

Final Devoicing or 'Why does <naoi> sound like [nɔiç]?'

It is something most intermediate and advanced learners will have noticed - strange things do not only happen at the beginning of words in Gaelic, but also at the end. At least when you compare the way a word is pronounced and the way it is written.

It's a strange, almost hissing like sound at the end of words which doesn't make that much sense at first sight. Linguists call it Final Devoicing and there is no really easy way of explaining it. It isn't particularly weird, those of you who are fluent in German will know this already - it is what makes the words <Tod> 'Death' and <tot> 'dead' sound exactly the same.

Ok, make sure no one is looking and put your hand on your throat, roundabout where your Adams apple is. Hold it there and make an <aaaa> sound. Now make an <oooo> sound. Now try something more difficult - make a sound. What you should notice is that there is something in your throat that is vibrating when you make this sound. The things that are vibrating are two ligaments called your vocal cords. So when we talk about voiced sounds, it means that these vocal cords are vibrating - similarly, when talking about unvoiced or devoiced sounds, it means they are not moving, e.g. in <k> <p> <t>.

Patience, we're getting there. In German there is a rule saying that you may not have a voiced sound at the end of a word, under no circumstances - so any voiced sound at the end of a word gets devoiced. In the case mentioned above, this means that <Tod> which has a voiced sound (d) at the end gets pronounced /tot/ i.e. your vocal cords are not vibrating. That's all there is to it really.

Now in Gaelic we do not have a rule saying that you have to devoice every single voiced sound at the end of a word. However, it is something you will hear a lot in spoken Gaelic.

So how does this work in Gaelic? Here's a short list of some of some of the things going on (we will compile a full list eventually)

-b, -d, -g Remember that these sounds are always voiceless in Gaelic anyway, so you don't have to pay attention to this final devoicing business with <d> <g>.

/ɣ/ > /ɣ̥/
/j/ > /j̥/ Final -gh/-dh often get pronounced almost as if they were <ch> (either broad or slender depending upon the preceding vowel e.g.

bagh /bɑ:ɣ/ > /bɑ:ɣ̥/

moladh /mɔɫ̪ɑɣ/ > /mɔɫ̪ɑɣ̥/

a-muigh /ə'muij/ > /ə'muij̥/

They are transcribed with the symbol for devoicing rather than /x/ or /ç/ because they are not as "strong" as broad and slender <ch> but much fainter and less strongly pronounced.

/h/ > /ç/ In most cases, this is a case of final <-th> being pronounced as if it were a slender <ch>:

ruith /ruih/ > /ruič/

/t̪/ > /t̪̥/ A broad <l> at the end of a word getting devoiced. In pronunciation, this almost sounds like the Welsh <ll>. To produce this sound, make an <l> but instead of blowing air out from your lungs, just exhale the air in your mouth - imagining you have no throat helps. Again you can place your hand on your throat to check whether there is any vibration - there should not be any for the <l>:

ceòl /k'ɔ:l̪/ > /k'ɔ:l̪̥/

Something slightly more bizarre, but definitely not unheard of in the languages of the world is the devoicing of final vowels. Ok, fair question - how DO you make a vowel without voicing if a vowel's very nature seems to consist of vibration of the vocal cords?

Basically what we said you do for the devoiced <l> - you pull your mouth into the appropriate shape for whichever vowel and the exhale without using air from your lungs. This produces a somewhat hissing vowel - almost as if the vowel were followed by a slender <ch>. It might help you to think of it as a VERY faint slender <ch> following the vowel. But you have to remember that it is not really a separate segment, but just a devoiced vowel so don't make the sound so prominent as if there actually WAS a <ch> (V stands for any vowel).

V > V̥ *naoi* /nūi/ > /nūi̥/

Which is why *naoi* often sounds as if it were **naoich*.