1 Introduction

Grammatical gender is a system of co-occurrence restrictions and correspondences between members of different word classes in a language (Ibrahim 1973, Roca 1989). Thus to say a noun is (grammatically) feminine is a shorthand for stating that in that language a certain marker, say an article, co-occurs with certain nouns and requires a specific form of pronoun when, for discourse reasons, a pronoun is used which is co-referential with a noun classified as ‘feminine’. Other correspondences may exist, for instance there may be adjectives or past participles which require different endings depending on gender affiliation.\(^2\) This is the case in the Romance languages, for example.

The traditional labels used for gender classification – masculine, feminine and neuter – are derived from the fact that specific forms of determiners are associated with masculine or feminine beings or with objects when used with nouns denoting these, this providing the tripartite division one has in German, Russian, etc. Other labels could equally well be used, even opaque ones like ‘X’, ‘Y’, ‘Z’, as they would not be any less analytically suitable than the existing labels which distinguish nouns along the axes of sex and/or animacy, irrespective of whether these categories apply extra-linguistically to the referents of the nouns or not.

The Indo-European languages which still have grammatical gender show agreement requirements first and foremost with determiners, even in languages like Russian which have no articles; in these cases it is the adjectives, demonstrative and possessive pronouns which show gender distinctions (Priestly 1983). However, there are other languages, such as Irish, which show gender agreement on verbal nouns which indicate by this means the gender of the direct object (see below).

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\(^1\) My thanks go to my colleague Dr. Brian Ó Catháin, Department of Modern Irish, National University of Ireland, Maynooth who commented extensively on an earlier draft for which I am grateful. Needless to say, any shortcomings are my own.

\(^2\) The issue of how gender arose in the first place is beyond the scope of this article, but see Greenberg (1978) and Fodor (1959).
2 Reduction and loss of gender

In a similar fashion to other Indo-European languages, Irish has reduced the number of grammatical distinctions from three to two. This occurred in Irish by the demise of the neuter gender and not, as in the Scandinavian languages or Dutch, by a merging of former masculine and feminine, to the utrum category or common gender (of de-words) respectively.

The formal distinction between the inherited Indo-European masculine and neuter genders was already weak in Old Irish (McCone 1994: 92f.) and had been lost in other Celtic languages, such as Breton. The masculine and neuter genders merged in the Middle Irish period (900-1200) (Breathnach 1994: 241) so that by Early Modern Irish (1200-1600) there were only two formally distinct genders, masculine and feminine. Remnants of the old neuter were, however, still found in fixed forms, e.g. in placenames.

A structural consequence for a language which collapses a former distinction of neuter and masculine to the masculine alone is that this gender generally becomes used in so-called ‘default’ situations, either those where speakers do not know the gender of something being discussed or where a semantically empty, dummy subject is used with a verb, for example with expressions indicating weather states (see 3.6 below).

As in other inflecting languages, Irish has gender-distinguishing pronouns. This means that in both anaphoric and cataphoric contexts, the gender of nouns being referred to can be gleaned from gender-specific deictic elements, e.g. demonstrative or personal pronouns. Hence gender plays an important role in reference tracking (Corbett 1990) in Irish as it does in languages like German or Russian, for instance.

3 Predictability of gender

For both previous stages of Irish and the present-day language it is true that there is a certain degree of predictability for gender, going on the phonological shape of the word (cf. Hickey 1999 for an analysis of this in German). However, many diachronic developments in Irish have led to opacity with formally transparent genders so that the level of overall predictability has been lowered. Nonetheless, in the present-day language gender is still observed by native speakers, but frequently not so by the much greater number of non-native users of the language.

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3 Trudgill (1999: 149f.) suggests that the reduction in gender distinctions can be due to koinisisation effects in the development of standard varieties of language. He also suggests that this reduction is a feature of adult language use, the retention of gender distinctions being, by implication, a characteristic of child language.

4 Belgian dialects in general tend to maintain a formal distinction between masculine and feminine nouns, though West-Flemish is closer to Netherlands usage in preferring the common gender.
3.1 Natural and grammatical gender

Irish has natural gender whereby beings which are biologically masculine or feminine are also so grammatically, e.g. bean (f) ‘woman’, fear (m) ‘man’, nia (m) ‘nephew’, neacht (f) ‘niece’. Agent nouns are grammatically masculine, even though in some cases the referent may be feminine. The following are some typical examples.

(1)  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Natural</th>
<th>Grammatical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tiománaí ‘driver’</td>
<td>iománaí ‘hurler’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>marcach ‘rider’</td>
<td>bacach ‘beggar’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ceannaire ‘leader’</td>
<td>aire ‘minister’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>muinteoir ‘teacher’</td>
<td>rinceoir ‘dancer’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sclaire ‘scholar’</td>
<td>baicéir ‘baker’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saighdiúir ‘soldier’</td>
<td>dochtúir ‘doctor’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Masculine gender holds here, although the default interpretation of a noun may at times still be feminine, e.g. rúnaí ‘secretary’. Furthermore, nouns which are inanimate, but formed on the pattern of an animate group, show masculine gender, e.g. loisceoir (m) ‘incinerator’ analogous to bádóir (m.) ‘fisherman’, foilsitheoir (m.) ‘publisher’, etc.

There are some exceptions to the equivalence of natural and grammatical gender. For instance, stail ‘stallion’ is feminine and a borrowing from English (with apocope of the second syllable). The palatal codas which resulted may have been the phonological trigger for feminine gender assignment. A more common noun is cailín ‘girl’ which is masculine because the diminutive ending -ín originally demanded masculine gender. This is basically still true although in many cases the combination of stem + in is not viewed as a diminutive, e.g. spailp (f) ‘term, period’ but spailpin (m) ‘seasonal labourer’.

Here one can see a feature of Irish, also found in other languages, that productive endings demand a single gender, consistently or overwhelmingly so. The reason for this probably lies in the productive nature of endings: when one can be used at liberty by speakers in ad hoc situations, then the gender assignment must be unambiguous, e.g. in German (in both the standard and the dialects) a diminutive ending, -chen (in the standard), -lein, -li in south-west and Swiss dialects always makes a noun neuter as in das Mädchen, das Mädlein, etc. ‘the girl’. Where the gender assignment of an ending is unpredictable, the cases where it occurs are limited and lexicalised, e.g. German -nis which is sometimes neuter, das Verhängnis ‘the disaster’

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5 At least in lexicalised cases, cf. paidir (f) ‘prayer’ but paidrín (m) ‘rosary’. Where -in is added productively to a base the gender of this is retained, e.g. smig (f) ‘chin’, smigin (f) ‘chin’ (Ó Siadhail 1984: 173). For more details of the situation with –in, see de Bhaldraithe (1990).

6 The correctness of this interpretation can be seen from other examples, e.g. die Mär ‘story; rumour, made-up story’ but das Märchen ‘fairy tale’.
and sometimes feminine, *die Erlaubnis* ‘the permission’.

The assignment of grammatical gender to objects is not semantically motivated in Irish, nor would it seem to be the case in those other languages which share this type of gender distinction (on French, see Surridge 1995: 12). Nonetheless, modes of conveyance (boats, cars, buses), and often technical objects in general, to which people, especially males, feel a certain attachment, take feminine pronominal referents irrespective of their grammatical gender, e.g. *Is húicéir an-bhreá í* [is hooker.MASC very-nice she] ‘She is a lovely hooker’ (traditional turf-carrying sailing boat). This is a feature which Irish shares with English and the latter may be the ultimate source of feminine gender assignment with such nouns.

### 3.1.1 Gender variation in Irish

Variation is found with gender across dialects just as with other linguistic parameters. For instance, the noun *ainm* ‘name’ is feminine in Southern Irish (Munster) but masculine elsewhere. The noun *loch* ‘lake’ is feminine in Western Irish (Connemara) but masculine elsewhere. In Cois Fharraige Irish (a sub-dialect of Western Irish) the word *leabhar* ‘book’ can be feminine.

In addition to this interdialectal variation many words may themselves be masculine but have feminine pronominal reference in standard Irish. In general such cases denote modes of conveyance, e.g. *meaisín* ‘machine’, *soitheach* ‘boat’, *carr* ‘car’, *capall* ‘horse’, but there may be some other instances as well, e.g. *Ba dhaor an clog í* (not *é*) ‘It was an expensive clock’ (Ó Dónaill 1977: 688). Here it would seem that the semantics of the words trigger the use of the feminine pronoun. A quite different situation is that with some nouns which are feminine but take a masculine article, e.g. *áit* ‘place’+ *é* (not *í*), e.g. *Sin é an ait ar rugadh mé* ‘That’s the place I was born’ (see section 4.5 *Gender disagreement* for further discussion).

### 3.2. Generalisations about the phonological shape of words

There would appear to be a link between the syllable rhyme of a word, especially the coda, and gender assignment. For instance, in French 94% of words which end in [3] are masculine (Surridge 1995: 14). It is characteristic

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7 Occasionally there have been suggestions in the literature that gender assignment with objects can be semantically motivated, e.g. in Manambu (an Austronesian language in Melanesia) there would seem to be – according to Aikhenvald (1996) – a pattern whereby large objects are masculine and small ones feminine.

8 The term ‘standard Irish’ in the present context refers to the morphology (including gender assignment) of modern Irish as set out in the official dictionary of Irish and English published by the government stationery office, Ó Dónaill (1977). It should also be pointed out that not all native speakers would have the range of vocabulary displayed in lexicographical works and many of the words used in this chapter for the purposes of discussion might not be commonly used words for such speakers.
of gender systems that assignment is never 100%. Certainly, a high degree of predictability is given, but this is not complete. In the course of a language’s history some regularisation may take place, e.g. German *Blume* ‘flower’ and *Fahne* ‘flag’ were previously masculine but became feminine in Middle High German (Tschirch 1975: 149) something which brought them in line with other disyllabic nouns in final -e such as *die Sonne* ‘sun’, *die Lampe* ‘lamp’, etc. Only a few retain their original gender, e.g. the masculine nouns *der Friede* ‘peace’ and *der Same* ‘seed’ (see Mettke 1978: 154f.).

It would thus seem to be a valid cross-linguistic generalisation that the phonological shape of monosyllabic codas is a good, but not unambiguous, indication of a noun’s gender. It would also seem cross-linguistically valid that polysyllables have almost completely predictable gender affiliation. The situation where polysyllables result from the addition of a word-formational suffix to a monosyllabic stem is one where gender affiliation is most regular (see comments above). Given this situation, one can make two broad generalisations about gender and the phonological shape of words:

(2) a. The syllable coda of monosyllabic nouns is a good guide to gender affiliation.

b. The predictability of grammatical gender increases dramatically with the number of syllables in a word.

In the following several instances are examined to determine if the above generalisations hold for Modern Irish (Ó Muiri 1992).

3.3 Value of [palatal] in right margin of word

There is a rough rule of thumb which says that words consisting of a single syllable and ending in a palatal consonant or cluster are feminine while those which end non-palataly are masculine. In Irish orthography a palatal consonant in a coda is indicated by a preceding *i*, as in *roinn* /riɲ/ ‘portion’. Where this is not the case the coda consonant is non-palatal, e.g. *rann* /ɾɛn/ ‘stanza, verse’.

This guideline may no longer be obvious because of diachronic changes and orthographic adjustments which have been made in Irish (as the result of the twentieth century spelling reform). For instance, *tré* /traː/ ‘strand’ is feminine, cf. *tré mhóir* ‘a big strand’. Although the modern orthography of the word ends in a vowel, older spellings show that it did once end in a palatal consonant, cf. the older form *tréigh*. There are, however, silent endings which still do not offer a correct clue to gender. For instance, the
word *tuath* /tua/ ‘country’, from a much earlier /tuaθ/, has a non-palatal coda and is feminine.

Another exception is that animate nouns generally follow natural gender so that words like *namhaid* ‘enemy’ or *rí* ‘king’ are masculine despite the final palatal consonant or vowel (an exception is *cailín* ‘girl’, see remarks above). Conversely, words like *maighdean* ‘maiden’ are feminine despite the final non-palatal consonant.

Table 1: **Phonologically predictable gender affiliation in monosyllables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feminine with palatal right margin</th>
<th>Masculine with non-palatal right margin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(i) Polysyllabic words ending in the suffix -(e)acht /-iocht, which forms a quality or abstract noun, are always feminine: *Gaelt-acht* ‘Irish-speaking area’, *teangeola-íocht* ‘linguistics’.

(ii) Polysyllabic words ending in the suffix -lacht are masculine, e.g. *comhlacht* ‘company’, *complacht* ‘group, gang’.

Table 2: **Phonologically unpredictable gender affiliation in monosyllables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feminine with non-palatal right margin</th>
<th>Masculine with palatal right margin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

It is obvious from even a cursory look at the above table that there is an imbalance between unpredictable gender affiliation for feminine and masculine nouns. Among common nouns the word for ‘quantity’ and ‘butter’ are virtually the only monosyllables which have a palatal coda and are masculine.
The level of predictability for gender going on the codas of monosyllables decreases sharply with nouns ending in a vowel, though these tend to be masculine.

Table 3: *Gender distribution in vowel-final words*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feminine</th>
<th>Masculine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

In some cases, the orthography shows that a word did end in a palatal segment before this was lost through vocalisation.

Table 4: *Gender distribution in words with unrealised final palatal and non-palatal consonants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feminine</th>
<th>Masculine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

3.4 Endings with fixed gender affiliation

The right margins of words with predictable gender are often formed by endings and not by the lexical stem of the word. This can be seen clearly with words like leabhrán (m) ‘booklet’, leabhróig (f) ‘libretto’ and leabharlann (f) ‘library’ which share the same lexical stem leabhr-, cf. leabhar (m) ‘book’, but where the gender varies according to suffix but always consistently.

Table 5: *Gender affiliation with word-formational endings*

| Feminine gender suffixes, mostly with a palatal coda | Masculine gender suffixes with a non-palatal coda (consonantal and vocalic) |
Table 6:  Phonologically predictable gender affiliation with word-formational endings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feminine gender suffixes with a non-palatal coda</th>
<th>Masculine gender suffixes with a palatal coda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| -eog: fuinneog ‘window’, fuiseog ‘lark’ | agent nouns with final /-i/:
| -ú | saineolaí ‘expert’, tireolai, ‘geographer’, teangeolai ‘linguist’

(i) Gealach ‘moon’, cláirseach ‘harp’, báisteach ‘rain’ are feminine nouns but nomina agentis which end in -ach are masculine, e.g. bacach ‘beggar’, marcach ‘rider’ as well as the word for ‘way’, bealach.

(ii) Similar to other inflecting Indo-European languages the gender of compounds is determined by the final element: grian (f) ‘sun’ + graf (m) ‘graph, chart’ > grianghraí (m) ‘photograph’, cam (m) ‘bend’ + cuairt (f) ‘visit’ > camchuairt (f) ‘ramble, tour’. There are some exceptions to this, e.g. animate nouns like ban-ab ‘abbess’ (f) from ban ‘woman’ (f) and ab ‘abbot’ (m).

3.5 Gender and loanwords

Languages with grammatical gender must assign gender to incoming loans (Poplack, Pousada and Sankoff 1982). During its history Irish has borrowed many words from Latin, Scandinavian, French and English. The early

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11 This ending is an orthographical variant on the preceding one and occurs where the preceding consonant is palatal.

12 On the situation in Old English with regard to borrowings from other languages, see Welna (1980). On the situation in Welsh, see Surridge (1989).
borrowings from Latin tend to show gender assignment based on the phonological shape of the word in Irish. For instance, *anam* from the feminine Latin noun *anima* 'soul' is masculine in Irish given the non-palatal consonant in which it ends. This applies to other nouns as well, e.g. *anann* (m) 'pineapple' from Portuguese *ananas*.

An instance of gender change on borrowing from Scandinavian is Old Irish *fuindeóc* (Modern Irish *fuinneog*) ‘window’ which is neuter in the source language (Old Norse *vindauga*, Köbler 2003: 277) but became feminine on borrowing, probably in analogy to Irish polysyllablic words in -óg/-eog which are feminine (Quin ed., 1990: 349 [476]).

Older English loans generally have a gender which rests on phonological association with an Irish gender type. For instance, the ending -óg, as in *grianóg*, triggers feminine gender, e.g. *pollóg* (f) ‘pollock’, *spúnóg* (f) ‘spoon’ (from English *spoon* + -óg). Monosyllables general follow the rule of thumb ‘palatal coda = feminine, non-palatal coda = masculine’, e.g. *bácuis* (m) ‘bakehouse’, *carr* (m) ‘car’, *seabhac* (m) ‘hawk’, *craic* (f) ‘crack’. The last example shows that the consonant following English /æ/ was interpreted in Irish as an equivalent to a palatal /k/ (and is pronounced as such).

More recent loanwords tend also to follow phonological patterning. This holds in particular for the large number of learned loans (or rather creations) which are more often than not a feature of formal, written language: *amóinia* (f) ‘ammonia’; *bácalaít* (f) ‘bakelite’, *sceideal* (m) ‘schedule’; *scitsifréine* (f) ‘schizophrenia’, *poimpéis* (f) ‘pomposity’, *pontún* (m) ‘pontoon’. The variation one finds with some common words actually confirms the relationship between phonological structures and gender assignment, e.g. *plean* ‘plan’ is a masculine noun in the standard (see Ó Dónaill 1977: 956) but with a final palatal consonant it is feminine (in colloquial speech): *pleain* ‘plan’ (f).

### 3.6 Default gender category

In Modern Irish the collapse of the old neuter with the masculine has meant that the latter gender is used in default situation, but the resulting gender can vary by dialect region, e.g. *loch* ‘lake’ (Quin ed., 1990: 437, col.177) has feminine gender in western dialects, though it is masculine in the standard. Structurally, the use of the masculine pronoun in Modern Irish parallels that of the neuter pronoun in English in generic usage and in specific cases of dummy subjects, e.g. with verbs referring to the weather, cf. the pronoun *sé* ‘he’ in the following sentences.

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13 This word may have entered via Dutch which was also the source for German *Ananas* which is a feminine noun.

14 The pronominal reference for this noun is feminine as it is a vehicle, see remarks in 3.1 above.
Tá sé ag cur báistí. ‘It is raining.’
Tá sé fuar inniu. ‘It is cold today.’

4 Indicating gender in Irish

The history of the Celtic languages shows a development which is unique within the Indo-European family. This is the phenomenon of initial mutation. By this is meant that under certain grammatical conditions the initial segment of a lexical word can change, for example, from a stop to a fricative or to a nasal. The system is quite complicated with many exceptions (for details see Hickey 1996) but it has survived down to the present day and is the prime means of indicating grammatical categories in Irish. Essentially, the mutations are the following.

(4) Mutation Change Example
Lenition Stop to fricative /k/ > /x/
One fricative to another /s/ > /h/
Nasalisation Voiceless stop to voiced /p/ > /b/
Voiced stop to nasal /b/ > /m/

For the present study, only the first mutation – lenition – is relevant as nasalisation is not used to indicate gender. The details of lenition are also relevant to the indication of gender. The first concerns the lenition of /f/. The only other fricative which occurs initially in the lexical citation forms of words in Irish is /s/ and this shifts its place of articulation on lenition to /h/ <sh>. In the following a capital ‘L’ stands for ‘lenition’.

(5) suíomh /siːv/ ‘site’ a shuíomh /a hiːv/ ‘his’ + L ‘site’

When lenition is applied to /f/ it is deleted. This means that there is no way of reconstructing the non-lenited /f/ if one only has access to the lenited form. In the history of Irish the consequence of this has been that many cases of vowel-initial words have changed to /f/-initial words as child language learners assumed that such words had an underlying initial /f/. Examples of such re-analysed words are fuar ‘cold’ from uar and fuiseog ‘lark’ from uiseog (de Bhaldraithe 1981: 39). A further consequence of the lenition of /f/ to Ø is that some native speakers do not lenite /f/-initial feminine words although their gender would normally demand this. Thus one finds cases like an fadhb /ən fədəb/ ‘the problem’ instead of an fhadhb /ən fədəb/.
4.1 Zero mutation

Irish mutation is a system of contrasts among initial sounds of words. In this system not just lenition and nasalisation are important but the lack of either of these. The absence of any change to an initial sound is irrelevant to a language without mutation but in Irish this lack of mutation is systemically as significant as any mutation. This means that Irish makes provision for three formal distinctions at the beginning of words:

(6) (i) Ø Zero mutation (no change)  
(ii) L Lenition (frication)  
(iii) N Nasalisation (prefix of /n/ or voicing of voiceless stops)

This tripartite system compares to similar initial mutation systems found in other languages or dialects. It provides a minimal number of distinctions for such central grammatical categories as person, number and tense. A similar system is found in Tuscan Italian where three distinctions at the beginnings of words are found (this is known as gorgia toscana, Catellani 1960, Contini 1960, Marotta 2008).

(7) **Gorgia Toscana**

(i) zero mutation (no change)  
(ii) lenition (frication)  
(iii) gemination (consonant doubling)

In Irish the three-way contrast can be seen with the possessive pronoun of the third person *a /a/*. Its minimal phonetic form cannot distinguish gender and person, but by means of varying mutations this can be realised.

(8) singular  
masculine (L)  
am *charr* ‘his car’  
a *carr* ‘her car’  
a *gcarr* ‘their car’

feminine (Ø)  
am *anam* ‘his soul’  
a *hanam* ‘her soul’  
a *n-anamacha* ‘their souls’

plural (N)  

The example of *a carr* ‘her car’ shows that in the grammatical system of Irish the lack of lenition is morphologically significant. Thus it is appropriate to talk of zero mutation in such cases which contrasts with lenition or nasalisation in the same position. There is also a three-way distinction with vowel-initial words. This is achieved by the contrast of no change

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15 There are obvious grammatical devices which indicate gender as well, e.g. prefix *t-* and *h-*  
e.g. *an tslat* ‘the stick’ (fem.)  
a *hthair* ‘her father’ versus *an stín* ‘tin’,  
a *athair* ‘his father’,  
see discussion in Hickey (2011: III. 6.3.2. ‘Grammar’).
(corresponding to lenition with consonant-initial words) and prefixed \(h\)-
(corresponding to no lenition with consonant-initial words). Nasalisation, the
more phonetically regular of the mutations, consists of a prefixed \(n\)- with
vowel-initial words.

4.2 Gender and the use of articles

As opposed to those Romance and Germanic languages which have
grammatical gender and a system of (definite and indefinite) articles which
are distinguished for gender, Irish just has one article, a definite one, which
has only two forms: an invariable one for the singular (\(an\ [\text{\`a}n]\)) and an
invariable one for the plural (\(na\ [\text{n\`a}]\)).

The absence of a mutation is used to indicate grammatical gender in Irish:
in the nominative singular of masculine nouns there is zero mutation,
feminine nouns on the other hand being marked by lenition. Conversely,
masculine nouns in the genitive have lenition but feminine nouns in this case
show zero mutation. This is a situation in which marking for (singular) case
in each gender is a mirror-image of the other.

\begin{table}[h]
\begin{tabular}{ll}
Masculine & Feminine \\
\hline
an cruth [kr\`a\`] ‘shape’ & an chuait [xuart]\` ‘visit’ \\
an b\`a\`d [b\`a\`d] ‘the boat’ & an ceist [\`e][t\`a]\ ‘the question’ \\
dath an bh\`a\`id [wa:d\`a] & fad na ceiste [k\`e][t\`a]\ ‘the length of the question’ \\
‘colour of the boat’ & ‘the length of the question’
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

But lenition does not apply to all syllable onsets, so in some cases there are
feminine nouns which have zero mutation like masculine nouns because
their word-initial sound cannot be lenited. The sonorants of Irish – \(n\), \(l\), \(r\) –
are not lenited (i) nor does lenition appear where the initial sound of a word
is a dental obstruent and so homorganic with the final consonant of the
definite article (ii). It does not apply to words beginning in /sp-, sm-, sk- /
either (iii).

\begin{table}[h]
\begin{tabular}{ll}
Masculine & Feminine \\
\hline
(i) an neart [n\`art] ‘the strength’ & an nead [n\`ad] ‘the nest’ \\
\ & an l\`a [l\`a:] ‘the day’ \\
\ & an l\`amh [l\`a:v] ‘hand’
(ii) an teach [an t\`ax] ‘the house’ & an deoch [an d\`ax] ‘the drink’
(iii) an smaoineamh ‘the thought’ & an smig ‘the chin’ \\
\ & an sc\`eal ‘the story’
\ & an sp\`eir ‘the sky’
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
Table 7: Gender distinctions via zero mutation versus lenition in Irish

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine Type of onset</th>
<th>Feminine Type of onset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No lenition</td>
<td>No lenition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) Sonorant</td>
<td>All other consonants or clusters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) Homorganic obstruent</td>
<td>$s +$ vowel or sonorant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) Cluster of $sC-$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This lack of marking applies to the noun itself. However, if it is followed by an adjective whose first consonant is lenitable then the gender of the noun is immediately obvious, e.g. *nead bheag* [nest small] ‘a small nest’, *deoch mhór* [drink big] ‘a big drink’, etc.

4.3 Head marking in Irish

It is obvious from the above Irish examples that Irish indicates gender by marking the head (noun) and not the modifier (article). The article is in fact invariable in Irish for any given case and/or number as be seen from the following table.

(11) Forms of (definite) article ‘the’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominative</td>
<td>All cases + genders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$an$</td>
<td>$na$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive</td>
<td>$an$ (m), $na$ (f)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although Irish differs from other Indo-European languages, such as Romance or (most) Germanic languages in having head rather than modifier marking in gender, it does share with these languages the fact that the formal distinctions with articles (as with other determiners) is greater in the singular than in the plural.

4.4 Prefix $t$ in Irish

The inadequacies of mutational gender marking are somewhat offset by a further phonological phenomenon of Irish. This is the selective use of a $t$-prefix with words which begin in (i) $s +$ vowel or (ii) $s +$ sonorant. This prefix shows a complementary distribution across genders and cases so that its appearance or absence is a clue to the gender of the noun to which it is added. The prefix should also be seen in the context of the $h$-prefix which Irish shows with vowel-initial nouns (see section Zero mutation above) as this is also sensitive to the gender of nouns. Note that to talk of a ‘prefix’ in this situation refers more to the orthography of Irish. Phonetically, what
happens is that /s/ is replaced by /t, t l/ as in slat [sl t] 'stick’, an tslat [tl t] ‘the stick’ or slí [sl l] /tl l/, an tslí [tl tl] /tl l/.

Table 8: Occurrence of prefix t and prefix h

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-leniting environment</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a) an t-arán</td>
<td>‘the bread’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a) an siopa (an fear)</td>
<td>‘the shop’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘the man’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b) blas an aráin</td>
<td>‘taste of the bread’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b) in aice an tsiopa</td>
<td>‘beside the shop’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(culaith an fhir a haois)</td>
<td>‘the man’s suit’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5a) a haois</td>
<td>‘her age’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leniting environment</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3a) an áit</td>
<td>‘the place’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a) an tseachtain (an chuairt)</td>
<td>‘week’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘the visit’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b) ar fud na háite</td>
<td>‘all over the place’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4b) i rith na seachtaíne (fad na cuairte)</td>
<td>‘during the week’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘the length of the visit’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5b) a aois</td>
<td>‘his age’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What the above table shows is that – synchronically in Irish – prefix t helps speakers (and language learners) to recognise the gender of words. With a vowel-initial noun, prefix t in the nominative shows that this is masculine, the lack of prefix t shows that the noun is feminine. In the genitive the lack of prefix t shows that a noun is masculine and the presence of initial h- that the noun in question is feminine.

With nouns beginning in s + vowel or sonorant the mirror image situation is found: the presence of prefix t signals a feminine noun and the lack of it a masculine (in the nominative). The opposite is the case for the genitive (lack of prefix t signals feminine, its presence masculine gender).

In conclusion one can state that noun marking for gender is by no means unambiguous in Irish given the fair number of word onsets which cannot be lenited and so cannot indicate feminine gender (see section 4.2 Gender and the use of articles above). This situation in fact mirrors the wider one of initial mutation in Irish grammar as a whole: not all words can undergo mutation and so grammatical categories such as case, number, tense, mood, etc. are not always formally marked. However, there are some phenomena
which, functionally, can be seen as fixes for this situation, both prefix $t$- and prefix $h$-.

4.5 Gender disagreement

There is occasional gender disagreement between determiner and noun in modern Irish. For instance, the word áit ‘place’ takes a lenited adjective and has a genitive in -$e$ with the article as na, all signals of feminine gender: áit dheas ‘a nice place’, ar $fud$ na háite ‘all over the place’. However, it is general to use a masculine pronoun together with this word as in $Sin$ é an áit a bhfuil sé ina chónaí [that he the place.FEM which is.REL he in-his living] ‘That’s the place where he is living.’ This was already noted in the mid-twentieth century, see de Bhaldráithe (1953: 135ff).

Furthermore, across the dialects there may be differences in gender, e.g. the word buicéad ‘bucket’ is feminine in Donegal but masculine elsewhere. See Ó Siadhail (1984: 174-175) for further examples.

**Gender and noun classes** There are five nouns classes in Irish into which all nouns can be grouped (there are a small number of exceptions, less than 20). The classes show different patterns of endings and by and large they correlate with gender (Carnie 2008: 4), e.g. the first class largely consists of masculine nouns while the fifth is almost exclusively feminine. But it is not gender which determines the noun classes. Rather these are determined by the formation of the genitive singular, in fact the five noun classes, or declensions, are a metalinguistic descriptive device gained from organising nouns into groups on the basis of their case endings.

**Semantic distinctions via gender** Words of the same form do not generally occur with both genders. There are a few exceptions here, e.g. ráth is masculine in the meaning ‘ring-fort, earthen rampart’, but feminine in the meaning ‘shoal of fish’, cuach is masculine in the meaning ‘bowl, goblet’, but feminine in the meanings ‘cuckoo, curl, tress; embrace, hug’. In other languages with grammatical gender the situation is similar, for instance in German there are very few words which show more than one gender, der Gehalt ‘contents’ and das Gehalt ‘salary’ is one of the few examples.

The more common situation is where words may have different genders and only one phonological difference, chiefly the contrast between a palatal and a non-palatal right margin, cf. gráin (f) ‘hatred’ versus grán (m) ‘wheat grain’.

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16 All this has meant that despite the inadequacies of initial mutation as a grammatical device (Hickey 2003) the system has survived for over 1500 years of language history.

17 Ó Dónaill (1977: 333) gives feminine gender as a variant for this word meaning as well.
5 Gender agreement in Irish

Gender affiliation for nouns has been the topic of this study so far. However, equally worthy of consideration is the issue of gender agreement across the elements of sentences. If everything were completely regular there would be no issue here, the scope of gender agreement would encompass any sentence element which is co-referential with the noun in question. However, this is not the case. Given that masculine gender is the default, then one can observe a tendency to use masculine anaphora together with feminine nouns. There is a general pattern in Irish which can be captured by the following principle.

(12) Gender agreement declines with an increase in distance from and a reduction in bonding with a noun.

Determiners and pronouns show maximum bonding as these depend on the noun they co-occur with or refer to. Of the two word classes, determiners occur closest to the noun. Because Irish is a VSO language, post-specification is the dominant type of word order. This means that attributive adjectives immediately follow the nouns they modify.

| (13) | [article] | noun | [adjective] |
|      | ‘an’   | ‘bád’ | ‘mór’       |
|      | ‘an’   | ‘lámh’| ‘bheag’     |

‘the big boat’
‘the little hand’

5.1 The syntactic scope of gender agreement

The scope of gender agreement in a sentence varies across the Indo-European languages. All the Germanic languages, except English, still have some kind of morphological distinction of two, if not three, types of grammatical gender. However, this is confined to the nominal area. The most conservative of the Germanic languages, German, shows three genders with agreement on articles and adjectives (for the strong declensional type).

| (14) | *der* Weg ‘the way’ | *ein* weiter Weg ‘a long way’ |
|      | *die* Tür ‘the door’ | *eine* kleine Tür ‘a small door’ |
|      | *das* Haus ‘the house’ | *ein schönes* Haus ‘a beautiful house’ |

The Romance languages, on the other hand, generally have a two way gender distinction for the past-participle so that gender-marking extends further into the syntax of these languages than it does in Germanic. Consider the following Italian examples.
The Irish situation is in principle similar to that in the Romance languages, i.e. gender agreement is found in both the nominal and the verbal area. The past participles of verbs do not, however, show gender agreement as they do in Italian, for example. Instead gender agreement is found with verb objects.

5.2 Object specification and mutation

The objects of verbs are distinguished for gender in Irish. In many cases this is done by leniting a non-finite verb form when the object is masculine and by using zero mutation (i.e. non-lenition) when the object is feminine as in the following instances.

(16) Masculine object   Feminine object  
Bhí siad á bhagairt. (L: bh = /v/)  Bhí siad á bagairt. (Ø: b = /b/)  
[was they at-his threatening]  [was they at-her threatening]  
‘They were threatening him/it.’  ‘They were threatening her.’  ‘They were threatening to do it.’

Object specification is a grammatical device which is similar to nominal gender in that it is the head of the phrase which shows the marking and not the modifier, i.e. verb forms show gender marking as do nouns modified by an article.

This type of object specification means that the mutation of the initial sound of both major word classes, nouns and verbs, is an essential part of Irish syntax. The demise of grammatical gender through neglecting lenition on feminine nouns would probably also mean, for future language learners, the neglect of mutational marking of transitive non-finite verb forms like those given in (16). This would result in the loss of distinction between male and female verb objects, a different kind of change than the neglect of grammatical gender with nouns, and is indeed already attested for Munster Irish.

5.3 Zero mutation or neglect of gender?

Because of the manner in which gender marking is realised in Irish, zero mutation is indicative of masculine gender in the nominative singular. But as zero mutation (no change to the initial consonant of a word) is the default in Irish – this holds for the citation forms of words, i.e. when they occur on their own – one cannot maintain that the occurrence of zero mutation is a clear indication of masculine gender, it could equally be the neglect of
mutation altogether on the part of a speaker. The feminine gender is a different issue, as here lenition is required, again in the nominative singular. This means that those speakers who neglect grammatical gender may appear to be doing so by overextension of the default masculine gender to feminine nouns. The generalisation of feminine gender to masculine nouns does not appear to occur, probably because lenition, the mark of feminine gender, is conceived of as a special step, a change of the default base form of a word, whereas zero mutation, the mark of masculine gender, leaves the citation form of a word unchanged.

6 Survival of the gender system

Several changes in the vernacular of native speakers of Irish have been taking place for some time now. The neglect of the genitive is quite common, e.g. *deireadh an tseachtain* (NOM) for *deireadh na seachtaine* (GEN) ‘end of the week’. The neglect of gender markers is another example. However, native speakers do not neglect all devices for gender marking and some are more prone to neglect than others. For instance, the resistance to leniting /f-/ is well established in the language. The neglect of prefix *t* with vowel-initial masculine nouns is another, e.g. *an aire* for *an t-aire* ‘minister’.

(17)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| f | an aire (f) ‘the care, the attention’  
an t-aire (m) ‘the minister’ |

Further evidence for the neglect of gender is to be found in the mismatch of anaphora in sentences, i.e. the use of masculine pronouns coreferentially with feminine nouns, although exceptions exist in Irish already, see remarks in section 3.1.1 above.

Given these signs of weakness in the gender system one can legitimately ask why such a system still exists? Why did not some generation of language learners just ignore the incomplete signals for grammatical gender and not acquire the system at all, as apparently happened historically in other languages, such as English (Curzan 2003)? There are essentially two possibilities, one is that the system continued due to inertia. The other is that it continued because it had a function. To make a case for the second option a function or functions must be clearly identified for Irish.

*Ease of recognition* Gender does not have a semantic function in Irish, i.e. it is not used to distinguish meanings primarily, though if speakers know the genders of nouns then it may help them to recognise these more quickly when used by their interlocutors. This is a pragmatic function and may well be one of the reasons why languages retain grammatical gender; it often makes the structure of discourse easier to grasp for the native speakers who, naturally, know the gender of the words of their language.
Gender and textual cohesion Textual cohesion can be reached in a language if elements at the beginning of sentences and those at the ends are linked via coreferentiality. This can happen through elements which refer back to the preceding elements at the beginning of a sentence (anaphoric elements). This type of textual cohesion is practised in Irish as can be seen from the following examples.

(18) \[feari go mbeidh níos mó tráchta againn faoi \textit{ar} ball.\]

\[\text{[man.MASC that will-be still more dealings.GEN at-us under-him on spot/while]}\]

‘…a man about whom we will have more to say soon.’

(19) \[An \textit{aimsir} i Éirinn, bíonn muid i gcónaí ag gearán fúithi.\]

\[\text{[the weather.FEM in Ireland are we always at complaining under-her]}\]

‘The weather in Ireland, we are always complaining about it.’

(20) \[An \textit{crann} a bhfuil na húlla air.\]

\[\text{[the tree.MASC that is.REL the apples on-him]}\]

‘The tree with the apples on it.’

6.1 Changes in gender today

Gender agreement is greatest where the governed elements are close to the governing element, e.g. \textit{Sin í an fhirinne}, lit. ‘This she the truth’ (f), \textit{cuíd mhaith}, lit. ‘amount good’ (f) and even more so if the words constitute an established collocation in the language.

Increasingly, however, native speakers are not observing the marking of gender, especially of feminine gender, and use the default masculine form of pronouns when referring back to feminine antecedents which are some distance from their coreferential anaphoric elements. The following sentences illustrate this.

(21) \[An \textit{fhadhb} [the problem.FEM] a gcótafimid dul i ngleic leis [with-him]. (for \textit{léi} [with-her]).\]

‘The problem which we have to tackle.’

(22) \[An \textit{obair} [the work.FEM] a bhfuil siad ag smaointeamh air [on-him] (for \textit{uirthi} [on-her]) \textit{anois}.\]

‘The work they are thinking about now.’

This situation has consequences for the language system. Consider the following sentence.
The use of *leis* with *smoirt* implies that it is masculine which it is not. The feminine gender of the word is not, however, evident from its onset as /sm-/ cannot be lenited (see 4.2 Gender and the use of articles above), unlike other feminine nouns such as *an chuairt* ‘the visit’ with the shift of initial /k-/ to /x-/ when preceded by the article.

Because a prepositional pronoun is the clue to a noun’s gender in such cases, first language learners will not grasp that *smoirt* and other nouns with a similar non-lenitable onset are feminine. Hence, children’s command of gender in the future will be less than that of previous generations and the gender system may well begin to disintegrate.

7 Conclusion

There is no doubt that in present-day Irish a clear neglect of grammatical gender is to be observed, both in the marking of nouns for feminine gender and in the use of anaphoric elements in discourse. Two groups of speakers are involved here: (i) a small group of native speakers (less than 50,000 all told) and (ii) a much larger group, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of non-native speakers with varying degrees of language competence. For the survival of the gender system the behaviour of the native speakers is crucial. The textual cohesion provided by gender agreement between distant sentence elements and beyond sentences in discourse definitely works in favour of gender as does object specification by gender marking on non-finite verb forms (see 5.2 Object specification and mutation above).

But the general weakening of the language due to the enormous pressure of English and the decline in general language competence even among those who would be classified by region of birth and upbringing as native speakers means a complex linguistic system like grammatical gender is definitely under threat. It is uncertain whether the observed neglect of gender is the direct result of transfer from English or due to the insufficient command of Irish which characterises many people currently growing up in the Irish-speaking Gaeltacht areas along the western seaboard of Ireland. What is true is that there is no positive transfer from English, i.e. no motivation on the part of individuals whose English is better that their Irish to maintain grammatical gender distinctions in the latter language.

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18 On Scottish Gaelic see also Dorian (1976) and Ó Muirí (1986).
References


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