

Initial High Front Vowels or Where the [j] in Eòrna comes from

Actually this isn't so much about where it comes from but rather how you can tell when it's there and where it isn't.

In a nutshell, it appears when you have a word with an initial high front vowel followed by a back vowel. Which means what exactly?

High front vowels are [i] and [e] in Gaelic, back vowels are [a] [o] [ɔ] and [u]. So if you get any combination of those two (in the said order), you get an initial glide, the [j]. Don't confuse this with the [j] sound (slender gh and dh) - [j] has much less friction. This is a sound you actually get in English words - year, yarn, yen etc.

A few examples:

eòrna	jɔ:ɾnə
iolair	juɔ:ɾɪɾʲ
Eòghann	jɔ:ɪ.əŋ
iubhar	ju.əɾ
eallach	jaɔ:əx
eòin	jɔ:ɪ.ɲ
ionnsaich	ju:ɲsɪç
earrach	jaɾəx
eòlas	jɔ:ɔ:əs

Unfortunately, this rule doesn't always work and you get words like **iorram** [iɾəm] or **iarann** [iɾəŋ]. The short answer to this problem is that it has something to do with Old Irish. So the best way of dealing with this issue is to expect a [j] glide when you get **e** or **i** before a back vowel, especially if the first syllable contains a long vowel and learn when the exceptions apply.