

Màthraichean-Céile or Kinship

The famous mother-in-law. No, don't worry, this is going to be completely unbiased, but it IS about kinship terms in Gaelic, which can be a bit tricky. Why? Well, I was hoping you'd ask that question.

For the most part, it's just vocabulary learning, but as always, there's more to it than that. To make it easier, we've drawn you a picture, which you can download [here](#).

The most unusual grammatical feature of kinship terms is, that depending on your view they either break the rules of lenition or they break the rules of not having to genitives in the same noun phrase. Let me give you an example or two:

mac mic-peathar	great nephew
nigheann mic-bràthar	great niece

Now there are two ways of looking at this.

1. We assume that **mac-peathar** 'nephew' is a compound noun (stress shift seems to indicate this). If this is the case, **-peathar** functions as an adjectival noun. In other similar noun compounds, the adjectival noun is lenited if the preceding noun is feminine or has slenderised for genitive/plural, e.g. **bileag-fhiosrachaidh**, **cinn-chinnidh** ... But in compounds like **nighean-peathar** 'niece' or **mac mic-peathar** 'great nephew' we don't get lenition.
2. You might say, hang on, maybe **mac peathar** isn't a close compound and simply two nouns, so there is no reason for peathar to lenite. Well, that is possible, but in this case, we violate another rule - that there may not be two genitives in the same noun phrase. **Mac peathar** on its own already contains a genitive, peathar. So **mac mic peathar** would therefore contain two genitives, **mic** and **peathar**.

The solution? There isn't one. It's just one of those cases where a language just goes and does something just because. So you just have to remember to put all nouns following other nouns into the genitive e.g. **nighean mic nighinn bràthar m' athar**. I'll leave you to figure out who that is. This also applies to genealogical phrases - **Eòghann mac mhic Dhòmhnail mhic Theàrlaich mhic Dhonnachaidh** ... until you run out of breath. All of these nouns are in the genitive. In this settings, mhic is pronounced as [tʰkʲ] which is why you sometimes see it written as 'ic.

The only exception (what would life be without them!) is céile, which behaves regularly, so we get **màthair-chéile** but **athair-céile**, **piuthair-chéile** but **bràthair-céile** etc.

What else? Beyond grandmothers and grandfathers, just stick another **sinn-** in front of it. From your great-great-great-grandfather/mother onwards though you insert **seachad-**. So she would be **sinn-seachad-sinn-seanmhair**. Some people, incidentally, lenite after **sinn-**, so you get **sinn-sheanmhair** etc.

There is slight confusion when it comes to husbands and wives, incidentally. **Bean** and **fear** are the prototypical 'man/woman' word pair. In Irish **bean** and **fear** still mean exactly that - even though curiously enough **bean** has the secondary meaning of 'wife'. In Gaelic there has been a slight shift of meaning however. **Bean** still means woman, but it primarily means 'wife'. **Fear** on the other hand still means 'man'. 'Husband' has been taken over by **duine** - which confusingly also can mean 'person' - depends on the context. **An duine agam** always means 'my husband' - but **na daoine a chaidh a Ghlaschu** means 'the people who went to Glasgow'. So what is the man/woman word pair then? Well, you can use **fear** for 'man' but in the modern language **boireannach/fireannach** has largely taken on that function. Notwithstanding, toilets are still labelled **Mnathan/Fir** - or **Mná/Fir** in Ireland.

If you are into traditional songs or sometimes read older materials, you may have come across two words used for 'daughter' - **nighean** and **inghean** - and gotten slightly confused by this. They are both the same word. **inghean** is the older form, derived from Old Irish **ingen**, but at some point the helping vowel that got inserted turned [iŋj.ən] into [iŋi.j.ən]. Modern Irish reflects this 'halfway point' with **Iníon** [iŋiːn]. The initial [i] subsequently got dropped and the [j] vocalised and we were left with the more familiar **nighean** [nɪː.ən]. This is also the reason for the two varying genitival forms given in dictionaries - **nighinn** and **ighne** and the plurals **nigheanan** and **ighnean**. **ighne** is a reflection of the older **inghean**, which quite regularly adds **-e** and shortens a final syllable ending in a nasal or lateral, whereas **nighinn** reflects the attempts of the language to "bring the genitive in line" with the nominative.

If you want to know why the word **piuthar** is irregular, read our page on [backformation](#). That's it really, the rest of the 'family tree' is self explanatory. You may want to have a quick look at the [possessive pronouns](#) page though, as it is very relevant to this topic.