Language terms and categories

The development of linguistic tradition in Irish

1 Introduction

The question of linguistic terminology in Irish is one which might not at first sight give rise to undue interest. The basic terminology for morphology established definitively for the western world by Priscian at around 500 AD was largely adopted by Irish writers. Indeed many references to the debt which writers on linguistic matters owed to Priscian’s *Institutiones grammaticae* and to a lesser extent to Donatus’ *Ars grammatica* and to Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae* are to be found in Old and Middle Irish texts (Law 1982). This influence set in after the introduction of Christianity in the first half of the fifth century and with it a knowledge of Latin. Already in the ninth century one finds manuscripts of Priscian and Donatus with glosses and commentaries in Irish.1

The Irish oral-poetical tradition was always concerned with matters of language usage, particularly as the question of correctness was gaining increasing importance with the drifting apart of spoken and written forms of the language. This situation led in the Early Modern Irish period to a number of linguistic tracts directed at the profession of the bards (see 1.2 below).

1.1 The poet’s primer

The first treatise in Irish on questions of language is the *Auraicept na n-Éces*, literally ‘the poet’s primer’ (Calder 1917, Ahlqvist 1983) which is a very uneven work, containing many unfounded speculations on the origin of Irish and of alphabets alongside fairly sensible comments on the structure of Irish. It was composed in sections, the earliest of which reach back to the seventh century (although the manuscripts date from the 14th century and afterwards) and in which many of the terms later found in the language were introduced. The text itself is quite short, less than 200 lines, but the manuscript contains much extraneous comment, resulting in a size of some 1600 lines for the entire work. It is not known who the original author was, although there is no lack of speculations, such as that of O’Donovan (1845: 55) who sees the work as having been composed by one Forchern who is supposed to have flourished in Ulster in the first century AD. However, such dating and assumptions on authorship can be dismissed without too many counter-arguments being necessary.

More recent authors such as Ó Cuív (1965: 158) see the *Auraicept na n-Éces* as arising under the influence of Isidore of Seville’s (c 560-636) *Etymologiae* (something also noted by Thurneysen 1928: 303) and ventures that the latter accounts for the liking for etymologies and explanations which one finds in many of the later glossed manuscripts. The *Auraicept na n-Éces* is the nearest thing to the Icelandic *First Grammatical Treatise* which Ireland has produced, though on a very much lower
1.2 The bardic tracts

The Irish Bardic Tracts is a collective term (McKenna 1979 [1944]) given to a series of treatises which were intended to instruct professional writers in the grammar of Irish. They belong to the period from 1200 - 1600 (Classical Modern Irish, Ó Cuív 1965:141) during which a uniform type of language was used in professional praise-poetry for Irish local rulers. It goes without saying that this written register was far removed from spoken speech and one of the chief purposes of the bardic tracts was to instruct potential writers in a form of the language which for them would have been quite archaic. Most of the material in the tracts stems from the 16th and 17th centuries (Adams 1970: 158) but some of it survives in manuscripts which were written in the 18th and 19th centuries. The earliest of the tracts may, in the opinion of Ó Cuív and Bergin go back to 1500 or possibly earlier.

In terms of linguistic analysis the bardic tracts are far superior to the Auraicept na n-Éces. They contain terms which are both derived from Latin and devised to deal with the special features of Irish, for instance the well-known three parts of speech: focal ‘noun’, pearsa ‘verb’ (later replaced by the indigenous term briathar) and iairmbéarla, literally ‘hindspeech’ a term used to refer to unstressed proclitics (Adams 1970: 158).

1.3 Early grammars of Irish

In 1571² there appeared the Alphabeticum et Ratio legendi Hibernicum, et Catechismus in eadem Lingua by John Kearney. At the beginning of the 17th century Giolla Brighde Ó hEodhasa [O’Hussey] (c 1575-1614), a Franciscan monk working in Louvain,³ produced a grammar entitled Rudimenta Grammaticae Hibernae (de Clercq and Swiggers 1992:87-91). Later in the 17th century, in 1677, the Grammatica Latino-Hibernica, nunc compendiata by Francis O’Molloy appeared and somewhat earlier, in 1643, Micheál Ó Cléirigh⁴ had produced an elementary Irish dictionary again in Louvain.

At the beginning of the 18th century one finds The Elements of the Irish Language, grammatically explained in English, in fourteen chapters by Hugh McCurtin which was printed in Louvain in 1728. By the same author there exists an English-Irish Dictionary (Paris, 1732). In keeping with the profession practised by many of these authors, one often has grammatical comment as an interspersion or an appendix in a religious work. Thus Andrew Donlevy appended a chapter entitled ‘The elements of the Irish language’ to his Irish-English catechism of 1742. Towards the end of the 18th century one finds an Irish grammar (Grammar of the Iberno-Celtic, or Irish language) by Charles Vallancey in 1773 which was printed in an enlarged edition in 1782. By the beginning of the 19th century more grammars begin to appear, the most comprehensive being A grammar of the Irish language by John O’Donovan in 1845. By this time of course the interest of Indo-European scholars had been directed towards Celtic languages, seen in Johann Casper Zeuß’s Grammatica Celtica of 1853 (revised by H. Ebel in 1871) and in articles by scholars like Heinrich Zimmer, Alfred Holder (see his Alt-celtischer Sprachschatz, 3 vols. 1896-1907) and Franz Nikolaus Finck (see his Die araner mundart. Ein beitrag zur erforschung des westirischen 1899) in the latter half of the 19th century and culminating in the monumental Vergleichende Grammatik der keltischen Sprachen by Holger Pederssen from 1909 to 1913 and Rudolf Thuneyse’s standard work Handbuch des Altirischen (1909, translated into English in 1946) along
with the *Grammaire du Vieil-Irlandais* by Joseph Vendryes (1908), the *Manuel d’irlandais moyen* by Georges Dottin (1913) and Julius Pokorny’s *A concise Old Irish grammar and reader* (1914).

To turn to matters of terminology one sees that Irish language equivalents of Latin linguistic terms were arrived at in quite typical ways (see Ahlqvist 1979/1980: 16f. and for more details 1982: 14-16; specifically on Old Irish see further Ahlqvist 1993). The first is to be seen where an existing Irish word with the corresponding meaning of a Latin term was used, e.g., the word *aimsear* ‘time’, now with the meaning ‘weather’, was used for *tempus* ‘tense’, the word *ainmfhocail* ‘name-word’ was used for *nomen* ‘noun’ while Latin *casus* gives *tuiséal* ‘fall’ in Irish much as it does *Fall* in German (see Ó Cuív, 1965: 151ff. for more terms). The influence of Latin may perhaps be seen in the development of the word for ‘language’ itself. This is in Old Irish *bélre* (later through metathesis *béarla*) and is connected with the word *bél* (Modern Irish *béal* ‘mouth’). But a shift took place whereby the word *teanga* ‘tongue’ (Old Irish *teng(a)e*) came to mean ‘language’ (cf. Latin *lingua*) and the term *béarla* acquired the meaning ‘English’ although the Irish ethnonym for the English derives from ‘Saxon’: *Sasanach* (noun and adjective).

The second situation is one where calques were formed. Thus one has *firinscneach* and *baininscneach* for ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, both terms deriving from inflected forms of the words for ‘man’ *fear* and ‘woman’ *bean* and meaning ‘with male or female gender’ respectively; *pronomen* results in *forainn* literally ‘pre-name’; *praefixus* turns up as *réamhlitir* literally ‘in-front-of letter’, etc. Later Latin terms, formed from Greek originals are also calqued, e.g. *morphologia* (Priscian’s *accidentia*) is rendered as *deilbhíocht* (**deil**b ‘shape’ + *íocht* quality noun suffix) ‘the study of forms or shapes’, compare German *Formenlehre* in this connection.

The third means of forming equivalents is by simply adopting the Latin term into Irish, its Irish appearance deriving from the phonological reshaping which took place on borrowing, e.g. *genetivus* results in *ginideach*, *declinatio* in *díochlaonadh*, *adjectivum* in *aideacht*, etc.

If this were the end of the matter there would be little call for the present paper. However there are a number of phenomena in Irish which have no equivalent in Latin or Greek grammar and for which new terms had to be coined by native writers. The phenomena in question are to be found above all in phonology and morphology and terms for them were already devised in the late Old Irish period. English language equivalents of these have continued down to the present-day and influence the manner in which scholars view the nature of the Irish language. To begin with let me outline briefly some of the peculiarities of Irish phonology and morphology and deal with the terms used to describe them.

## 2 Morphological phenomena

The most outstanding features of Irish morphology are the changes which occur at the beginning of words, chiefly to indicate grammatical categories such as gender, case, number, tense, etc. These are termed initial mutations (MacÉoin in Ball (ed.) 1993 and Ó Dochartaigh in MacAulay (ed.) 1992) and are called in Irish *athraithe tosaigh*, lit. ‘changes initial’. There are two to be found in the present-day language5 which are known in English by fairly recent terms ‘lenition’ (a phonetic weakening of consonants) and ‘nasalisation’ (voicing of voiceless stops and nasalisation of voiced ones).
2.1 Lenition

The native word for this is séimhiú ‘mellowing, softening’, a very old term which occurs in the bardic tracts (McKenna 1979 [1944]: 199+205) and is written séimhiughadh in Classical Modern Irish. It ultimately derives from a stem sein in Old Irish meaning ‘slender, thin, slight’ (Quin (ed.) 1980 [1953]: column 146f.). The noun séimigud (Old Irish spelling) is attested in the Auraicept na n-Éces as the Irish word for the grammatical phenomenon of lenition.

The term aspiration is an older designation used early on by scholars in the Indo-European tradition: in German as early as 1879 by Windisch (1879: 13, 23) and in Danish (Pedersen 1897 in the title of this work). It is derived from Latin aspiratio in the meaning of ‘sounding a h’ and refers phonetically to the fricativisation of stops and possibly to the orthographical practice of placing h after a stop which had been lenited. In the present century the term ‘lenition’ (with the German variants Lenition, Lenierung, Lenisierung) has become established as the standard designation for this phenomenon.

2.2 Nasalisation

The modern Irish term for this morphological phenomenon is urú which is orthographically derived from urdhubhadh < urdubad < airdubad. The last spelling is that of Old Irish. The word consists morphologically of an Old Irish preposition air meaning ‘before, for’ (related to English for, German vor, Latin pro, etc., by loss of IE *p) but which developed a meaning as a general intensifier (Thurneysen 1946: 497). The stem of the compound is the word for ‘black’ dub, Modern Irish spelling dubh /duv/, with the suffix -ad (Old Irish: /-q3/) which indicates an action so that the compound means ‘the act of blackening’, later ‘the state of being darkened, eclipse’. This latter meaning is found in Ó hÉodhasa [O’Hussey] referring to an eclipse of the sun (Sullivan and Quin 1964: column 190). As a term for nasalisation it is already found in the bardic tracts (McKenna 1979 [1944]: 50+148). Eclipsis is a translation of Irish urú which was used until quite recently.

The change in Irish linguistic terminology would seem to have come about at the beginning of the present century. By 1913 Pedersen (1913: 427ff.), and later in 1925 Pokorny, had started to use the term Lenition (Pokorny 1925: 11ff.) while still retaining Eclipse ‘eclipsis’ for nasalisation (1925: 13ff.). This would seem to go back to Thurneysen who in his Handbuch des Altirischen (1909) showed his preference for it although ‘nasalisation’ is the translation chosen in the English version of his Old Irish grammar.

One of the disadvantages of the older term ‘eclipsis’ is that it is based on a holistic conception of sounds. A distinctive feature interpretation is much better as there is only one phonetic feature which is changed on the application of this process.

(1) Nasalisation in Irish

\[
\begin{align*}
[-\text{voice}] & \rightarrow [+\text{voice}] \\
[+\text{voice}] & \rightarrow [+\text{nasal}] \\
\text{ceart} /k/- 'right' & : a\text{ gceart} /\ddot{o}\text{-}g/- 'their right' \\
\text{galar} /g/- 'illness' & : a\text{ ngalar} /\ddot{o}\text{-}\eta/- 'their illness'
\end{align*}
\]

The alterations to the stems of words in Irish are not restricted to the beginning of words.
Stem-finally there are two changes which are used to indicate grammatical categories, chiefly case and number. These final changes often co-occur with initial mutations.

2.3 Palatalisation

Palatalisation is a change in secondary articulation of a consonant such that the body of the tongue is arched upwards; there is no further change to the segment in question. Specifically morphological palatalisation in Irish does not involve a change in manner of articulation and is quite different from instances of historical palatalisation like those in the development of Romance languages which include fronting of place of articulation and assimilation (as with /k/ → /ʃ/).

The Modern Irish term for palatalisation is caolú which comes from Old Irish cíl ‘slender’ (Buck 1949: 886 lists various Celtic cognates but only Latvian kails ‘naked, bald’ as a non-Celtic IE cognate).

2.4 Velarisation

Velarisation is a lowering of the body of the tongue and raising of the back towards the velum which would appear historically to be a reactive articulation prompted by the phonologisation of palatalisation on the loss of the conditioning vowels in following syllables much as umlaut was functionalised in the Germanic languages (bar Gothic). This type of secondary articulation is also found in Russian for example with those segments which are non-palatal and in the case of the vowel /i/ has led to a retracted variant arising after velarised segments which has a special orthographic symbol to represent it, y (as opposed to i) in transliteration.

The word leathnú ‘broadening’ is used in Irish for velarisation and derives from Old Irish lethan ‘broad’ (cognate with English field, German Feld, Latin plenus with the characteristic loss of IE *p in Celtic) a metaphorical usage derived from the impression gained by the articulation of such velarised segments.

The terms for palatalisation and velarisation are historically attested in Irish. Molloy (1677), mentioned above, uses the terms caol ‘slender’ and leathan ‘broad’ in his references to (orthographic) palatalisation and velarisation as in the formulation of the principle of orthographic harmony caol le caol, leathan le leathan ‘slender with slender, broad with broad’.

Other languages which have a systematic distinction between palatal and non-palatal consonants use similarly impressionistic terms. The Slavic tradition avails of the terms ‘soft’ for palatal and ‘hard’ for non-palatal, i.e. velarised, segments as in mjagkij znak ‘soft sign’ and tverdyj znak ‘hard sign’ used to indicate consonant quality where the consonant symbol itself is not sufficient.

3 Phonological phenomena

There is a considerable degree of phonetic sophistication in the bardic tracts. They possess the standard terms necessary for a phonetic description of Irish: foghar ‘sound’, connsuine ‘consonant’, guthaidhe ‘vowel’. Furthermore there would seem to be a connection between the earlier Auraicept na n-Éces (both the actual text and commentaries) and the bardic tracts as Ó Cuív (1965: 162f.) notes, for instance in the use
3.1 Consonantal divisions

The bardic-tract grammarians recognise fricatives and plosives and make the distinction between voiceless and voiced segments. They furthermore hive off /s/ as a consonant on its own and refer to it as the ‘king of consonants’ (Ó Cuív 1965:150). This is an ingenious characterisation because /s/ has no voiced counterpart in Irish (as in Swedish, for instance) and is resistant to word-internal lenition (in the post-Old Irish period). Furthermore all other fricatives in Irish have a dual status as they are segments which occur both independently in lexical citation forms and as the result of lenition being applied.

Voiced continuants are divided by the authors of the bardic tracts into two groups, /bh mh dh gh l n r/ on the one hand and /m ll nn rr ng/ on the other. The first group are ‘light’ (eadtróm) and the second group is ‘strong, thick’ (teann), see below for further discussion. As Ó Cuív notes (1965: 150f.) the natural counterpart to light, trom ‘heavy’ is only rarely used. Other descriptive terms are found such as báthadh ‘submerging, drowning’ which is used for the elision of vowels and the assimilation of consonants (Bergin 1915-25: 13f.). Some of the terms might seem counter-intuitive to the modern scholar, especially in light of the terms preferred in other languages. Consider the means of referring to obstruents.

(2) a. bog ‘soft’ voiceless stop
b. cruaidh ‘hard’ voiced stop
c. garbh ‘rough’ voiceless fricative

If impressionistically voice is interpreted as representing softness in articulation – for instance in German to distinguish sibilants: hartes und weiches s, ‘hard and soft s’, [s] and [z] respectively – then one would not expect the term cruaidh to be applied to voiced stops. But the use of bog with reference to voiceless stops shows that the contrast is that between stops and fricatives, the friction of the latter having been interpreted as ‘rough’, Irish garbh.

3.2 ‘Tense’ consonants

A major division among consonants, alluded to above, for writers on Irish phonetics is that between ‘light’ and ‘tense’ consonants. The latter are of special significance in the phonology of Modern Irish because of the effect they have had on the vowels which precede them. For this reason a note on their origin is called for.

The ‘tense’ consonants have as their prime source geminate sonorants which arose first from sequences of sonorant plus homorganic stop either internally in Irish (3a) or with loan-words from Latin (3b).

(3) a. Old Irish find → finn ‘beautiful’
b. Latin planta → cland → clann ‘family’

The length of these sonorants would seem to have infected the vowels which preceded
them by lengthening them so that the result was in each case a superheavy (hypercharacterised) syllable (Lass 1984: 256), for the examples above, [fi:nn] and [kla:nn] respectively. This developmental stage can be compared with the lengthening of vowels before clusters of sonorant and homorganic stop in the late Old English period (Lass 1994: 259f.) and is quantitatively similar in that an original heavy syllable VCC became superheavy through the lengthening of the nucleus V:CC. A possible cause of such lengthening may be the anticipation of the long cluster during the articulation of the preceding vowel, something which is phonetically plausible but which led to a phonologically unbalanced system, at least for Old English which had an embryonic complementary distribution of short vowels with heavy codas on the one hand and long vowels with light codas on the other (as in modern Scandinavian languages, except Danish).

The phonetic lengthening just described only applied to stems which were monosyllabic. The inflected forms (polysyllables) retained short vowels before these sonorants. Through a process of phonologisation the monosyllables now have phonemically long vowels and the polysyllabic forms have short ones as can be seen from the following Modern Irish examples.12

(4) a. geall /gə:l/ ‘promise’-verb  
b. gealladh /gələ/ ‘promise’-verbal noun

There is a further complication in that the length contrast among consonants was lost after Old Irish so that one has nowadays an alternation of long and short vowels before certain sonorants (former geminates) and not before others (always simplex consonants), contrast gann /ga:n/ ‘scarce’ and gan /gan/ ‘without’ (stressed form) in Modern (Western) Irish.

The distinction of ‘tense’ and non-‘tense’ consonants is clearly attested in the history of Irish. For instance in Old Irish there is a phenomenon known as MacNeill’s Law (named after MacNeill 1909, see also Hamp 1974) which specifies that in an immediately post-tonic syllable a sonorant is realised as ‘tense’ if the syllable opens with a non-‘tense’ sonorant.13

(5) a. Érenn-gen-sg, cf. Ériu-nom ‘Ireland’  

This is a type of dissimilation which prohibits non-‘tense’ and ‘tense’ sonorants in the same (unstressed) syllable and is reminiscent of Grassmann’s Law in Sanskrit which blocks the occurrence of aspirated and non-aspirated stops in the same syllable, i.e. it is a case of syllable onset – coda dissimilation.

3.3 Irish phonetic transcription

There is a long tradition in Irish phonetics (going back well into the last century, e.g. with Pedersen 1897, see pp. 20-67 for an exhaustive overview of historical treatments of the sonorants of Irish) of transcribing ‘tense’ consonants by using capital letters, lower-case letters being reserved for the non-‘tense’ counterparts. This is not of course a usage which stems from the International Phonetic Alphabet and in combination with the superscript stroke (prime) used in Irish (as for example in transcriptions of Slavic
languages, notably Russian) to indicate palatalisation accounts for the particular flavour of Irish phonetics.

(6)  a. ball /ba:L/ ‘member’
    b. ceann /k’a:N/ ‘head’
    c. bainne /baN’ə/ ‘milk’
    d. duine /dn’ə/ ‘people’
    e. buile /bl’ə/ ‘anger’

Now if one combines ‘tense’ and non-‘tense’ with palatal versus non-palatal (velarised) there are four possibilities, for instance with laterals: /L : L’/, /l : l’/ or with nasals /N : N’/, /n : n’/. This looks like a neat analogical equation and is postulated for Old Irish (McCone 1994: 90). It is also to be found in many unreflecting treatments of Irish phonetics with little concern for accurate articulatory description such as Ó Siadhail (1989) and general literature which is derived from studies of varieties of Irish such as Ó Dochartaigh (1992: 83) or Russell (1995: 74-77). The difficulty in the equation is the assumption of a distinction between /n/ and /n’/ and /l/ and /l’/. In order to come to an acceptable description of sonorant segments in Irish an attempt must made at a phonetic interpretation of ‘tenseness’.

3.3.1 Interpreting ‘tenseness’

The difficulty for the linguist analysing the background to the use of the term ‘tense’ in Irish phonetics is that it does not have an unambiguous phonetic interpretation, hence the difficulty of it as a descriptive term.

(7) Possible interpretations of ‘tense’

(1) length: geminate consonant
(2) secondary articulation: clear palatalisation or velarisation
(3) absence of lenition: no shift to more sonorous segment

Historically ‘tense’ sonorants derive from geminates themselves arising from consonants clusters or they stem from segments occupying the onset of a stressed syllable (Thurneysen 1946: 93-96) where the phonetic reduction which is typical of Celtic would not have been effective.

In the course of Middle Irish – on the loss of phonemic consonantal length (in Western and Southern Irish) – the distinction between geminate and simplex was realigned on an axis of secondary articulation. The former geminates retained a clear secondary articulation, either markedly palatal or velar. These segments would be transcribed in the IPA as /n̥l̥/ and /l̥n̥/ respectively. In the Irish tradition they are indicated by /N’ L’ R’/ and /L N R/. Now a prominent secondary articulation may involve a greater length phonetically as a sound which has the active articulator (the tongue) in an extreme position requires a greater amount of time to reach this peripheral position.

The distinction in secondary articulation (palatalisation or velarisation) is paralleled by the obstruents of Irish which also show this distinction. That is, the contrast of /n̥l̥/ versus /n/ is equivalent to that of /l̥l̥/ versus /l/, the corresponding non-nasal stops.
The situation with the sonorants in the modern language is more complicated as they have a neutral articulation as well. Instead of pronouncing them with marked palatalisation or velarisation they can be spoken with a neutral alveolar position for the tongue much as in English *leap* and *neat*. A three-way distinction among sonorants is not unknown (see Petrovici 1959 for examples from Roumanian) as their relative quality on a palatal – alveolar – velar axis is clearly audible due to their sonorant quality. In Modern Irish neutral sonorants derive from two possible sources. The first is a non-geminate of Old Irish which is not the onset of a stressed syllable (recall the examples *duine* /d̠iːn/ ‘people’ and *buile* /b̠iːl/ ‘anger’ from above). The second source of neutral sonorants is the onset of a stressed syllable in a word which has been lenited.

(9) a. *neart* /n̠art/ ‘strength’
   b. *mo neart* /m̠o nart/ ‘my strength’
   (after de Bhaldraithe, 1945:38)

The lexical citation form *neart* is pronounced with clear palatalisation and would traditionally be regarded as a ‘tense’ consonant. Lenition is a morphological process in Modern Irish and is realised phonetically as fricativisation if the input is a stop (cf. *teach* /t̠ax/ ‘house’, *a theach* /a hax/ ‘his house’). However, as sonorants in Irish do not fricativise (as opposed to Welsh), the phonetic exponence of the morphological process of lenition is to remove the secondary articulation of the sonorant, that is to pronounce it with a neutral alveolar tongue position.

From the above remarks it is clear that the sonorant pairs /L N/ and /L´ N´/ correspond to phonetic distinctions made in Irish and these must be viewed phonetically as differences in secondary articulation. For the frequently found distinction /l : l´/ and /n : n´/ the matter is much more dubious. Here one sees the dangers of paper phonetics. If /L N/ and /L´ N´/ are palatal and velar respectively and if /l n/ are neutral with regard to tongue configuration, what phonetic interpretation remains for /l´ n´/? It is unlikely that there is any and a four-way distinction in tongue configuration for sonorants is typologically improbable to say the least.

4 Conclusion

This discussion of terms in the history of Irish linguistics has hopefully shown both the richness of the native tradition and the dangers embodied in the continuing use of terms whose reference is obsolete or whose interpretation is in need of clearer definition. This is especially notable with the traditional term ‘tense’ which is phonetically vague and masks the re-alignment which took place in Middle Irish when the functional load of phonemic length among sonorants shifted to secondary articulation, either palatal or velar. Here one can see that a cautious adjustment of traditional terminology would not
only serve to bring it more in line with current linguistic usage but also lead to a sharper understanding of the phenomena being described.

Notes

1. See Strachan (1903) for the Irish Priscian from St. Gall in Switzerland; Stokes and Strachan (1903: 49-232) for glosses on different versions of Priscian and Hofman 1992 for the Donatus commentaries.

2. It is noteworthy that Richard Creagh (c. 1525-1585), born in Limerick and educated in Louvain, produced a work De origine linguae Hibernicae which was not published and unfortunately has only survived as a fragment (Rockel 1989: 67).

3. Louvain as a centre of Catholic learning was a natural refuge for Irish scholars and also a centre where they could publish works not acceptable to the English in the 16th and 17th centuries (Clercq and Swiggers 1992).

4. This scholar (1575-1643) is chiefly known for his monumental work on Irish history, Annála Rioghachta Éireann [Annals of the Kingdoms of Ireland], which was written to salvage historical knowledge in the period of aggressive Anglicisation of Ireland which began in the 17th century. This work is usually known by the title Annals of the Four Masters after the edition by John O’Donovan (6 vols., Dublin 1848-57) who devised the title as Ó Cléirigh had three assisting scholars, each a competent historian in his own right.

5. There may have been a third mutation, gemination, in Old Irish but its status is disputed, see Feuth (1983).

6. The ending had already in this period been reduced from /-u̯a̯/ to /u̯a/, later /u/: hence the simplification of the spelling in the modern language.

7. The IE base for ‘thin’ *tenu (cf. Latin tenuis) is represented in Old Irish by tana, Modern Irish tanaí ‘thin’. However the root séim is generally linked, through loss of */p/ in Celtic, to a Greek adjective meaning ‘thin’ spinos which is also found in German spannen ‘to stretch’ (Buck 1949: 889; Vendryes 1974: 72).

8. This is a recent device in Irish orthography which however has a precedent in Old Irish; from the classical period up to the present century, and indeed for /f/ and /s/ even before that, lenited consonants were indicated by a dot, a punctum delens, written over them.

9. Possibly the same root as in Gothic daufs, English deaf, Greek tuphlós ‘blind’, IE *dheubh.

10. Not all the terms are obvious in their reference, for instance there is a further distinction between ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ vowels (Bergin 1915-25: 5), the latter referring to i or u when they are consonant-like as in Latin from which two words are quoted. However there are no Irish illustrations of what is meant and it is doubtful that the distinction applied to Irish at all, as there was no practice of using i and u consonantly, but only as syllable nuclei or indicators of consonant quality (palatal and non-palatal respectively).

11. The word used here, Modern Irish teann ‘tense’, is derived from Old Irish tend ‘strong, fast, severe’ which Pedersen (1913: 198) sees as a back formation from the verb tendaid ‘he presses, tightens, strains’ which he links to Latin tendō.

12. The examples here are from Western Irish, different reflexes of the Old Irish situation are
found in other dialects; for instance, in Munster and in Scottish Gaelic diphthongs occur (geall /gəul/), while Donegal appears in cases to have retained the oldest configuration with short vowel and geminate sonorant (geall /gəll/), see Ó Baoill (1979: 80-106) for a detailed discussion and Hickey (1995: 53-58) for the theoretical issues involved.

13 Thurneysen (1946:89) formulates the restriction as follows ‘After short vowels l and n are also delenited at the end of unstressed syllables beginning with r, l, n or unlenited m’. Note his use of delenition to imply ‘tense’ sonorant.

14 The fourfold equation with r-sounds, i.e. /R : R/ , /r : r/ is not taken to exist. Indeed the interpretation of /R/ as a post-alveolar trill (Ó Baoill 1979: 81) would scarcely allow for a putative phonetic segment /R/ as a post-alveolar palatal trill.

Chronological list of works cited

Non-Irish

Priscian Institutiones grammaticae
Donatus Ars grammatica
Isidore of Seville Etymologiae
First Grammatical Treatise (anonymous)

Irish

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