'." This is an *obscurum per obscurius* kind of explanation, as *-th* should not have become *-d* after a stressed syllable in *saíth*.

"**cuide** 123^{d}3 for **cuithe** 'puteus' is probably a faulty spelling… so too **ídi** Ml. 124^{c}8, dat sg. of vb.n. **ithe** 'eating' (where the mark of length is also erroneous)." Thurneysen fails to explain why these variations are errors, whereas the others have to be taken seriously. Still, he may well be right (Ml. in particular is certainly prone to errors) and we should probably mention examples such as these somewhere in the grammar to illustrate cases of orthographic variation which we cannot systematically explain.

"A few exceptions may be ascribed to analogy." This is actually McCone's law, a sound-change that happened c. 700 AD, which turned voiceless consonants on absolute word-boundaries, after or before an unstressed syllable into their voiced counterparts.[4] Afterwards, intraparadigmatic analogy ensued. This is logical, given that the sound-change gave rise to a great amount of allomorphy within the language. The spread happened both ways.

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[3] David raises his hands, one hand has all the fingers extended and the other has one finger extended: "There are at least five". People start noticing that his hands signal 'six', whereas he meant 'five'; laughter ensues. David: "The big five."
They are: *anlaut, inlaut, auslaut, umlaut* and *ablaut*.
[4] E.g. *#to·ˈic# > #do·ˈic#*.

"But forms like **cumachtgaib** Ml. 26[b]20, dat. pl. of **cumachtach** 'powerful', compar. **cumachtgu** 101[d]7 beside **cumachtchu** Sg. 39[b]3a, admit of no such explanation. It is doubtful whether *g* here represents voiced *γ* or merely a weaker articulation of *ch*." Possibly. There certainly seems to have been some kind of hypercorrection involved in these cases. If the distinction between *ch* and *g* was neutralised in these positions, a scribe would have been liable to confuse them.

"In Mid. Ir. *sch sg* everywhere becomes *sc*." David remarks that for all but speakers of Dutch the Old Irish *sch/sg*-clusters are hard to pronounce.[5]

Lenition of stops (§124)
"In other positions the original form of lenited stops has undergone various modifications." This essentially boils down to a process whereby distinctions were chiefly neutralised, but then restored in places. David looks into the complex matter of the distribution between *f* and *β* in his legendary apple-article (which is approaching being finished) and the upshot is that there does indeed seem to be a neutralisation of distinctions.[6]

It looks like *-f-* can stand for *-v-* word-internally after other consonants? And there seems to be a loss of the distinction between voiced and voiceless consonants in unstressed positions? And this then seems to often be counteracted by scribal standards and knowledge of the correct spelling?

Next meeting
At any rate, we end our meeting. The next meeting will be in two weeks' time on Monday May 14th. In order to avoid a clash in David's schedule, the meeting will take place earlier than usual, namely from 10.00 to 12.00 o'clock.

Pages read in this session: 4,5.
Paragraphs discussed: §§118–124.

[5] Much like a year ago, the meeting closest to the Dutch festival of *Koningsdag* ('King's Day'), is well-attended by the Dutch. In this case, there are three Dutch people sitting besides one another, facing David. And indeed, as might be expected, a veritable cascade of Dutch words like *schrijver, schrapen, school* reverberate across the room. Some discussion on the North-South distinction in the pronunciation of *ch / g* in Dutch follows – a matter which is very clear to the Dutch-speakers, but which is highly obscure to the outsiders. All this nicely illustrates the complexities involved in determining the exact phonetic reality of an historic language, such as Old Irish.
[6] He cites the word *confad* 'rabies', which seems to be a compound of *con* and *bath*, i.e. 'dog-death'.