S C O T T I S H   G A E L I C - A N   O P E N   L E T T E R

Glasgow,
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Dear Libbie and Gordon,

You may remember that when Elizabeth and I visited you about 10 years ago - give or take a decade - you gave me a copy of a Gaelic handbook called "Can Seo", saying that if that was what the language was like, you were going to have to forgo mastering this part of your Scottish heritage. I'm writing now in the hope of pointing you back on the track, and also - while admitting that I'm really writing for a wider audience than just yourselves - to thank you for setting me wondering whether this language really had to be that difficult.

I think now that it doesn't, and below I set out why. What makes Gaelic difficult, in my view, is not the language itself, but that there is no accessible handbook that isn't muddled and incomplete.

You'll be wanting to start with the sound-system. Here are the 39 phonemes of Gaelic in the International Phonetic Alphabet (which is not hard to find reference-books for, if you don't know it):

Consonants
pʰ p tʰ t tʲʰ tʲ kʲʰ kʲ kʰ k
f v s ç j ʃ x ɣ
h m
rʲ r rˠ nʲ n nˠ lʲ l lˠ
Vowels
i e ɛ a u o ɔ ɯ ɤ ə

Vowels can be short or long (**i**, **iː**), and nasalised or not (**a**, **ã**), and can have an upstep (**↑a**).

Obviously this is no place to discuss the sounds in detail, but some remarks may be useful. The big difference in the plosives (top line in the display above) is between those which have great puffs of breath around them (marked with superscript h), and those which don't. There's a second difference between those which have a y-sound mixed up with them (marked with superscript j), and those which don't. (Some have simultaneous puff of breath and y-sound.) There are three varieties each of the consonants r, n and l: one called 'palatal', which has a y-sound mixed up with it (superscript j), one normal (no superscript), and one called 'velar', which has a hollow sound made by tensing the back of the tongue (superscript ɣ). No handbook mentions nasalised vowels, but they sound like French nasal vowels and the nasal quality creates a different meaning: **xa ˈviː** *it won't be*, **xa ˈvĩː** *it isn't me*. The upstep - you pronounce the vowel with a kind of squeak - also creates a different meaning: **ˈpalˠak** *skull*, **ˈpalˠ↑ak** *belly*.

Secondly, you'll be wanting to know how the spelling relates to the sounds. This is actually the second most difficult part of learning Gaelic. (The most difficult part, of course, is finding *any* handbook that talks sense.) Claims that "Gaelic is more or less phonetically spelt" are tosh, and the only practicable way to proceed is to find a handbook that gives you a phonetic transcription as it goes along. Unfortunately the only such handbook is the seriously serious tome by Carl Borgstrøm published by Norwegian Universities Press in 1940 and available now only in university libraries. Seminal for learning Gaelic, but not exactly accessible. Until a phonetic handbook appears (watch this space!), you'll just have to flounder.

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Back to the sound-system. Perhaps its most startling feature is lenition, a process by which verbs and nouns change their first consonant under certain grammatical conditions. The basic process is simple: each lenitable consonant (some don't lenite) has its lenited counterpart. So **p** lenites to **v**, **tʰ** lenites to **h**, and so on. The correspondences are not particularly systematic, but they're quickly learned. (But there are some fiddly details: certain consonants lenite when there is lenition with verbs but not when there is lenition with nouns, or have different lenition-forms with verbs and nouns.) A second process by which nouns change their first consonant is usually called 'nasalisation', but I use the term 'ploption' to distinguish it from nasal vowels. Under ploption, initial plosives are replaced by a sort of plopping sound. It doesn't happen in all dialects, but when it does, it makes you wonder where half the consonants have gone, so you need to know about it for that reason. A third process, which applies to the final consonant of a word, is palatalisation - the consonant changes to its palatal equivalent (the one with superscript j in my transcription).

All handbooks have difficulties with ploption and nasal vowels, and when I say difficulties I mean they simply don't mention them. The reason for this is that ploption and nasal vowels aren't represented in the spelling, so a handbook that treats the language in terms of its orthography (and that means all of them) can't discuss them. Lenition, on the other hand, is mostly represented in the spelling, but lenition of **l**, **n**, and **r** is not, so handbooks have to say that those consonants don't lenite. (They do. To say that they don't lenite is about as helpful as saying, for example, that the past of English *to read* is the same as the present: *we read a book*.) Palatalisation is shown in the spelling (it's traditionally called 'slenderisation'), so handbooks deal adequately with that.

Turning now to grammar, the news is much better. First, the verbs. One of the disconcerting things about learning Gaelic, if you're used to the major European languages, is that verbs don't have an identifying ending as they do in German, for example, where the infinitives all end in -en, or French, where the infinitives end in -er, -ir or -re. In Gaelic, verbs are just globs like any other words. (They share this characteristic with English, of course.) But the good news is that they have only two principal parts. This is not clear from the handbooks, where the terms 'verb', 'root', 'infinitive' and 'verbal noun' are used with ill-defined and shifting meanings, but the two forms you need are the 'root', which is the same as the imperative sing. and is the form quoted in dictionaries, and the 'verbal noun', from which the infinitive can be formed (some handbooks say they're the same). Unfortunately you can't predict the verbal noun from the root, although you can make a guess (because there are some common patterns) - but you still have only two parts to learn. These two parts will enable you to make any tense of any verb, with the exception of the 10 irregulars. And even with these 10 irregulars there are only 4 forms each - 40 words - to learn.

The verbal noun gives you enormous expressive power. Take a sentence such as:

haː mi ək ˈɔːl

Word for word, this is *Am I at drinking*, meaning *I'm drinking*, and obviously you can substitute any verbal noun for the last word to create a different meaning (you need to drop the **k** of **ək** if the following verbal noun begins with a consonant, and change **k** to **kʲ** if the verbal noun begins with **i**, **e** or **ɛ**):

haː mi əkʲ ˈiçə *I'm eating*
haː mi ə ˈlʲeːvəɣ *I'm reading*
haː mi ə ˈfaːkal *I'm leaving*

So if you know 10 verbal nouns you can say 10 things; but then if you substitute one of the seven personal pronouns **mi** *I*, **u** *you (sing.)*, **a** *he*, **i** *she*, **ʃinʲ** *we*, **ʃu** *you (plur.)*, **at** *they* you can say 70 things:

haː u əkʲ ˈiçə *you're eating*
haː at ək ˈɔːl *they're drinking*
haː i ə ˈlʲeːvəɣ *she's reading*
haː ʃinʲ ə ˈfaːkal *we're leaving*

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But there's more than this. By adding two words to your vocabulary - the future and past of to be - you can change the time-reference:

piː **ʃu** ə**k**ʲ ˈ**iç**ə	*you'll be eating*
vaː **a** ə ˈ**l**ʲ**e**ː**v**əɣ	*he was reading*

And by changing the preposition **ək** you can include more time-relationships. There is a surprising range of possibilities here. For example:

haː **mi** ɛ**r**ʲ ˈ**iç**ə	*I'm after eating, I've eaten*
haː **ʃu r**ʲ**i** ˈ**iç**ə	*you're in the middle of eating*
vaː **at ku** ˈ**iç**ə	*they were on the point of eating*
piː **i** ˈ**t**ʲ**irax** ɛ**r**ʲ ˈ**iç**ə	*she'll be right after eating*

One more set of possibilities remains. The three forms of the verb *to be* given above, **ha**ː, **pi**ː and **va**ː, are used only in positive statements; to make questions and negatives you need an interrogative form and a negative form for each tense, i.e. six more words. So with a vocabulary of, say, 31 words (9 forms of **to be**, 7 pronouns, 5 prepositions and 10 verbal nouns), you can say (9 x 7 x 5 x 10 =) 3150 things. No worries!

The above is known as the periphrastic set of verb constructions. There is also a non-periphrastic set, in which each tense is formed by inflectional changes to the 'root'. Roughly speaking, the periphrastic forms convey the same meanings as the English *-ing* forms, while the non-periphrastic set convey the meanings of the English plain old past and future.

There is good news on the non-periphrastic front as well. There are only four tenses (future, past, conditional and imperative) and three possible forms of each (independent, used in non-subordinate positions, relative, used after relative conjunctions, and dependent, used in other subordinate contexts). But not all forms are found in all tenses - only 7 of the possible 12 forms exist. Moreover these verb-forms don't change to express person - you just shove the subject pronoun after the verb:

Root **t**ʰ**ok** *lift*:

-	Independent	Dependent	Relative
Future	**t**ʰ**oki**	**t**ʰ**ok**	**hok**ə**s**
Past	**hok**		
Conditional	**hok**əɣ	**t**ʰ**ok**əɣ	
Imperative	**t**ʰ**ok**		

The seven forms are made from the 'root' by using just two resources: lenition (**h** is the lenited form of **t**ʰ) and adding an ending (**i**, ə**s** or əɣ). Examples:

Fut. Ind.	ˈ**thoki tu a**	*you'll lift it*
Fut. Dep.	**nax** ˈ**thok i a**	*won't she lift it?*
Fut. Rel.	ə ˈ**f**ɛ**r** ə ˈ**hok**ə**s a**	*the chap who will lift it*
Past	ˈ**hok mi** ˈʃɔ	*I lifted that*
Cond. Ind.	ˈ**hok**əɣ **thu a**	*you'd lift it*
Cond. Dep.	**nax** ˈ**thok**əɣ **ʃin**ʲ **a**	*wouldn't we lift it?*
Imper.	ˈ**thok a**	*lift it!*

A few details need to be added to complete the account given above. (a) Lenition follows a different pattern with verbs from that used with nouns. (b) In a lenition-like process, verbs beginning with vowels change their front end. (c) Dependent forms show ploption instead of lenition, or don't change, according to which subordinating particle introduces them. (d) One or two persons of the conditional and imperative - but not all 7 persons - use personal endings. (e) The conditional and future use the pronoun **tu** instead of **u**. (f) There is a passive participle and an impersonal verb-form, not mentioned above. But the major part of the system is as described, and not hugely complicated.

There are two further points worth mentioning about verbs, however. The first is that different handbooks tell different stories about how you add

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grammatical objects to periphrastic verbs (e.g. *dinner* in *she's eating her dinner*). They may go into the genitive or not, and they may come before or after the verb, and these things may happen in all or only certain circumstances. Perhaps this is a matter of dispute among Gaelic commentators, like the disagreement in English over *I don't like you going* versus *I don't like your going*.

The second point is that there are perhaps a dozen cases where English uses a verb, but Gaelic uses a noun. Examples are English *I can*, Gaelic *it is ability to me*, English *I know*, Gaelic *there is knowledge at me*. These constructions are perfectly clear (they're nouns followed by a preposition and a person), but they're usually described as 'idioms' as though they were impenetrable, and called verbs. This is confusing - describing *ability* in *it is ability to me* as 'an auxiliary verb' or 'a verb followed by a preposition' turns any analysis into rubble. *Can* may be a verb in English, but *ability* isn't a verb in Gaelic.

On to pronouns! The subject and object pronouns in themselves are a piece of cake: there are only seven of them (listed above), and they're invariable. You can tell which is which because the order of elements in a sentence is always verb - subject - object:

ˈ**hok mi i** *I lifted her*
ˈ**hok i mi** *she lifted me*

But that's where the good news about pronouns ends. There are serious problems in creating phrases where a pronoun follows a preposition (*with them*, *against us*, *for me*), and in using pronouns as grammatical objects of periphrastic verbs (e.g. *it* in *they're after cutting it* = *they've cut it*). And these constructions are frequently needed in speech.

The problem with phrases like *with them*, *to me* is that they no longer consist, in Gaelic, of a separate preposition and a pronoun. Instead, the two have coalesced over time to produce single words, each a combination of preposition and pronoun, in which the two elements can't now be separately identified. So *ɛ**r**ʲ **ʃu** *on you*, for example, is ˈ**ɣr**ʲ↑**ɣv**, ***le ʃin**ʲ *with us* is **lɣin**ʲ, and ***tə mi** *to me* is ɣɔ̃. Given that there are seven personal pronouns, and assuming that a set of 10 prepositions is a reasonable starting kit, you'll have 70 of these little squashed toads to learn. What's worse is that you have no way of finding out how they're pronounced, unless you consult Borgstrøm: handbooks list them only in orthography, and how the orthography converts to pronunciation is, as ever, impenetrable. (For example, the orthographies for ˈ**ɣr**ʲ↑**ɣv**, **lɣin**ʲ and ɣɔ̃ are *oirbh*, *leinn* and *dhomh*.) And you need these words not only for general conversational use, but more particularly for use with the nouns that Gaelic uses where English uses verbs, described above.

As for the pronoun-objects of periphrastic verbs, there's another set of squashed horrors used here - but there are only seven of these, so squashed frogs, perhaps, rather than squashed toads. The problem here is that the 'content verb' - ˈ**iç**ə in **ha**ː **mi** ə**k**ʲ ˈ**iç**ə - is really a noun (*I am at eating*), so how do you attach a grammatical object to it, to say, for example, *I'm eating them*? The answer, in Gaelic, is that you turn the object into a possessive pronoun, and say *I am at their eating*, but you combine *at their* into a single word. There are seven such words, one for each personal pronoun. *At their* is **ɣan**ː **ha**ː **mi ɣan** ˈ**iç**ə. This is OK for the periphrastic verbs with ə**k**, but no handbook tells you how to add pronoun objects to periphrastic verbs with the other prepositions ɛ**r**ʲ, **r**ʲ**i**, **ku** etc.

After verbs and pronouns, the only other topic of importance is nouns, which it has to be admitted are not hugely easy to learn. There are three cases (absolute, vocative and genitive, but also a vestigial dative), two numbers (singular and plural, though with a vestigial dual) and two genders (masc. and fem.) The 'absolute' case is used for both subject and object (some call it the nominative); the vocative is used when addressing people, and the genitive is

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used for possession and when one word qualifies another, as in *school-house*. The dative is found only in a handful of fem. nouns.

The rather bad news is that nouns are affected by two systems operating simultaneously - inflections and sound-changes - and you need a clear head to keep them apart. The handbooks won't help you in this - they get the two systems muddled up, and their account turns into sludge. And of course you can't get any sort of grip on what's happening if you work only in terms of spelling, and that's what the handbooks do.

First, the inflections. Gaelic deploys only four resources to inflect nouns: leniting the first consonant, changing the last vowel, palatalising the final consonant and adding a suffix. The problem is that even a simple classification yields 5 types of noun, each with a different mix of the four resources, not to mention a good sprinkling of irregularities. Some examples:

-	I	II	III	IV	V
-	*cat*	*shoe*	*school*	*work*	*man*
Abs.	**kʰaʰt**	**prɔːk**	**skɔl**	ˈ**opər**ʲ	ˈ**tɯn**ʲə
Voc.	**xeʰt**ʲ	**vrɔːk**	**skɔl**	ˈ**opər**ʲ	ˈ**ɣɯn**ʲə
Gen.	**kʰeʰt**ʲ	ˈ**prɔːk**ʲə	ˈ**skɔl**ə	ˈ**opr**ʲ**əx**	ˈ**tɯn**ʲə

(One of the results of lenition of the vocative, by the way, is that the vocative of ˈ**ʃeːməs** *James* is **heːmiʃ**, and this was picked up as a different name, *Hamish*, by English-speaking intruders; and similarly with ˈ**vãːrʲi**, the vocative of ˈ**maːrʲi** *Mary*, picked up as *Mhairi*, pronounced *vah-ree*.)

Plurals are formed in various ways, but a common method - and the default for borrowed words - is to add **içən**: **stoːv** *stove*, ˈ**stoːviçən** *stoves*. Again, you more or less have to learn the plural of each noun alongside its singular (but the plural inflections are less complicated).

Alongside this inflectional system there is a sound-change system, consisting of lenitions and ploptions, which creates further modifications. For example, the definite article causes ploption in the masc. abs. sing.: əŋ **haʰt** *the cat*, and lenition after prepositions in the fem. sing.: **ɛr**ʲ ə ˈ**vrɔːk** *on the shoe*, but creates no change in the fem. gen. sing.: **nə** ˈ**prɔːk**ʲə *of the shoe*. Moreover some prepositions always lenite a following noun, whereas others do not: **lɛ** ˈ**ʃeːməs** *with James* shows no lenition, whereas **fɔ** ˈ**heːməs** *from James* shows lenition of ʃ to **h** (and differs from the vocative in that the last consonant isn't palatalised or the last vowel changed). The possessive pronouns are a mixed bunch, some always causing lenition and others never: ə ˈ**vãːhər**ʲ *his mother* (lenition), ə ˈ**maːhər**ʲ *her mother* (no lenition). At the end of the day, you just have to learn which prepositions, articles, etc. cause lenition, and under which circumstances, and which do not.

Some handbooks try to unify the inflectional system and the sound-change system by introducing such concepts as the 'definite noun' (the noun with the definite article). One can then say, for example, that the definite noun lenites after prepositions. Such accounts quickly fall apart, however - they don't explain the difference between ˈ**ʃeːməs** and ˈ**heːməs** (both 'indefinite') above, to take just one example. Treating the inflectional system and the sound-change system as different means that the description is more fragmentary, but in the end makes more sense. It also acknowledges that some lenitions are inherent in the grammatical forms of some words (e.g. vocative), whereas others are produced by various preceding words.

I think that's about all I have to say in this overview. As you'll guess, I've relied heavily on Borgstrøm's 1940 publication in drawing it up, and I've confined it to the variety described by him as used in Lewis. (I've also thrown "Can Seo" in the bin.) It seems to me that the Gaelic verb system is infinitely less complicated than that of French or Spanish, and that its noun system is no

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more complicated than that of German, which is horribly bitty. But of course Gaelic deploys very different and interesting resources to embody its grammatical structures, and opens up a different way of thinking about it all. I'm sure you'll enjoy it!

Yours ever,

Derek

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