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## P R O N U N C I A T I O N

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This Pronunciation module consists of this Description and a set of computerised listening exercises: it teaches you all the speech-sounds of Gaelic. The variety taught is Hebridean Gaelic as spoken on Lewis.

## 2. CONSONANTS

## 2.1. Plosives

There are 10 Gaelic plosives. They fall into matching pairs in which one sound is aspirated and one is not:

Aspirated:    p<sup>h</sup>   t<sup>h</sup>   tʃ<sup>h</sup>   c<sup>h</sup>   k<sup>h</sup>  
 Unaspirated: p    t    tʃ    c    k

The aspiration - the puff of breath that follows the consonant - is very strong, much stronger than in English. The unaspirated (and voiceless) sounds are damped down, with absolutely no puff of breath at all, like French *p t k* (which are likewise unaspirated), or an aggressively pronounced English *b d g* (which can be virtually voiceless).

They can also be thought of as forming a different set of matching pairs, in which each non-palatal plosive has a matching palatal plosive:

	Asp.	Unasp.	Asp.	Unasp.	Asp.	Unasp.
Non-palatal:	p <sup>h</sup>	p	t <sup>h</sup>	t	k <sup>h</sup>	k
Palatal:	-	-	tʃ <sup>h</sup>	tʃ	c <sup>h</sup>	c

The pattern is incomplete because of the absence of palatal p<sup>h</sup> and p, though some commentators say they exist.

- p<sup>h</sup> Voiceless bilabial plosive, strongly aspirated.  
 Like English *p* followed by a strong puff of breath. 'p<sup>h</sup>ãnə *pan*.
- p Voiceless bilabial plosive, unaspirated.  
 Like English *p*, but without the following puff of breath. 'pal<sup>ɤ</sup>ə *wall*.
- t<sup>h</sup> Voiceless denti-alveolar plosive, strongly aspirated.  
 Like English *t*, but with the tongue pushed against the front teeth, and followed by a strong puff of breath. t<sup>h</sup>ɤj *house*.
- t Voiceless denti-alveolar plosive, unaspirated.  
 Like English *t*, but with the tongue pushed against the front teeth and without the following puff of breath. 'tũjə *man*.
- tʃ<sup>h</sup> Voiceless denti-alveolar plosive, strongly aspirated, palatalised.  
 Like the *ty* sound in English *tune*, but with the tongue pushed against the front teeth, and followed by a strong puff of breath. 'tʃ<sup>h</sup>ẽnə *fire*.
- tʃ Voiceless denti-alveolar plosive, unaspirated, palatalised.  
 Like the *ty* sound in English *tune*, but with the tongue pushed against the front teeth, and without the following puff of breath. tʃɔx *drink*.
- c<sup>h</sup> Voiceless palatal plosive, strongly aspirated.  
 Like the *ky* sound in English *cue*, followed by a strong puff of breath. c<sup>h</sup>ɔ:l<sup>ɤ</sup> *music*.
- c Voiceless palatal plosive, unaspirated.  
 Like the *ky* sound in English *cue*, but without the following puff of breath. cal<sup>ɤ</sup> *white*.
- k<sup>h</sup> Voiceless velar plosive, strongly aspirated.  
 Like English *k* followed by a strong puff of breath. k<sup>h</sup>a<sup>h</sup>t *cat*.
- k Voiceless velar plosive, unaspirated.  
 Like English *k*, but without the following puff of breath. kɯ: *wind*.

Aspirated plosives occur only in stressed syllables. If the aspirated plosive is at the end of its syllable, then the aspiration comes before it instead of after: k<sup>h</sup>a<sup>h</sup>t *cat*, mã<sup>h</sup>k *son*, 'p<sup>h</sup>ɛ:h<sup>h</sup>pəɹ *paper*.

## 2.2. Fricatives

Six of the nine Gaelic fricatives can be thought of as forming two different sets of matching pairs, just as plosives can. One set contrasts voiceless and voiced sounds:

Voiceless: f s ʃ ç x h  
 Voiced: v - - j ɣ -

s, ʃ and h don't have voiced companions.

The alternative set contrasts non-palatal and palatal sounds (as plosives do):

	V.less	V.d	V.less	V.d	V.less	V.less
Non-palatal:	f	v	s	x	ɣ	h
Palatal:	-	-	ʃ	ç	j	-

f, v and h don't have matching palatals (though again, some commentators claim that palatal f and v exist).

f Voiceless labio-dental fricative.

Like English *f*. fa:s *grow*.

v Voiced labio-dental fricative.

Like English *v*. 'ãviŋ *river*.

s Voiceless alveolar fricative.

Like *ss* in English *hiss*. 'suɪjə *sit*.

ʃ Voiceless post-alveolar fricative.

Like *sh* in English *shush*. ʃɔ *this*.

ç Voiceless palatal fricative.

Like the *ky* sound in English *cue*, but without the tongue touching the roof of the mouth. 'çi: mi *I can see*.

j Voiced palatal fricative.

Like the *gy* sound in English *regular*, but with more buzz, and without the tongue touching the roof of the mouth. 'jiç mi *I ate*.

x Voiceless velar fricative.

Like the *ch* sound in Scottish *loch*. 'xʊð' mi *I placed*.

ɣ Voiced velar fricative.

Like the *ch* sound in Scottish *loch*, but with the vocal chords vibrating to give a buzzing sound. 'ɣɔ:l'ɣ mi *I drank*.

h Glottal fricative.

Like English *h*. 'hʊ:t' mi *I said*.

## 2.3. Sonorants

Whereas plosives and fricatives can be grouped into non-palatal and palatal pairs, three groups of sonorants - *n*-sounds, *r*-sounds and *l*-sounds - show a three-way variation. One member of the group is strongly palatal, one is strongly velar, and one is weak, neither palatal nor velar. As follows:

Strongly		Strongly
palatal	Weak	velar
ŋ	n	nʁ
ðʲ	r	rʁ
ʎ	l	lʁ

m Voiced bilabial nasal.

Like English *m*. 'mãl'ɣə *eyebrow*.

nʁ Voiced denti-alveolar nasal, velarised.

Like English *n*, but with the tongue pushed against the front teeth, and the back of the tongue raised to create a hollow sound. ə 'nʁʃk *tonight*.

n Voiced alveolar nasal.

Like English *n*. ə 'nɪʃ *now*.

ŋ Voiced palatal nasal.

Like the *ny* sound in English *onion*. 'ŋɪ.ə *wash*.

ðʲ Voiced interdental fricative, palatalised.

Like the *thy* sounds in English *bathe you*. 'mã:ðʲi *Mary*.

r Voiced alveolar tap.



## 3. VOWELS

i Close front unrounded vowel.

Like ee in English *flee*, but shorter. iç *eat*.

e Close-mid front unrounded vowel.

Halfway between English *bet* and *bit*. 'pek *little*.

ɛ Open-mid front unrounded vowel.

Like e in English *dress*. pɛn *woman*.

u Close back unrounded vowel.

Like ur in English *fur*, but with the back of the tongue raised very close to the roof of the mouth. 'uɲak *window*.

ʏ Close-mid back unrounded vowel.

Like ur in English *fur*, but with the back of the tongue slightly raised towards the roof of the mouth. tʰʏj *house*.

a Open central unrounded vowel.

Like a in English *path*, but shorter, and with the tongue further forward. 'mãtiɲ *morning*.

ʊ Close back rounded vowel, advanced.

Like oo in English *moon*, but with the tongue pushed forward. kʰʊs *too much*.

ʊ Close back rounded vowel, lowered.

Like oo in English *foot*. rʰʊt *thing*.

o Close-mid back rounded vowel.

Halfway between English *lot* and *foot*. 'kʰõmə *indifferent*.

ɔ Open-mid back rounded vowel.

Like the vowel-sound in English *thought*, but shorter. tɔɔx (*a*) *drink*.

ə Mid central unrounded vowel.

Like a in English *about*. ə 'nɪʃ *now*.

## 3.1. Short and long vowels

All vowels except ə come in two versions, short and long; the examples above show short vowels. To say a long vowel, just keep the short vowel going for much, much longer. Long vowels are shown in this course with the symbol :, placed after the vowel: f:m *butter*, 'kɛ:.əlʰ *Gael*, fɹʊ:x *heather*, pɹ: *shop*.

- the long versions of ɛ, ʏ and ɔ have noticeably higher tongue-positions than the short versions. This means in particular that it is not always easy to distinguish ɛ: from e:.

- not all speakers differentiate between short u, short ʏ and short u.

## 3.2. Nasal and oral vowels

A nasal vowel is one that is pronounced through the nose, as some French vowels are; an oral vowel is one pronounced wholly through the mouth (the usual way in English). Nasality is indicated by the symbol ~ placed over the vowel: fẽːc *see*, kʰĩõːk *hill*, rock, 'f:ʃə *tell*.

Nasal vowels run throughout ordinary speech, and follow this pattern:

- in stressed syllables, a vowel standing next to a nasal consonant (ṽ r̃ m nʰ n ɲ) is usually nasal. But there are exceptions - e: for example is almost never nasal, and mo:f - vo:f *big* has no nasal vowel. A vowel can also be nasal when it is not next to a nasal consonant, as for example in ʃĩçə *night*. This course marks all the nasal vowels that occur in stressed syllables.

- if a word has a svarabhakti vowel then it has no nasal vowels.

- in unstressed syllables, a vowel standing next to a nasal consonant is nasal. This course does not mark nasal vowels in unstressed syllables.

### 3.3. Choice between $\text{u}$ and $\text{u}^{\text{v}}$

Broadly speaking (there are exceptions),  $\text{u}$  is used if a u-sound occurs next to a 'back' consonant; otherwise  $\text{u}^{\text{v}}$  is used. The consonants that count as 'back' in this context are  $\text{x}$ , the three velarised sonorants  $\text{n}^{\text{v}}$ ,  $\text{r}^{\text{v}}$  and  $\text{l}^{\text{v}}$ , and the three retroflex consonants  $\text{ɰ}$ ,  $\text{ʂ}$  and  $\text{ɳ}$ . Examples:  $\text{h}\text{u}^{\text{v}}:\text{ɰ}$  *said*,  $\text{p}\text{u}^{\text{v}}:\text{ŋ}$  *water*,  $\text{r}^{\text{v}}\text{u}^{\text{v}}\text{t}$  *thing*. An exception is  $\text{ə}$  'xʊlə every, where  $\text{u}$  appears next to the non-velarised  $\text{l}$ , but the pronunciation  $\text{ə}$  'xʊl<sup>v</sup>ə (i.e. with velarised  $\text{l}^{\text{v}}$ ) is also found.

If the consonant next to the u-sound changes from velarised to unvelarised - as it may under lenition, for example - then the vowel will change accordingly:  $\text{r}^{\text{v}}\text{u}^{\text{v}}\text{t}$  *thing*,  $\text{ə}$  'hʉnɰw 'ɹɹt *the same thing*.

## 4. RHYTHM

### 4.1. Stress

The stress normally falls on the first syllable of a word; it is marked in this course, in words of more than one syllable, by the symbol ' at the beginning of the stressed syllable:  $\text{k}\text{a}'\text{ʂ}\text{ɔ}\text{n}$  *why*,  $'\text{k}^{\text{h}}\text{ɔ}\text{m}\text{ə}$  *indifferent*. Foreign words may keep their original stress:  $\text{p}\text{ə}'\text{n}^{\text{v}}\text{h}\text{a}:\text{h}\text{t}\text{ə}$  *potato*. This course also uses the stress-mark to show where the stress falls in a phrase containing unstressed words:  $'\text{ɹ}\text{ɹ}\text{ɪ}^{\text{v}}\text{ŋ}$  *mi a I did it*.

### 4.2. Syllable divisions

There is a difference between words of one syllable containing a long vowel or a diphthong, and words containing the same sounds pronounced as two syllables. An example is  $\text{t}\text{u}\text{̃}\text{an}$  *poem* vs.  $'\text{t}\text{u}.\text{an}$  *fishing-hook*.  $\text{t}\text{u}\text{̃}\text{an}$  is a diphthong, pronounced as one syllable, with the pitch rising throughout;  $'\text{t}\text{u}.\text{an}$  is pronounced as two syllables, of which the first is stressed, and with the pitch falling abruptly on the second syllable. In this course the syllable division is marked with a dot.

### 4.3. Svarabhakti vowels

Some vowels are pronounced with a sudden rise in pitch: the effect is as though the speaker had stressed the preceding vowel as normally, then changed his mind and stressed the next vowel instead. These vowels are called, for various reasons, 'svarabhakti vowels' or 'epenthetic vowels' or 'anaptyctic vowels', and marked with a small up-arrow  $\uparrow$  in this course:  $'\text{f}\text{al}\uparrow\text{av}$  *depart*,  $'\text{t}\text{ɕ}^{\text{h}}\text{im}\text{i}\text{ɕ}\text{ə}\text{l}^{\text{v}}$  *around*. The additional stress can create a difference of meaning:  $'\text{p}\text{al}^{\text{v}}\text{ak}$  *skull*,  $'\text{p}\text{al}^{\text{v}}\uparrow\text{ak}$  *belly*.

The svarabhakti vowel is always the same as the vowel to the left of its preceding consonant.

## 5. LENITION

A striking feature of Gaelic is the way in which the first sound of a word can change to another sound in certain grammatical constructions. So, for example,  $\text{p}\text{ɛ}\text{n}$  *wife* changes its initial  $\text{p}$  to  $\text{v}$  in  $\text{m}\text{ə}$  'vɛn *my wife*, because the word  $\text{m}\text{ə}$  *my* requires this change of the following noun. Or again,  $\text{t}^{\text{h}}\text{xj}$  *house* becomes  $\text{n}^{\text{v}}\text{h}\text{xj}$  in  $\text{ə}$  'n<sup>v</sup>h<sup>xj</sup> *the house* from the influence of the definite article *the*. There are two sets of modifications, lenition and nasalisation. This section and the following one explain the changes that constitute lenition and nasalisation; the circumstances in which lenition and nasalisation apply will be dealt with in the forthcoming Grammar module.

### 5.1. Plosives and fricatives

Lenition means that a consonant changes to its lenited equivalent. The lenited equivalents of the plosives and fricatives are as follows:



Strong nasalisation applies when the first sound in the following word is one of the following:

- an aspirated plosive
- one of the clusters  $sn^x$   $\int n$   $sl^x$   $\int l$  and  $stf$
- $s$  or  $\int$  followed immediately by a vowel.

Weak nasalisation applies when the following word begins with:

- an unaspirated plosive
- a vowel
- $f$  followed by a vowel.

If the following word does not begin with one of the sounds listed above, nasalisation does not apply.

## 6.2. Additional sounds for nasalisation

Strong nasalisation uses three additional sounds:

$h$  Breathy glottal fricative.

Like English  $h$ , but said in a warm, breathy, unctuous way.  $\text{ə } 'nha:f$  *the car*.

$\eta^j$  Voiced velar nasal, advanced.

Like the *ngy* sound in English *bring you*.  $\text{ə } 'n^jha\ddot{a}\ddot{o}n^x$  *the head*.

$\eta$  Voiced velar nasal.

Like *ng* in English *long*.  $\text{ə } 'nha:f$  *the car*.

Weak nasalisation uses five additional sounds called 'mistimed plosives', described below.

## 6.3. Strong nasalisation

### 6.3.1. Plosives

To apply nasalisation to an aspirated plosive, replace the plosive with a nasal consonant formed at the same point in the mouth, and follow this with  $h$ . As follows:

Unchanged:	$p^h$	$t^h$	$t\zeta^h$	$c^h$	$k^h$
Nasalisation:	$m^h$	$n^xh$	$\eta^h$	$\eta^jh$	$\eta^h$

Examples:

$'p^h\varepsilon:h$ <i>paper</i>	$\text{ə } 'm^h\varepsilon:h$ <i>the paper</i>
$t^hxj$ <i>house</i>	$\text{ə } 'n^xhxj$ <i>the house</i>
$'t\zeta^h\varepsilon n\text{ə}$ <i>fire</i>	$\text{ə } 'n^h\varepsilon n\text{ə}$ <i>the fire</i>
$'c\ddot{a}\ddot{o}n^x$ <i>head</i>	$\text{ə } 'n^jh\ddot{a}\ddot{o}n^x$ <i>the head</i>
$k^ha:f$ <i>motor-car</i>	$\text{ə } 'n^hha:f$ <i>the motor-car</i>

### 6.3.2. Sibilant clusters

The five clusters beginning with  $s$  or  $\int$  behave under nasalisation as follows:

Unchanged:	$sn^x$	$\int n$	$sl^x$	$\int l$	$stf$
Nasalisation:	$n^xh\text{r}$	$n^xh\text{r}$	$n^xhl^x$	$\eta^hl$	$n^xh\text{r}$

Note that three of the five clusters change to  $n^xh\text{r}$  (including  $\int n$ , where the palatal  $\eta$  becomes the velar  $n^x$ ). The two clusters that have an  $l$ -sound in them retain it, and also retain its palatal or velar quality, and add no  $f$ .

Examples:

$'sn^x\ddot{a}:h\text{ət}$ <i>needle</i>	$\text{ə } 'n^xh\text{r}\ddot{a}:h\text{ət}$ <i>the needle</i>
$\int n^x\varepsilon xk$ <i>snow</i>	$\text{ə } 'n^xh\text{r}\varepsilon xk$ <i>the snow</i>
$sl^x\varepsilon\text{ə}\chi$ <i>people</i>	$\text{ə } 'n^xhl^x\varepsilon\text{ə}\chi$ <i>the people</i>
$'\int li.\text{ə}$ <i>way</i>	$\text{ə } 'n^hli.\text{ə}$ <i>the way</i>
$stf\ddot{c}:n$ <i>nose</i>	$\text{ə } 'n^xh\text{r}\ddot{c}:n$ <i>the nose</i>



## 6.3.3. Single sibilants

The sibilants *s* and *ʃ* behave under nasalisation as though they were *t<sup>h</sup>* and *tʃ<sup>h</sup>*:

Unchanged:     *s*     *ʃ*  
Nasalisation:  *n<sup>s</sup>h*  *ɲh*

Examples: '*sasən<sup>s</sup>əx* *Englishman*, ə '*n<sup>s</sup>hasənəx* *the Englishman*; '*ʃɛ̃nɛð<sup>ʃ</sup>* *grandfather* ə '*ɲhɛ̃nɛð<sup>ʃ</sup>* *the grandfather*.

## 6.4. Weak nasalisation

## 6.4.1. Unaspirated plosives

To apply nasalisation to an unaspirated plosive, replace the plosive with a nasal consonant followed by a mistimed voiced plosive, both made at the same point in the mouth as the original plosive:

Unchanged:     *p*     *t*     *tʃ*     *c*     *k*  
Nasalisation:  *m(b)*  *n<sup>s</sup>(d)*  *ɲ(d<sup>j</sup>)*  *ɲ<sup>j</sup>(ʃ)*  *ɲ(g)*

The term 'mistimed voiced plosive' needs an explanation. Let us start with a nasal consonant: *m* is made by closing the lips and passing voiced breath through the nose. A voiced plosive such as English *b* is likewise made by closing the lips and passing voiced breath, but the breath does not pass through the nose, because the velum is closed (as it is when you hold your breath, for example). This closing of the velum enables pressure to build up in the mouth, which is then released explosively to create the *b*. While the pressure is building up there can be a buzzing sound.

To make the Gaelic sound, open the lips after the buzz has started but before the pressure has built up enough to create a full *b*. The timing is critical - if you open the lips too early, you'll get an ordinary *m*, and if you open them too late you'll get a full *b*. Something between the two is the thing to aim for.

The account above describes the mistimed plosive in terms of *m* and *b*, resulting from applying nasalisation to *p*. To apply nasalisation to the other unaspirated plosives, form the nasal and the mistimed plosive at the same point in the mouth as the original consonant, producing *n<sup>s</sup>(d)*, *ɲ(g)*, etc. The mistimed plosive is a vestigial, voiced form of the original unaspirated plosive.

## 6.4.2. Vowels

To apply nasalisation to a vowel, or to *f* followed by a vowel, first delete the *f*. The nasalised form is then:

- *m(b)* if the preceding particle ends in *m*; otherwise
- *ɲ(d<sup>j</sup>)* if a 'front' vowel follows, or
- *n<sup>s</sup>(d)* if a 'back' vowel follows.

Examples:

'*ahəð<sup>j</sup>* *father*     '*m(b)ahəð<sup>j</sup>* *my father*  
'*e:ð<sup>j</sup>iɲ<sup>j</sup>* *Ireland*  ə*n<sup>s</sup>ə* '*ɲ(d<sup>j</sup>)e:ð<sup>j</sup>iɲ* *in Ireland*  
'*ʃiʃə* *night*       ə '*n<sup>s</sup>(d)ʃiʃə* *the night*.

Nasalisation before a vowel is also found, for historical reasons, within the word: ə '*ɲ(d<sup>j</sup>)ɛ̃:* *yesterday*; ə '*ɲ(d)u<sup>h</sup>* *today*.

## 7. GLOSSARY

**Advanced:** a vowel where the tense part of the tongue is further forward than usual; a consonant where the tongue articulates with the roof of the mouth at a point slightly further forward than that specified.



**Sibilant:** a general term for consonants that have a hissing sound, such as the *s*-sounds and *sh*-sounds at the beginning and end of English *cease* and *shush*.

**Sonorant:** a general term for consonants that are not plosives, affricates or fricatives.

**Tap:** a consonant where one articulator touches the other briefly while in movement.

**Trill:** a consonant where one articulator vibrates against the other.

**Unaspirated:** an unaspirated plosive does not have the puff of breath that accompanies most plosives in English. See 'Aspirated'.

**Unrounded:** a vowel where the lips are spread, not rounded.

**Velar:** the tongue articulates with the velum. See 'Velum'.

**Velarised:** the back of the tongue is tensed and raised towards the velum, giving the consonant a dark colouring. See 'Velum'.

**Velum:** the soft back part of the roof of the mouth.

**Voiced:** with a voiced sound, the vocal chords vibrate: the sound can be sung; if you put your hands over your ears, you can hear a buzz; if you touch your larynx lightly, you can feel vibrations. See 'Voiceless'.

**Voiceless:** with a voiceless sound, the vocal chords do not vibrate: the sound cannot be sung; if you put your hands over your ears, you do not hear a buzz; and if you touch your larynx lightly, you feel no vibrations. See 'Voiced'.

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