

Intrusive T or Why we're writing sròn nor *stròn

Ermm ... for the sake of all our sanity, I'll keep the explanation of *why* short. Phonetically, [r] and [d] are quite similar to each other - both are articulated at the same place using the tip of your tongue, the only difference really is the length of contact. Plus, because Gaelic only does that in <sr> clusters, there's an added articulatory reason.

Actually, just taking a quick trip round the world, languages often change [d] into [r] and vice versa. In American English for example the -tt- between vowels has become much like [r] in words like matted, butter etc. Anyway.

So Gaelic introduces a [ɹ̥] sound in <sr> clusters (but doesn't replace the <r>). The northern dialects anyway, as you can see on the map below.



This gives rise to a never ending stream of discussions about spelling. Is it <sruth> or <struth> or even <*sdruth>? In traditional orthography it is spelled <sr> because the orthography was first fixed South of the line. But as the southern dialects have been declining for a long time the majority of Gaelic speakers speak dialects from North of that line, it is a) prominent in everyday pronunciation and b) creeping into the spelling. A quick cross-check with Irish and Old Irish tells us that indeed there was no such sound many moons ago:

Old Irish	Irish	Gaelic
srath	srath [srah]	srath or srath [sɹ̥rah]
srón	srón [sro:n]	sròn [sɹ̥ro:n]
sreth	sreath [srah]	sreath or streath [sɹ̥reh]

As you can see, the [sɹ̥r] pronunciation has been dominant for so long, it has started to creep into the spelling bit by bit. In 100 years time we'll probably write *stròn too.