

Compensatory Lengthening and the Secret of Time

No, I'm not about to go mystic on you, no worries. But time does come into it. Now - just humour me for a moment and enjoy:

$$\begin{aligned} V > V; \text{VV} / _ C: [+son]\# \\ V > V; \text{VV} / _ C: [+son][\alpha\text{place}]C[\alpha\text{place}] \\ V > V / _ C: [+son]V \\ V > V / _ C: [+son][\alpha\text{place}]C[\beta\text{place}] \text{ and } \alpha \neq \beta \end{aligned}$$

You know, when I started doing linguistics ... quite some time ago, I thought I'd finally escape maths. Hah! Anyway, that was just for enjoyment, I will make things much clearer.

I'm sure you have all come across words like **ann**, **ball**, **ceann** and **cam** and wondered where the strange diphthongs come from? Why do we say [auŋ] and [kaum] and [b̥auɰ̥]? Ok, we can take the view that they simply are pronounced like that and that we have to learn by listening. Fair enough, listening is important, but some of us are a bit more inquisitive than that and we don't all have the privilege of living with a native speaker. And as it turns out, there are a few very good pointers - less arcane than the above rules by the way.

So here's what really happened:

Going back to Old Irish (again), we find a handful of interesting consonants. Long sonorants - that is, L N R and M. They are called sonorants because you can "keep saying them", almost as if they were vowels, something that doesn't work with p t k for example. Because they are long, our kind scribes wrote them as double consonants, quite logical really. So we get

Old Irish	Gaelic	Irish
lomm	lom	lom
tomm	tom	tom
mall	mall	mall
mell	meall	meall
cenn	ceann	ceann
donn	donn	donn
corr	còrr	corr
cerr	ceàrr	cearr

So what? Well, what happens is that the long consonants "transfer" their long quality to the preceding vowel. This in turn gets diphthongised in many cases (as happens in many languages, just think of the changes from Old English to Modern English: hlūd [lu:d] became loud [laʊd], nama [na:mə] became name [neɪm]) so what we have in terms of pronunciation is:

Old Irish	Middle Irish	Common Gaelic	Scottish Gaelic
lomm [lom:]	lom [lo:m]	lom [lo:m]	lom [lɔum]

But hang on, if that happens before **ll**, **nn** and **rr** in Gaelic, what about **im** and **cùm** and **inntè** and especially **ceannaich**, seeing **ceann** has a diphthong? Well spotted. As always, things aren't as straightforward as that.

First of all, when do you lengthen?

- Before **rr**: **bàrr, geàrr, ceàrr, còrr, tàrr ...**
- After **i/i**: **ìm, tìm, ...**
- After **u, io**: **cùm, lom, tom, a chum, ionnsaich, ionnan, cionn ...**

Second, when do you diphthongise?

- Everywhere else
- Including after "disappeared" fricatives. In other terms, if you come across a **bh, dh, gh** or **mh** that is apparently not pronounced, this fricative has gone into lengthening or diphthongising the preceding vowel. Cool, eh? **snaidhm, gearhadh, oighre ...**

And when not to?

- If the sonorant is followed by another vowel. This includes words with helping vowels, so words like **Donnchadh** escape both lengthening and diphthongisation. A good pair of words to remember here is **caill** [kaiʎ] and **cailleach** [kaʎax]; similarly **ann** [aʎ] and **Anna** [aʎə]
- When the vowel before the sonorant is a diphthong anyway, e.g. **iarr**
- Traditionally there was a tendency not to diphthongise when the sonorant is followed by a homo-organic consonant, meaning that if **ll, nn, rr** are followed by **d, dh, s, t, or th** you would simply lengthen the vowel. This is still apparent in words like **sunndach** which can still be heard as [su:ɲɔx] but this rule is only marginal today.

Before we answer the question of "how to", let's just take a quick look at "where to". There's a broad divide into "progressive" or diphthongising and "conservative" or lengthening dialects.



As you can see, it's not much of an issue anymore, as most of the conservative (regarding lengthening) dialects of East Perthshire, Kintyre and Arran are mostly moribund today. So to be brief, all that needs to be said about these dialects is that in almost all cases these dialects either lengthen the vowel or simply have a short vowel, but hardly ever diphthongise. So in Arran Gaelic for example **ann**, **ceann**, **donn**, **cùm** and **ionnsaich** would be pronounced as: [aŋ] [kʲaŋ] [d̪oŋ] [kum] and [iŋsiç].

The most lively dialects today are fairly homogenous, except perhaps for Lewis Gaelic (don't sigh) which is the most progressive amongst these. There are two categories of diphthongs to be considered here: the so called i-glides and the u-glides. The difference in quality is simply due to the quality of the original vowel and following consonant (either broad or slender) and isn't much of a problem. Here's an overview over these dialects:

Before a Broad Sonorant (LL, NN, RR, M)

Spelling	Lewis	Elsewhere	Examples
a	au	au	ann , fann , cam , mall ...
ea	au	au	ceann , cearr , gearr , leann ...
o	ɔu	ɔu	tom , lom , donn , bonn ...
u	ɔu	u:	cum , cunnradh , cunntas ...
io	ɔu	u:	ionnsaich , iolla , tionndaich ...
abhC, amhC	au	au	samhradh , samhla ...
aighC	əi	əi	saighdear , maighdean ...
(e)adhC, aghC	ɣ:	ɣ:	adhbran , Ragnall , adhbhar ...
eamhC	ɛu	ɛu	geamhradh , leamhrag ...
ion/m	ia	ia	mios , fion , gnìomh ...
iodhC, ioghC	iə	iə	iodhlann , tiodhlac ...
oghC	o:	o:	foghnaidh , roghnaich ...

Before a Slender Sonorant (LL, NN, M)

Spelling	Lewis	Elsewhere	Examples
ai	ai	ai	caill , saill , cainnt , caim ...
oi	əi	əi	broinn , soillsich ...
ui	əi	ui	cruinn , druim , cluinn ...
i	ei / i:	i:	mill , till , im , innte ...
ei	ei	ei	beinn , seinn , leinn ...
aibhC, aidhC, aimhC	ai	ai	snaidhm , taibhse , aimhraid ...
aoibh/mh/gh	əi	ui	buidhe , guidhe , craoibh ...
oibhC	əi	əi	goibhle , goibhnean ...
oimhC	ɔi	ɔi	doimhne , doimhneachd ...
oighC	ɣi	ɣi	oighreachd , oighre ...
uimhC	əi	ui	cuidhne , cuidhneachadh ...

So how does this all relate to the Secret of Time? What's Gaelic for time? **Àm**, isn't it? Or is it **am**? **Cùm** or **cum**? **Ceàrr** or **cearr**? Strictly speaking, as long as you are aware of the rules of lengthening/diphthongisation (which is easy if you're a native speaker) there is no need really to indicate length over the vowels. But people like to clarify, so at some point they began to indicate the long vowel/diphthong by using an accent over it. But as this hasn't become universal yet, you find people spelling words like **ceàrr**, **bàrr**, **àm**, **cam** etc with or without an accent. It's up to you in a way, but as the general practice these days seems to be to use the accent, we suggest you do that. But that's the secret behind this confusion over words like **àm** vs **am** anyway.

As an extra minor footnote watch out for the derivatives of these words. As many will add a vowel to indicate the genitive or add an ending to form a verbal noun, you must not pronounce or write a long vowel/diphthong in the derived word. Here's a few illustrative examples:

àm	clàr-ama
bàrr	Dùn Bharra
geàrr	a' gearradh a ghearras gearraidh ...
ceann	a' ceannach a cheannaicheas ceannaidh ...
cùm	a' cumail
tinn	nas tinne

So. Happy diphthongising to you all.