

The History of L N and R

Once again, we have to go WAY back. To Common Gaelic to be exact, which has a lovely balanced system of sonorants - L N and R that is:

l̥	l̪	n̥	n̪	r̥	*r̪	r	rʲ
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To begin with, the *r means that there was an initial slender R but we have no idea what that was phonetically. It's a mystery.

The above system is nice and balanced in the way that you had two "strong" variants of each sound which would occur at the beginning of words and two "weak" ones which you would get in the middle or at the end of words or as the result of lenition!

So you'd get:

l̥	l̪	n̥	n̪	r̥	*r̪	r	rʲ
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Taking a big leap in time most modern Scottish Gaelic dialects have evolved the following system:

l̥	l̪	l̥	l̪	n̥	n̪	n̥	n̪	r̥	*r̪	r	rʲ
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Which creates a small problem - since the system is now 3 sounds short and somewhat unbalanced, how do you deal with lenition? Well ... two ways.

1. By making one sound "double up" for two
2. By "not" leniting

l̥	l̪	l̥	l̪	n̥	n̪	n̥	n̪	r̥	*r̪	r	rʲ
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What does this mean practically? To begin with, the L in **long** and **balach** sound exactly the same now and when you lenite L in **mo long** for example, there is no sound change.

Initial slender L still lenites as in Common Gaelic:
leabaidh [l̪] becomes **mo leabaidh** [l̪].

Both initial N's on the other hand now lenite to [n]:
nead [n̪] > **mo nead** [n]
nàbaidh [n̪] > **mo nàbaidh** [n]

Initial slender R has merged with initial broad R i.e. there is only one initial R sound left - which lenites to [r]:
rionnag [r̪] > **mo rionnag** [r]
ràmh [r̪] > **mo ràmh** [r]

Sooo ... what does this have to do with initial consonant clusters? Lots. The second consonant is considered non-initial, which means that in Common Gaelic it would have had the "weak" pronunciation. But since we have lost two of the "weak" sounds, we have to make do somehow, so the initial broad L has to fill the gap that the departure of non-initial broad L has left:

b̃t > b̃t̃

and so on. In essence, the old system is perpetuated wherever possible except where that isn't possible anymore due to a loss of some of the sounds. Which is why the system today is a bit messy.

Incidentally, not all dialects have evolved the same system and Ulster Irish retains the most complete set of sonorants amongst the Gaelic languages and dialects:

Ulster Irish												
ɸ̃	ʌ	ɸ̃	l	h̃	ɲ	h̃	n	ɸ̃	ɸ̃	r	r̃	
Connacht Irish												
ɸ̃	ʌ	ɸ̃	l	h̃	ɲ	h̃	n	ɸ̃	ɸ̃	r	r̃	
Munster Irish												
ɸ̃	ʌ	ɸ̃	l	h̃	ɲ	h̃	n	ɸ̃	ɸ̃	r	r̃	

And looking at Scotland:

Harris Gaelic												
ɸ̃	ʌ	ɸ̃	l	h̃	ɲ	h̃	n	ɸ̃	ɸ̃	r	r̃	
Rosshire												
ɸ̃	ʌ	ɸ̃	l	h̃	ɲ	h̃	n	ɸ̃	ɸ̃	r	r̃	
East Sutherland												
ɸ̃	ʌ	ɸ̃	l	h̃	ɲ	h̃	n	ɸ̃	ɸ̃	r	r̃	
and most others have												
ɸ̃	ʌ	ɸ̃	l	h̃	ɲ	h̃	n	ɸ̃	ɸ̃	r	r̃	

Fun, ain't it?