Proceedings of the Thurneysen Fanclub: issue 30

Records of the discussions in the Conference Room on 30-01-2018

In attendance: David Stifter (chair), Fangzhe Qiu, Elliott Lash, Theodorus Fransen, Romanas Bulatovas, Lars Nooij (scribe)

Apologies: Nicole Volmering, Siobhán Barrett, Bernhard Bauer

Practicalities
The session opens with a relatively long discursion on the preterites of *beirid*, S1-verbs and, to some extent, strong verbs in general after Dorus raised a question concerning the lowering of 3sg. ·*bert*.

David apologizes for not having finished and sent out last week's proceedings just yet. Lars adds that this can hardly be considered to be David's fault, as Lars only sent the minutes over late last night.[1]

The discussion then turns to the time slot for these sessions in the new semester. The Wednesday option (13.00–15.00) does not suit Dorus very well and is impossible for Romanas. The present Tuesday slot (12.00–14.00) is rather impractical for David, as he will always have to rush off towards the end of it. We will now consider whether a Monday slot (12.00–14.00) would be possible. David will send out another email about this. [DS: The Monday slot was eventually adopted.]

Cormac Anderson's comments and various other discussions concerning the consonant qualities and the vowel system of Old Irish
Elliott throws in the remark that he wants to get to reading Thurneysen at last. David warns that we might not be able to do so at all today. And indeed, it turns out that we will spend the remainder of the meeting discussing the issues raised in Anderson's comments and in a 2015 article by Krzysztof Jaskuła,[2] which Elliott sent round and whose thesis Anderson also made reference to ('A pragmatic approach to Old Irish consonant qualities', *JCeltL* 15). But first of all, David thanks Cormac Anderson for taking the time to comment so extensively on our proceedings. The comments are very useful indeed.

We first turn to Jaskuła's article. Jaskuła rejects both the three-consonant-quality system and the *u*-infected diphthongs, appearing to argue that neither of them are necessary to explain the Old Irish material. However, we are not fully convinced by the arguments he sets out in his article. For example,

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[1] At that time David was fixing his kitchen sink. Successfully too.
[2] Dr. Jaskuła, a hero, but hopefully never martyr, in the research of ancient languages: http://pracownik.kul.pl/krzysztof.jaskula.

Jaskuła, given his rejection of the *u*-infected diphthongs, seems to argue that the *u* in the dat. sg. of *fer* 'man' (*fiur*) is a purely graphic dative marker. Admittedly, this might be true for Middle Irish, but we would think that graphemes usually derive from things that were once actually pronounced. Moreover, if it were used as a purely graphic dative marker, why is it not at all regularly employed, being used in some words and not in others (e.g. in *fír*)? In general, we find that we tend to be able to come up with counterarguments and counterexamples to his proposals. It is suggested that Jaskuła's approach is strongly theory-driven, which is fair enough, but that it does not take quite *all* the data into account. More particularly, it seems to lack the diachronic approach the material. Perhaps this is there in in thesis, but not in the article we are discussing.

Romanas adds that the theories of Jaskuła and Anderson are related to that of Gussmann who operated with three vowels for Old Irish (*a, u* – corresponding to our *i* and *u* – and *ə* – which more or less includes our *e* and *o*). Such heavily reduced vowel systems are often proposed as fitting descriptions of Modern Irish. In the mentioned theories this system appears to be back-projected onto Old Irish, to see whether this may already be true for that stage of the language. The arguments are usually accompanied by various typological arguments. However, it is far from certain that Old Irish had such a reduced vowel system and it certainly was *not* the case for the pre-Old Irish stages.

A problem we have with having three series of consonant qualities is that whereas a two-series consonant quality system can be quite easily diachronically developed out of pre-Old Irish, we appear not to be able to produce a three-series system with non-contradictory rules. That is to say, there simply does not seem to be a way to make the three-series system work diachronically. The arguments in favour of a three-series system of consonant qualities seem to always start from synchronic descriptions, setting up the consonant qualities of individual words as is. They do not seem to take the (reconstructed) origins of these words into account.[3] [DS: Or in other words: On the basis of the PIE and PC consonant systems, I can predict with great confidence which consonants will be palatalised in OIr. I do not see any clear rules that allow me to predict which consonants of OIr. will have *u*-quality.]

In later Irish the vowels do indeed become progressively more dependent for their quality on the surrounding consonants, but we do not believe this to have already been the case to any significant extent in Old Irish. Especially in initial, stressed and final positions, vowels must have had an independent quality of their own.

The main advantage of operating with three series is that it allows one to say that a word like *fer* has one underlying vowel, which does not alternate – the various cases then being reflected by changes to the quality of the final consonant, e.g. like so:

nom. sg.	*fer*	/$f^i ɯ r^a$/
gen. sg.	*fir*	/$f^i ɯ r^i$/
acc. sg.	*fer*	/$f^i ɯ r^a$/
dat. sg.	*fiur*	/$f^i ɯ r^u$/

In a sense, this is simpler than our complex patterns of vowel alternation. It may be compared to Mashallese,[4] a language which has a three-way consonant quality system.

However, it does not seem to work as neatly for many other examples. For example, it seems to run into trouble in the verbal system:

1sg.	*biur*	/$b^i ɯ r^u$/
2sg.	*bir*	/$b^i ɯ r^i$/
3sg.	*beir*	/$b^i ɯ r^{???}$/

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[3] There is a short break. Elliott takes a cookie, saying: "More of this." David: "No, that's mine!"

[4] The scribe omitted to record that, unfamiliar with that Micronesian language, he was first inclined to write *Martialese*, as if it came from another planet.

How does one explain the 3sg. *beir* only with changes in the consonant qualities, rather than in the vowel? Does one not need to have a different vowel here, e.g. /b^{i}ar^i/? And if so, where's the advantage relative to our system in which there are only two series of consonants, but the vowels alternate?

In our system, there is – diachronically speaking – also one underlying vowel, being altered by three rules: *u*-infection, raising and lowering. It is noted that economy on the phonological level makes the morphology more complex; essentially, there is always a price to pay somewhere in the system.

We wonder why one would *a priori* assume that there was such a reduced vowel system in Old Irish. This would require one to assume that there occurred a very radical, wholesale reduction of the vowel system relative to what is known for the immediately preceding, pre-Old Irish stage of the language. As such, this reduction must have taken place in a rather short amount of time, very shortly before the Old Irish period. That seems less likely to us than a scenario in which the reduced Modern Irish system is the result of a long history of reducing the vowel distinctions over time, which may be traced as a process throughout the attested history of the language.

We turn more directly to Anderson's comments:

We agree that the *i*-glide, if it was phonetic, was not contrastive.

We do not fully understand what he means with his comment on the allophonic status (in our view) of the palatal/non-palatal contrast for consonants immediately before the stress. To our understanding, this contrast is not allophonic in Anderson's system and his comment must be tied in with that. Perhaps we should ask him for a further comment on this matter? At any rate, diachronically it seems quite natural that whereas the palatal/non-palatal distinction became phonemic everywhere else, it was still allophonic in initial syllables. The distinction between the two consonant qualities only became phonemic elsewhere when the conditioning vowels were lost due to apocope and syncope, but in stressed syllables the conditioning vowels were simply never lost, allowing this to remain allophonic.

On <imaille>, we should look at Anderson's statistics. This looks interesting.

Regarding the contrast between Russian and Irish, we again have some difficulty in understanding what Anderson means exactly. Did he mean that the Russian alphabet's (synchronic) use of special signs (ъ and ь, originally vowel signs) to indicate palatal / non-palatal status is less ambiguous than the Irish use of a glide vowel (which in other positions represents a real vowel)? At any rate, the main point Romanas was making during the meeting two weeks ago was concerned with differences in the phonetic, rather than the graphic realisation of palatalisation in the two languages (which then in turn may have influenced the way they were represented in writing). Romanas argued that Russian never had a phonetic glide vowel and expresses the palatalisation phonetically solely on the consonant, whereas the consonant quality also affects the vowels in some ways in Irish.

On the use of the words 'infection' and 'affection'. We fully agree that it is important to distinguish these matters very clearly. However, we would prefer to use words other than these two, since they have both already been in extensive use for a long time for decidedly different purposes in Celtic linguistics.

On the relative simplicity of a two- vs. a three-way series of consonant qualities: our main issue with the three-way series is that we do not think it works diachronically, as stated before.

On not using the word 'tier', but using 'series' instead. That's a fair point.

On needing 100 phonemes when one has a three-series system. Yes, you are correct, the 100 was too high. We should have been more exact.

On McCone 2011 vs. McCone 2015. This is actually the same thing, but we should have said 2015, referring to the year the article was published. David tends to refer to the year (2011) McCone presented the paper at the Celtic Congress.

We should have mentioned Anderson's work on the three-series system before. We'll include that now. We were not aware of Heinrich Hock's work on these matters. That's interesting, we should look into that.

As the meeting ends, Elliott suggests that the scribe should add the paragraph numbers of the paragraph's read [DS: or discussed] at the end of the proceedings, for ease of reference. The scribe agrees and David also agrees to make note of this in the abstract of the proceedings on academia.

Pages read in this sessions: 0.
Paragraphs discussed: §§84–88 (the same as in *Proceedings* 28).