

The Homo-Organic Rule or When not to Lenite

Every Gaelic textbook will teach you about lenition and when to expect it; there is lenition after feminine nouns, after the definite article in certain cases and so on which are "relatively" straightforward. But as we all know there are certain exceptions to this rule ... you have *sgian mhór* but *sgian dubh*, *an fhàinne* but *an duilleag*, *Dùn Bhreatainn* but *Dùn Dèagh*, *MacDhòmhnail* but *MacCaluim* and the song goes "*mo nigheann donn*" ... at which point you will often find a list telling you that an does not lenite feminine nouns beginning with *d* or *l* and/or that it just IS *Dùn Dèagh* and not **Dùn Dhèagh*.

Fortunately, there is an easier rule. Linguists call it the homo-organic rule, the rule of "sounds made with the same organ". You could call it the Sgian Dubh Rule to make it easier to remember since it demonstrates the rule in action. But before we can understand this rule, we need to look at our mouth again and where we make sounds.

Broadly speaking, in Gaelic there are three important areas in your mouth where you make consonant sounds: at your lips (labial sounds), at your teeth (dental sounds) and at your velum (the place at the back of your throat where you would make a <k> sound)

Group 1 (labials)	<i>b, p, m, f</i>
Group 2 (dentals)	<i>d, n, t, l, s</i>
Group 3 (velars)	<i>c, g</i>

Why do we need this? Because the rule in Gaelic is that whenever you have two sounds which are in the same group coming together, lenition is blocked, even if the grammatical rule is saying "lenite here please!". Let's look at some examples:

<i>Dùn Bhreatainn</i>	> Lenition
n is in Group 2, b in Group 1	
<i>Dùn Dèagh</i>	>no Lenition
both n and d are in Group 2	
<i>Camshronach</i>	> Lenition
m is in Group 1, s in Group 2	
<i>Caimbeul</i>	>no Lenition
both m and b are in Group 1	
<i>MacDhòmhnail</i>	> Lenition
c is in Group 3, d in Group 2	
<i>MacGriogair, MacCaluim</i>	>no Lenition
both c and g are in Group 3	
<i>sgian mhór</i>	> Lenition
n is in Group 2, m in Group 1	
<i>sgian dubh</i>	>no Lenition
both n and d are in Group 2	
<i>air an fhearann, An Fhraing</i>	> Lenition
n is in Group 2, f in Group 1	
<i>air an duilleig, an deoch</i>	>no Lenition
both n and d are in Group 2	

Of course, things are not quite that uncomplicated. In modern Gaelic this rule has started to break down bigtime and is thus not always applied. You will find that this rule is most strictly adhered to with place names and surnames and after the definite article. This rule is most intact with dental sounds (Group 2) and only infrequently applied with sounds from Group 1 and 3.

So as a pointer to good "current" Gaelic we suggest you adhere to these rules with surnames, placenames, the definite article **an**, the negation **cha(n)** and certain verbal forms like **bhios**, **bhiodh** and **bu** but not otherwise. Here's a few examples of what sounds like "good Gaelic" to native speakers and what sounds like "odd Gaelic":

Definite article	
in the nominative case	an deoch, an luchag, an drochaid, an tunnag ...
in the dative case	anns a' Ghleann Dubh, aig an duine ...
in the genitive case	an dorais, an taighe, an leanna ...
Bu	bu dona, bu tioram, bu salach, bu nimheil ...
Cha(n)	
+ future	cha toisich, cha sàbhail, cha nochd ...
+ personal pronoun	cha tu(sa), cha sinn(e), cha sibh(se)
bhios + thu	a bhios tu
bhiodh	
+ pronoun	b(h)iodh tu, b(h)iodh sinn, b(h)iodh sibh
Surnames	MacCaluim, MacGriogair, MacCriomain ...
Placenames	Dun Déagh, Bad Darach ...
Frozen Forms*	sgian dubh, nighean donn ...

* A Frozen Forms is a phrase or word which preserves some feature which is not salient in the current form of the language anymore. All languages have frozen forms - English e.g. has frozen plurals for certain nouns such as <mouse - mice> <goose - geese>. These are remnants of an old way of forming the plural which is no longer active in modern English - compare German, where this "Umlaut" is still very alive: **Haus - Häuser, Maus - Mäuse, Gans - Gänse**. Or Gaelic as a matter of fact - **mac - mic, balach - balaich, eun - eòin** etc.

Even though **sgian dubh** is acceptable because it is a frozen form, things like ***ad donn** rather than **ad dhonn** have come to sound odd to native speakers and should thus be avoided.

While it does not necessarily concern you as a learner, it is an interesting issue for language planner when it comes to fixing orthography or forming neologisms - should it be **Sgoil Ghàidhlig Glaschu** or **Sgoil Ghàidhlig Ghlaschu**?

To a certain degree, this even applies to the lenited variants of these sounds, but only very infrequently, e.g. **ath-thé** vs. **ath-té**.

The reason for this rule is most likely laziness – if you have to make a **d** (at your teeth) and a **dh** (at your velum) in quick succession, your tongue has to move around a lot – and your tongue is a lazy thing. Linguists debate this 'ease of articulation' concept - but it helps to make sense of this particular one.