

MUTATIONAL PATTERNS IN THE TEACHING OF IRISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA

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Introduction

At the University of Vienna, Modern Irish is an optional subject in the Celtic Studies curriculum, which was started in 2000. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the teaching of Irish at beginners' level at this university. In order to illustrate some of the difficulties that may arise out of this special situation some of the results of a mini-study will be presented, conducted on the problems and challenges concerning a rather specialised area of Irish grammar: the system of initial mutations. I will start by briefly reviewing the teaching situation in Vienna. The second section then deals with the system of mutations, and in the third and last part I will present my study and discuss some of the findings.

Teaching Irish in Ireland and in Vienna: An Overview

Irish has been taught at the University of Vienna already for some twenty years; in the 1990s, for instance, it was an open course administered by the Linguistics Department and taught by Dr. Fitzsimons. Due to administrative and legal circumstances, the course became part of the Celtic Studies curriculum in 2002. The students there are typically German native speakers with some knowledge of Old Irish and Breton, often also Welsh and/or Cornish. While Breton and Old Irish are compulsory, Modern Irish is an optional subject; therefore the focus of most students is elsewhere. Until recently, there used to be three levels of Irish classes, two during the first year and generally one level in the second year. Courses at higher levels could only be held occasionally, adding up to a maximum of 90 minutes per week in each term in the first year, and usually 45 minutes per week in the second year. This is, no doubt, quite satisfactory with regard to the investment in an optional course in a rather exotic subject, but it is obviously not enough to teach Irish in the same way as, for instance, English is taught in Austrian schools, or Irish is taught at Irish universities. By way of comparison, University College Dublin offers 12 hours of conversation classes per week alone for its Irish Studies programme in the first semester. (In UCD there is no equivalent to the Austrian style of Celtic Studies, which includes, for instance, history and archaeology.)

In Ireland, the main focus in teaching the language is on fluent conversation, written and spoken expression, and generally confident use of the language. The Irish Studies curriculum at UCD, for instance, presents the following (ideal) learning out-

comes after 12 hours of conversation and 24 hours of instruction (on student numbers, see Mac Mathúna):

On completion of this module students should be able to:

1. Express themselves both confidently and competently in spoken and written Irish; read and understand texts within a range of areas;
2. Discuss and debate current affairs and contemporary issues; translate texts from English to Irish and vice versa;
3. Have a greater understanding of the distinctiveness of the Irish language in the areas of phonetics, grammar, syntax and lexis.
("Teanga na Gaeilge")

This is, of course, impossible to achieve with the limited amount of time available for teaching Irish in Vienna. Thus, it has become the main purpose of teaching to give students an introduction to Irish, particularly to the more theoretical aspects of grammar, orthography, and pronunciation in order to enable them to make use of Irish material should they come across it in their future research (also and particularly with regard to secondary literature) and to enable them, if they wish, to continue their studies of the language elsewhere, preferably in Ireland. Furthermore, with Irish being embedded in the Celtic Studies curriculum, it is felt to be essential that they become familiar with the general structure of Irish, specifically with reference to other Celtic languages. For this reason, it was decided to restrict the course content to grammar, somewhat enlivened by basic communication skills, and this is the strategy still adhered to, at least in the beginners' course. While the latter has meanwhile moved to the English Department, since 2006 other Irish courses held by Máire Ní Charra have been offered by the Celtic Studies curriculum, thanks to funding by the Irish Government, and these include genuine conversational classes, which had been sorely missed until then.

Thus, we have reached a situation where students are fed on grammar at a very early stage, which they may put to use in later conversation courses; this runs counter to what most experts on language acquisition suggest (e.g. Van Patten and Poulisse, who advocate a more usage- and output-oriented approach, and Ellis, who warns against exposing beginners to too much grammar and recommends immersion at an early stage), but is still regarded as the best possible compromise. One integral part of this grammar is the so-called *initial mutations*, which will be briefly presented below.

Initial Mutations

Mutations appear in all modern Celtic languages, in varying patterns and determined by varying rules of application. Four patterns are usually identified for Irish (Tables 1-3)¹:

1 The apostrophe (' < superscript <>) marks palatality.

1. Lenition/Aspiration (Seimhiú)
2. Nasalisation/Eclipsis (Urú)
3. Aspiration/h-Prefix
4. t-Prefix

Table 1: Lenition

radical	<p>	<t>	<c>		<d>	<g>	<f>	<m>	<s>
pronun.	p/p´	t/t´	k/k´	b/b´	d/d´	g/g´	f/f´	m/m´	s/s´
lenited	<ph>	<th>	<ch>	<bh>	<dh>	<gh>	<fh>	<mh>	<sh>
pronun.	f/f´	h(/h´)	x/x´	v/v´	γ/γ´	γ/γ´	∅	v/v´	h(/h´)

Table 2: Nasalisation

radical	<p>	<t>	<c>		<d>	<g>	<f>	<V>
pronun.	p/p´	t/t´	k/k´	b/b´	d/d´	g/g´	f/f´	V
nasal.	<bp>	<dt>	<gc>	<mb>	<nd>	<ng>	<bhf>	<nV>
pronun.	b/b´	d/d´	g/g´	m/m´	n/n´	ŋ/ŋ´	v/v´	nV/h´V´

Table 3: t-Prefix and Aspiration/h-Prefix

radical	<V>	<s>	radical	<V>
pronun.	V	s/s´	pronun.	V
t-prefix	<t-V>	<ts>	aspirat.	<hV>
pronun.	tV/t´V´	t/t´	pronun.	hV/h´V´

These patterns are not, however, a phonological phenomenon, at least not synchronically, but are generally accepted to be part of the morpho-syntactic system of Irish. The discussion as to which processes are involved in the actual choice of a pattern has been going on for some time; while some scholars, like Ó Siadhail & Wigger, Gussmann, McBrearty, Ní Chiosáin, or Gnanadesikan have considered the processes to be phonological, albeit triggered by a morphological, lexical or syntactic environment, more recently, Green, “Independence,” has suggested that they rather be regarded as a case of morphological selection, comparable to case selection in inflecting languages, albeit occasionally overridden by phonological considerations (see also Green, “Coronals”).

The greatest problem a phonological explanation comes up against lies less in the sheer frequency and range of application than in the irregularities and number of exceptions. Thus, *ar* 'on' causes lenition in the following noun, resulting in the phrase *ar bhord* 'on a table.' In certain adverbial phrases or as part of a compound preposition it does not lenite: *ar bord* 'on board,' *ar fud* 'all over'; but it may also nasalise, as in the phrase *ar dtús* 'at first.'

As for range of application, mutations affect nouns after prepositions, nouns after articles, adjectives after nouns (in the latter two cases they vary according to gender, number, and case); verbs are mutated after certain preverbal particles (e.g. negative, interrogative, or conjunctive); numerals mutate following nouns and may in their turn be mutated. There are also a number of fixed idiomatic phrases that require various types of mutation.²

As to the actual application of mutation, there is some limited variation even in the standard (the combination of preposition and article may nasalise as in *ag an mbean* 'by the woman' or lenite as in *ag an bhean* 'dto. '), but there are at times significant differences between dialectal varieties. It is therefore not surprising that initial mutations have been a topic for linguists of various schools for a long time and seem to lend themselves to the application of whatever theoretical framework one wishes to employ.

Most ordinary and readily available grammars or handbooks, however and quite naturally, restrict themselves to a discussion of the phenomena as such and are generally more at home in the morphological school of thought, i.e. mutations as part of grammar rather than phonology, though they are frequently treated under the headings of "phonology," "pronunciation," or even "orthography," as summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: Terminology and Treatment in Handbooks

BOOK	TERMINOLOGY	WRITTEN/ORAL; LANGUAGE	SEPARATE ENTRY?	GRAMMAR/ PHONOLOGY?
Ambros & Illés	len/ecl(nas)/asp/ t-pref	mostly written; caighdeán+Ulster	yes	grammar/lexicon
Bammesberger 1	len/ecl/h-insert/ t-insert	written, IPA; caighdeán; occ. dialect	no	phonology, grammar, diachronic
Bammesberger 2	len/ecl/h-pref/ t-insert	written+oral; caighdeán; occ. dialect	yes	pronunciation/ phonology ("sound system") > diachronic grammar
BC	none	written; no IPA, oral on CD, caighdeán	no	lexicon/grammar

2 A detailed description may, for example, be obtained from NIG; for a summary see Illés.

Dillon	asp(+ts)/ecl/h-pref	written+oral, no IPA; older caighdeán	yes, apart from t-prefV-	pronunciation/ alphabet; tV- = grammar
First Steps	asp/ecl/h-pref/t-pref	written; caighdeán	not really	alphabet/grammar
GG	séimhiú/na réamhlitreacha: urú/réamhlitir h/réamhlitir t	mostly written; caighdeán	yes	orthography/ grammar
GnaG/LnaG	séimhiú/urú/h roimh ghuta/t roimh ghuta agus roimh s/d'	written; caighdeán (no mention of pronunciation)	yes	orthography/ grammar
Graiméar	"athruithe"	written, caighdeán	no	grammar
LGG	séimhiú(len-asp)/urú(ecl-nas)/ h roimh ghuta nó s/ t roimh ghuta	written; mainly caighdeán	intro yes, mainly no	orthography/ grammar
LI	len/ecl/h-pref/t-pref	oral+written; mostly Cois Fhairrge	no	grammar
McGonagle	len/ecl/h-pref/t-pref	written; caighdeán mainly	yes	orthography/ alphabet grammar
NIG	asp/ecl/h-prf/t-prf	written; caighdeán	yes	grammar
NYT	len/ecl/place h before/place t before	mostly oral (CD+DVD); written; caighdeán/Ulster	intro yes, mainly no	phonology/grammar
Progress	asp/ecl/h-pref/t-pref	written; caighdeán	no	grammar
Stenson, <i>Basic</i>	len(asp 'inaccurate')/ecl/h-pref/t-pref	oral ("sound") + written, IPA; caighdeán, occ. dialect	no	grammar; orthography
Stenson <i>Intermediate</i>	len/ecl/h-pref/t-pref	written; caighdeán, occ. dialect	no	grammar
TYI	len/ecl	written, pseudo-IPA; CD; caighdeán	mostly no; hprf&tprf no	pronunciation; grammar
TYIG	len/ecl/h before V/t before V or s	mostly written; caighdeán	intro yes, mainly no	alphabet/phonology grammar
ÚG	séimhiú/urú/h roimh ghutaí/t roimh ghutaí nó s	written; caighdeán	no	grammar
Carnie	len/ecl/h-pref/t-pref	written+oral; caighdeán+dialect	yes	grammar
Ó Siadhail	len/ecl/h-insert/t-insert	written+oral; caighdeán+dialect	yes	grammar (morphology)
Ó Siadhail & Wigger	séimhiú/urú	oral, caighdeán+dialect	yes	phonology
Stifter	len/nas(ecl)/asp(h-mut)	written+reconstructed pron.	yes	grammar/ pronunciation
Strachan	len/n-(ecl)	written	no	grammar
Thurneysen	len/nas	written	yes	phonology/grammar

As suggested above, the terminology in handbooks and grammars is not quite uniform. In general, *lenition* is adhered to for mutations of the kind shown in Table 1 (as in TYI, NYT, and by Ó Siadhail, Bammesberger and Carnie); but especially some of the older works still refer to this pattern as *aspiration* (e.g. NIG). Similarly, prevocalic affix *h-* is known as either (more usually) *h-prefix* (e.g. Bammesberger, McGonagle) or *aspiration* (Stifter, Ambros & Illés). What is termed *eclipsis* in most handbooks is sometimes also referred to as *nasalisation*, especially in historically oriented literature (e.g. Stifter, Thurneysen).

In accordance with other courses in the Celtic Studies curriculum, the terms *lenition*, *nasalisation*, and *aspiration* (the *h-prefix*) are used in Vienna, since, for example, *eclipsis* ('darkening') was considered somewhat less descriptive of the actual changes than the term *nasalisation*. Even though the latter refers to only about half of the actual processes, i.e. the changes of voiced plosives to nasals, it is felt that at least it provides learners with a hint as to which system to apply. But more importantly, these terms are also used in the teaching of Old Irish, and since, until very recently at least, most students that attended Irish classes were also students of the Celtic Studies curriculum, the majority of them could be expected to have done some Old Irish or to be doing so in the very near future. In order not to confuse them the terminology was streamlined. This might, in fact, lead to puzzlement when grammar books are consulted, but since students tend to do that only at a later stage in their learning career, the initial confusion surrounding the concept as such is expected to have somewhat abated by then.

The term *t-prefix* is preferred to *s-fortition* (pace e.g. Green, "Coronals"), since a *t*- may appear before *s-* but also before a vowel, and these cases should be regarded as one and the same phenomenon – which they historically are, going back to a form of the definite article ending in *-d*.³

The Study

The study was based on 12 mid-term and final tests, taken by a total of 172 students between 2002 and 2009.⁴ The completed test papers were analysed for errors in the application of the mutational system and the results compared for each test group with the number of instances with no errors in the same environment, as summarised in Table 5 below.

3 As we wish to adhere to the standard grammar as far as possible, dialectal features such as *t-* before *s-* after *-l* and *-n* in compounds, for instance, are disregarded.

4 The major difference between the year 2008/2009 and previous ones is that in this year for the first time Irish was taught through the medium of English rather than German.

Table 5: The Data

test no. (number of students)	lenition	nasalisation	aspiration	t-prefix	none
1 (12)	26-172	---	3-26	2-10	14-118
2 (9)	15-58	6-26	4-23	---	9-115
3 (29)	66-145	21-55	16-81	---	17-764
4 (25)	25-137	11-61	4-23	---	25-258
5 (8)	21-54	2-21	5-3	---	4-14
6 (3), 2 nd year	6-12	4-10	---	---	2-15
7 (20)	16-109	---	10-48	---	9-227
8 (17)	7-40	7-8	---	---	3-0
9 (24)	14-59	15-98	4-28	2-0	7-77
10 (5)	8-16	3-12	15-1	1-1	7-3
11 (4), 2 nd year	3-3	3-2	1-0	---	---
12 (16)	4-38	14-52	---	---	---

In this table, for each pattern the token number of errors is given first, followed, after a hyphen, by the number of cases where no errors occurred. *None* refers to cases where mutations were applied in places they would not normally be found in. Thus, for test number 10, in seven cases mutation was applied, as opposed to three identical environments where it was not, the latter being (prescriptively) correct. This test also contains, for example, eight errors in lenition environments against 16 correctly applied lenitions.

The tests were taken by varying numbers of students; their dwindling after the first semester or year is not unusual and one reason why higher level courses frequently are in danger of being cancelled. Furthermore, the length of the tests was not uniform, ranging from one to four pages, and the tasks to be tackled varied considerably from year to year, depending on the numbers of students involved and their overall performance during class. The tasks were mostly of an eliciting nature and included: free writing; picture stories; translations; word-lists (e.g. hobbies, food); fill-in exercises (e.g. supply one half of a dialogue, fill in endings, mutation, or case form); jumbled sentences (without connectives, i.e. verbal endings and/or mutations supplied by the student); conversion exercises (from past to future, etc.). Of the twelve tests, ten are from first-year courses (semesters 1 and 2) and two from second-year courses (both semester 3).

The overview in Table 5 shows that mutation is in fact more frequently applied correctly than misapplied, and that to a considerable degree. It must be noted, however, that while errors are easy to spot, cases with correct non-mutation are rather less so, since in a given environment not all mutable initials need (and do) undergo mutation in the first place. Thus, a case of non-lenition of *t*- after the feminine NSgf. article (*an tine* 'the fire') may be the result of correctly applied coronal blocking, or the simple ignoring of a mutation. Consequently, the figures after the hyphen in Table 5 must be taken *cum grano salis*.

The study took as a starting-point a list of possible categories of errors with examples taken from homework sheets: no mutation (e.g. **sa gáirdín*); misapplied mutation: either by analogy to non-mutating cases or wrong pattern (e.g. **as Bhaile Átha Cliath*, **sa theach*, **i pháirc*); mutation of non-mutable sounds (analogy; e.g. **sa lheabhar*); double mutation (e.g. **sa ngháirdín*, *sa dtheach*); diaeresis-deleting function of *h-* (and possibly also *t-* and *n-*; e.g. **sa hobair*).

Let me emphasise at this point that this study does not intend to demonstrate the “shortcomings” of students in acquiring Irish, but is meant to serve the purpose of identifying problems and adapting and improving the teaching of Irish grammar. I was mostly interested in the following questions: Which errors are the most frequent? Which environments are most troublesome to learners? Which mutational patterns do they most frequently disregard? And, finally, would the expectations as to possible error categories indeed be confirmed by the data?

Discussion

The analysis provided a list of error-prone environments, as displayed in Table 6. Not surprisingly, this is a comprehensive list of environments one is likely to be faced with in the first three semesters. Except for a few instances (such as, for example, nasalisation after the conjunction *go* ‘that,’ which was correctly applied in all cases), errors could be detected for almost every environment appearing in the tests.

Table 6: Error Environments

NO mut. of pres. statement	L/N after <i>ag/as/ar an</i>
NO mut. of future statement	L/N after <i>sa(n)</i>
L of past statement (after <i>do</i>)	L/N after <i>faoin</i>
NO mut. of past statement (<i>sc-</i> , <i>sp-</i> , <i>st-</i> , <i>sm-</i>)	A after <i>sna</i>
L after <i>ní</i> (+Verb)	T after <i>as an</i> + f. noun
N after interrogative <i>an</i>	NO mut. of homorganics after <i>ag/as/ar an</i>
L of verb after <i>ar/níor/nár</i>	NO mut. after masc. noun
N after <i>cá</i> (+Verb)	L after f. noun
L of direct relative verb	NO mut. after strong pl.
N of indirect relative verb	NO mut after f. noun (homorganics)
NO L of copula past forms (<i>ba</i> , not * <i>bha</i>)	NO mut. after <i>cúpla</i>
L after <i>níor</i> (+Adj.)	L after poss.1sg <i>mo</i>
L after <i>ba</i> (+Adj.)	L after masc. poss. A
A after equative <i>chomh</i>	A after fem. poss. A
NO mut. after <i>ní</i> (+Adj.)	N after plural poss. 1
NO mut. after copula <i>is</i>	N after plural poss. 3
NO mut. of pred. adjective	NO mut. of free adverbs
L after <i>mar</i> (+noun)	NO mut. of direct object of VN
L after <i>ar</i>	NO mut. of direct object (pace Welsh)
L after <i>a</i> (+VN)	L of pers. names in Gen.
L after <i>de</i>	L after <i>Nic, Mhic, Uí, Ní</i>
N after <i>i</i>	NO mut. of C, G after <i>Nic, Mhic</i>
A after <i>go</i> ‘towards’	<i>ar tí</i> not * <i>ar dtí</i>
A after <i>le</i>	<i>bheith</i> , permanently lenited

NO mut. after <i>chuig</i>	NO mut. of interrogatives (<i>cé</i> , not * <i>ché</i>)
NO mut after <i>ag</i>	A after <i>a</i> (+ num.)
NO mut. after <i>as</i>	L after <i>aon</i>
L after NSgf art.	L of <i>déag</i> after <i>dó</i>
L after GSgm art.	L after <i>dhá</i>
A after GSgf. art	L after <i>beirt</i>
A after NPl. Art.	NO mut. after <i>trí</i> + pl.
T- after NSgm art. (+V-)	L after <i>c(h)éithre</i>
NO mut. after NSgm art. (+C-)	L after <i>c(h)úig</i>
NO mut. of homorganics	N after <i>seacht</i>
L in compounds	N after <i>ocht</i>
NO mut. in compounds (homorganics)	N after <i>naoi</i>

As for the expected categories of errors, all but the last (i.e. diaeresis deletion) in fact emerged, but the most frequent one was, not surprisingly, simply failing to mutate:

- a) no mutation at all,
- b) “wrong” pattern,
- c) extension/analogy,
- d) double application,
- e) mutation of non-mutable initials sounds/letters,
- f) “anything goes,”
- g) varia.

In the following, the error categories will be examined individually. Since the examples are meant to illustrate the use of mutation, the spelling has otherwise been standardised.

a) Not surprisingly, lack of mutation was the most frequent error category and present at least once in almost every test paper. Examples are: *an úll* (NSg), *ar ceannaigh sé? ba maith, de gnáth, dhá peann, mo dinnéar, mar garda, le athair Úna, girseach deas, Nic Maoilir, a dó déag, go amharclann, i ionad spóirt, an caora, xy a cur, Francis maith, i ndiaidh a ocht, chomh ard le, faoin cathaoir, an feicfidh sé?, naoi capall, ina cónaí* (3pl), *réamhfaisnéis, sa Coiré, deirfiúr Pádraig, beirt mac, ar an bunscóil, l’Áine.*

In most instances it would seem that mutation was simply disregarded, particularly in cases like *de g(h)náth*, or *chomh (h)ard le*; in other cases it may have been the result of confusion, especially in the case of attributive adjectives, numerals, possessive pronouns, or the combination article+noun, where the rules are slightly more complicated.

b) The wrong-pattern category includes misapplied mutation and mutation where it is not required. Not surprisingly, “wrong” patterns were applied mostly in cases such as the ones just mentioned: article+noun, adjectives, prepositions, but, interestingly, not so much in the case of numerals, where as a rule the option ‘no mutation’ was preferred. Examples are: *an t-aimsir, inar chónaí, na chaoirigh, an dteileafóin, an chomharsa* (NSg), *ní dtógaim, a bhuaillimid leo* (indir. rel.), *go Bhaile Átha Cliath, an*

snáth fhada, ina chónaí (3Sgf), le mháthair Úna, dhéanaim, san hollscoil, fear chairdiúil, níor n-ól sé, i phost, ag dhul, cúpla phionta, as Chorcaigh, bha mhaith, i tSeirbia, go nDublin, le athair hEithne, is fhearr, lá ghréine, trí mbliana, ní dtiocfaimid.

In this group also belongs what may be referred to as syntactic mutation similar to Welsh, i.e. mutation of direct objects or adverbials. Examples here are: *is maith liom Ghaeilge, Ghaeilge líofa, dhonn* [as independent adjective], *bheagán Gaeilge, is maith léi cheol clasaiceach, ag obair...pháirt-aimseartha.*

The data suggest that such errors are simply the consequence of general uncertainty. In the case of *dhéanaim*, the error seems to have been prompted by the immediately preceding question *Cad é a dhéanann tú...?*

c) Occasionally, mutations were also applied in environments with restricted mutation, such as coronal homorganics, probably by analogically extending the pattern in question to those cases where it does not apply. Examples of this are: *shcríobh sé, an thine, bean thanaí, Nic Chorra, ag an dheireadh seachtaine.* Again, confusion as to the exact mutation rules and their exceptions, and hence analogical extension, seems to offer the best explanation for these cases.

d) As opposed to what had been subjectively anticipated, double application of mutational patterns was rare. Only two instances were recorded in the data: *naoi gchapall, and ina gchónaí (3pl)*. It is difficult to identify the cause of the first error; in the second case, however, the error seems to go back to the often-used phrase *Tá mé i mo chónaí* 'I live in,' where *cónaí* is lenited. Apparently the student was aware of the need to nasalise in the third person plural and applied the latter not to the radical, but to the more familiar lenited form.

e) Mutation of non-mutable initials was the second error type that had been expected to appear much more frequently; in fact, the following examples are the only ones occurring in the data: *Fraincis lhíofa, i lheabharlann, i nleabharlann, a lhéamh, ón rhadió, an rhaidió, siopa lheabhar.* In this case the patterns were extended to letters where mutation does not exist at all in the standard language (although – but only in the spoken language – *l* and *r* may be lenited in some dialects; see Ó Siadhail 82-84).

f) The actual existence of a strategy along the lines of 'anything goes' is, of course, purely conjectural, and simply based on the impression of utter confusion conveyed by the following examples: *i nbialann, i gnaol, ba hfuath, an tseach* 'the house,' *an t-each* 'dto.,' *an bfuil, an bhuil* (both used consistently in the test paper), *naoin ncapall.* More than the other error types above do they suggest that mutations are understood mainly as a written phenomenon, particularly, of course, in a learning situation as in Vienna, where there is much less time for pronunciation practice than would be desirable. The fact that teaching is necessarily mostly instructive rather than output-oriented may also contribute to this phenomenon.

g) The data further contained two errors that did not seem to fit into any of the other categories: *le beith* and *ní fuil*. The first case appears to be hypercorrection (*le* causes aspiration, and the student therefore seems to have felt the need to de-lenite (permanently) lenited *bheith*, since mutations apply only one at a time). In the second case, in order to make the system more transparent, this particular group of students had been told that *níl* is in fact a contraction of *ní fhuil* 'I am not seen, e.g., in a place,' meaning 'I am not, e.g. in a place,' hence the dependent form of *tá* simply is *fuil*, to which the usual mutational patterns apply. In this sense, the error belongs into the category of 'ignored mutation,' but since the word *níl* is so frequently used as a single lexical item, it rather came as a surprise.

When considering the results as a whole, it would seem that the performance of students is varied indeed. It had been anticipated that the more complex the system, the higher the chance of errors, and this was indeed confirmed by the data. On the other hand, interestingly, some of the trickier problems were dealt with surprisingly competently (such as mutation in relative clauses), while some of the rather simple applications were more frequently either mixed up or simply ignored (such as *ní* leniting a verb).

Conclusion

The main question is what causes these errors. Apart from the fact that the system of mutations is generally rather complex, the special situation in Vienna may account for some of the phenomena discussed. As already mentioned, mutation is likely to be understood in terms of correct orthography rather than pronunciation and grammar, and in this respect, not surprisingly, the written test situation itself influenced the results.

Not surprisingly either, the most frequent misapplication seems to be the failure to mutate in the first place, which bears witness to the fact that mutations are often not seen as communicatively important, on a par with the *síneadh fada*, i.e. the length mark/accent.

With regard to the error rate it also might have been interesting to differentiate between students with a philological or linguistic background, particularly those having prior knowledge of another Celtic language, and others, as well as between native speakers of German and those with another L1, to see whether these factors in any way influence results. Unfortunately, the sample was not large enough and would not have yielded any relevant figures.

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