

THE COLOURING OF CONSONANTS IN OLD IRISH

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For the last sixty years, it has been generally accepted that Old Irish (700–900 AD) had three phonemically relevant consonant colourings: velar, arising from a following *u*-sound, neutral, arising from a following *a*- or *o*- sound, and palatal, arising from a following *e*- or *i*-sound. It will be clear that this colourings first become phonemic when the vowel causing them dropped and it is unlikely that consonant colouring was relevant in anlaut in our period. A simple example can be taken from the declension of *fer* “man”, where the Primitive Irish forms N. **q̄iros*, G. **q̄iri*, D. **q̄irū* have been transformed into N. *fer*, G. *fir*, D. *fiur*, which are usually interpreted as /f^{er}/, /f^{ir}/, /f^{ir}^u/, where f^{er} indicates palatal, f^u velar quality, and neutral is left unmarked. It should be remarked that the alternation of *e/i* is an older change, which I will call metaphony, and does not affect the present problem. And I am in some doubt as to whether I should record the colouring of the initial consonant, which is always conditioned by the following vowel.

This is the generally accepted view, which gives a total of 23×3 , or 69, consonantal phonemes for OIr.; the only scholar to question it in print has been Sommerfelt, who suggested that velar quality was not phonemic and that the relevant quality belonged to the vowel preceding the allegedly velarized consonant – what we may call velar umlaut. I think Sommerfelt’s view is right, for the following reasons:

1. A triple series of colourings is very rare in any language; the normal situation, as in modern Irish and in modern Russian, is that, where palatalization is phonemically relevant, velarization is a phonetic component of non-palatalized, or “neutral” colouring. This maximalization of opposition is illustrated by the native terms *caol* “slender” and *leathan* “broad” in Irish and *мягкий* “soft” and *твердый* “hard” in Russian, for palatalized and velarized respectively.

2. While the semantic load of palatalization is enormous, that of the alleged velarization is very light; morphologically, it would have served to distinguish only the dative case of *o*-stems (*fiur*) and the first person singular of certain verbs (*for-cain* “he teaches”: *for-caun* “I teach”). It was not useful enough semantically to give rise to an entirely independent consonant series and its supposed disappearance does not, in the later language, add significantly to the number of homophones.

3. OIr orthography used *e/i* (palatalization) and *a* (non-palatalization) consistently to show that a consonant had a colouring not conditioned by the following vowel:

thus *aithrea* is to be interpreted as /aθ^{er}a/ and *delbae* as /d^{el}ve/. But we never find *u* used in this way. Spellings such as *manchuib*, which occurs also as *manchib*, *manchaib*, no doubt indicate a phonetic velarization which is found in words of similar structure in modern Irish, but there could be no historic basis for “*u*-quality” of the /nx/ cluster, which derives from Primitive Irish **manakabis*. On the other hand, in a word like *caurad* we find a supposed *u*-quality consonant followed by *a*; the Primitive Irish here would be **karutas*.

4. On the evidence of later Irish, velarization and neutral colouring are one and the same; the degree of velarization is conditioned phonetically. This colouring is opposed to palatalization, and the latter is the marked member of the opposition; in unstressed position, for example, there is a strong tendency towards depalatalization. Thus, from the noun *tochim*, with palatalized [x^h] and [m^h] is derived the unstressed preposition *dochum*; if we were to assume that *u* always indicates “*u*-quality”, we would have to say that these two consonants were now not merely neutral, but phonologically velarized. They are, of course, velarized (as the modern Irish pronunciations suggest) but phonologically they are to be considered simply as non-palatalized. Similarly, the spelling of the *o*-stem *topur* “well” does not indicate that either the [b] or the [r] had *u*-quality, but merely that the short unstressed vowel between a labial and a resonant was of a rounded type, just as it is in modern Irish.

I propose the following statements:

A. That OIr had two phonologically relevant consonant colourings, *Non-palatalized*, often realised by velarization, and *Palatalized*.

B. That in stressed syllables the short diphthong phonemes *au*, *eu*, *iu*, *ou* existed at the beginning of the OIr period, and *eu*, *iu* at the end.

C. That in unstressed syllables in OIr there were two phonemically relevant short vowels, one unrounded and written *a*, *e*, *i*, the other rounded and written *o*, *u*, *iu*.

I have dealt already with the arguments for A. In the case of B the parallelism between the short and long diphthongs is striking: *au* and *ou* are simplified to single vowel sounds during the OIr period (*for-cun* beside *for-caun*), just as are *áu* and *óu*, while in later Irish *eu*, *iu* normally become [jo], [ju], just as *éu*, *íu* become [jo:], [ju:]. We even have one or two examples of the long and short diphthongs alternating: thus OIr *indiu* “to-day” sometimes has the diphthong lengthened as in *indú*, and the modern dialects preserve both pronunciations. It should be said, however, that the old short diphthong *iu* tends to fall together with short *i* followed by a non-palatalized consonant, so that in stressed syllables of the type C’...C, [u] and [i] are now in complementary distribution. Thus, the English word “pint” was borrowed into Connemara Irish as [p^hiNtə], but into Kerry Irish as [p^hu:nt], genitive [p^hi:n^ht^h] (where the lengthening is secondary).

It is in the case of unstressed syllables that the orthodox doctrine is most unsatisfactory. There are numerous examples of rhymes such as *gur* (*gour*): *eissimul*, which would be on Thurneysen’s analysis [g^uur^u]: [es^hám^uə^hl^h] or *doss*: *immorbus*, [d^uos^u]: [im^uər^uv^uəs^u]. Thurneysen’s somewhat despairing suggestion of yet a fourth colour-

ing ("o-quality") does nothing to save the situation. There is a simple explanation: in unstressed syllables a rounded vowel could arise either (i) phonetically, as in *eissimul*, *domun*, *mebol* or (ii) phonemically, by velar umlaut, as in *immorbus*, which is a *u*-stem. This vowel could rhyme with an *o* or with a *u* but never with an *a*; the consonants are to be interpreted as velarized, but only in the sense in which this word indicates a phonetic variety of non-palatalized. The existence of this rounded vowel as a separate entity is shown by the following two words:

Primitive Irish	*s _u esūr "sister"	*tri _u irū "three men" (Dsg.)
Old Irish	siūr	triūr
Modern Irish	siúr	triúr

The unstressed *u* of the first word is a shortened form of the original long vowel, while the unstressed *u* of the second arises from velar umlaut. With the reduction of hiatus in Irish both words developed the diphthong *iu*, later reduced to [ju:], so that we have modern Irish *siúr*, *triúr*, while in Scottish Gaelic the first word is still disyllabic and the *u* has penetrated into the first syllable: Barra [piu-ər].

It will be seen, therefore, that, by interpreting these words as examples of velar umlaut giving rise to diphthongs, the later history can be explained in terms of the general simplification of diphthongs which is characteristic of late Old Irish and early Middle Irish, and of the levelling of short vowels in unstressed syllables. This appears preferable to assuming a third consonant colouring; as a matter of economy, it removes 23 consonantal phonemes at the expense of 5 vocalic phonemes. The re-statement of the Old Irish phonological system in terms of short diphthongs has arisen entirely from an examination of the Irish evidence and is not intended as a contribution to the controversy on the status of the short diphthongs of Old English. If the view set forth in this paper is accepted, however, it will not be possible to hold that orthographical devices for indicating velarized consonants in Old English derive directly from the orthographical system of Old Irish.

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