

David Wheatley (University of Edinburgh) and Pavel Iosad (University of Edinburgh)

ACOUSTIC CORRELATES OF THE FORTIS/LENIS DISTINCTION IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY DONEGAL IRISH

In this paper we address the long-standing question of how the distinction between fortis and lenis consonants arose and functioned in Old Irish, and how it is reflected in the present-day Gaelic languages. We report an empirical study of early-twentieth-century Donegal Irish recordings from the Doegen collection. The results show that fortis sonorants (traditionally written /L/ and /N/) displayed significantly greater duration than the equivalent lenis sonorants (/l/ and /n/) both word-medially and word-finally, suggesting that the fortis/lenis distinction did correspond to a duration distinction. Furthermore, ‘voiceless’ stops /p t k/ displayed significantly greater duration than ‘voiced stops’ /b d g/. The magnitude of the effect suggests that the voiced/voiceless contrast in stops during this period was an aspiration contrast, with postvocalic voiceless stops showing preaspiration (Ní Chasaide 1986; Iosad 2020).

There has been a longstanding dispute surrounding the ordering and relationship of lenition and degemination in the Gaelic languages, how duration and fortis/lenis status interacted in the Old Irish period, and how these changes led to synchronic phonemic distinctions in Old Irish and the modern Gaelic languages. In particular, it is unclear whether postvocalic stops Old Irish showed a length distinction, and how the length distinction related to the fortis/lenis distinction in the sonorants. For both Old Irish (Thurneysen 1946) and Donegal Modern Irish (Quiggin 1906; Wagner 1958–1969) it has been suggested that both stops and sonorants were lengthened after a short vowel (cross-cutting the laryngeal contrast in stops), although these accounts are disputed (Greene 1956).

Our results suggest that there was no across-the-board fortition in Donegal Irish: in stops, duration follows laryngeal contrast, and in sonorants it follows the fortis/lenis distinction. We explore the dialectological and historical implications of this result.

References

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