

Lenition and why that is your mothers fault

Ease of articulation. Don't worry if you never heard of this, all will be revealed. It's a contentious concept in linguistic circles, but for our purposes it's rather helpful.

And feel free just to jump the explanation - it's a bit long - and go straight to the bit where we tell you [how lenition works](#).

Ever noticed how things get slurred in fast speech? Suddenly whole sounds drop out, change into something else ... sometimes that becomes so established that even orthography will reflect that. The word <in-pede> had become <impede> long before it even reached Norman French. And be honest - when was the last time you pronounced <in Botham's> as such rather than <im Botham's>? This is where ease of articulation comes in - you are anticipating the next sound you know is to come and your mouth starts getting into position for that sound long before the preceding one has finished. So sounds next to each other become more alike or drop out, if it just gets too tricky for your mouth.

Funnily enough, this also applies to vowels and consonants. Consonants are (in articulatory terms) tricky bastards with a lot of things having to get shifted around (anything from your lips to your pharynx) and held in place, whereas vowels are relatively simple things - just move your tongue a bit this way or that way and you have it.

So when you speed up your speech and have a consonant between vowels, it tries to become more like a vowel. The first thing it loses is the closure that many consonants have (try saying a <p> - notice how your lips close up for a moment?), becoming a fricative (p becoming an <f> in this case - still a consonant but "easier" to say). There may be many intermediate stages, but eventually the consonant either becomes a vowel or disappears altogether. Prove it? Easy. Look at the word for mother in the Indoeuropean languages and how it developed from ancient Indoeuropean to our ancestor languages to the modern day ones - watch out for the <t>:

		mātēr (Indo-European)			(other branches)
	mōder (Germanic)	mātēr (Latin)	mati (Old Slavonic)	mātār (Old Indic)	mētēr (Ancient Greek)
māthir (Old Irish)	muoter (Old German)	mōder (Old French)			macer (Tocharic)
	mōdor (Old English)				
	móðir (Old Norse)				
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màthair (Gaelic)	Mutter (German)	matri (Sicialian)	matir (Ukrainian)	mātā (Bengali)	metéra (Greek)
máthair (Irish)	muter (Yiddish)	madre (Italian)	mat(ka) (Czech/Slovak)	mātri (Hindi)	māte (Latvian)
	moder (Danish)	madre (Castilian)	mati (Croatian)	mātu (Pali)	mótė (Lithuanian)
	muada (Bavarian)	mádre (Sardinian)	matj (Russian)	mādar (Farsi)	
	mither (Scots)	matre (Corsican)	mać [matʃ] (Sorbian)		
	móðir (Icelandic)		mat (Russian)		
	mother (English)				
mayragh (Manx)	mor (Norwegian)	mare (Catalan)	mazi (Belorussian)	mor (Pashtu)	mayr (Armenian)
	moer (Frisian)	maire (Occitan)			
		mère (French)			
		mãe (Portuguese)			

So what? Well, if you look closely, there is some kind of consonant degradation going on - you start with a very strong consonant <t> which gradually is reduced to <d> then <ð> then <h> and then nothing at all (the words underlaid in red)!! So you see, it's a very common thing - even more so when you look at the Tocharic example. Tocharic is the most eastern indo-European language, sadly extinct, but spoken in East Turkestan up until about 700 AD - but it had already changed the [t] to a [tʃ]!!!

The mad thing about Celtic languages though is that this does not only happen within a word like *màthair* but also across word boundaries! In Celtic languages, a consonant between vowels gets lenited fullstop. Well, as a rule of thumb. But pardon me, where is the consonant between two vowels in Irish *an bhean*? (Gaelic used to spell it that way too, it's just a better example) And what about *an fear*? Same thing, isn't it? Unfortunately, not.

There is something very old going on here - there used to be an extra vowel. But for that we have to go back to Indo-European and Old Irish. The modern definite article **an** used to look very different then, it was **sind-os**, the **-os** being an ending for the nominative case of masculine nouns and **sind-a** for feminine nouns. You know where we're going now? Let's have the overview:

Indo-European/Old Irish	Translation	What's going on
sind-os fer-os	the man	two consonants, so nothing happens - but the s- is lost at some point in history
ind-os fer-os	the man	now we lose the endings
ind fer	the man	look familiar? lose the -d
in fer	the man	change the spelling and the sounds a bit
an fear	the man	and now Gaelic assimilates the an to am
am fear	the man	... a 4000 year journey in 6 lines

So what about lenition? "Patience young Skywalker!" ... let's look at a feminine noun

Indo-European/Old Irish	Translation	What's going on
sind-a ben-a	the woman	oops - consonant-vowel-consonant - we have to lenite! and also lose the s-
ind-a bhen-a	the woman	aha. now what? as before, we lose the endings ...
ind bhen	the woman	look vaguely familiar? now we lose the d-
in bhen	the woman	change the spelling and the sounds a bit
an bhean	the woman	Irish! Gaelic now loses the -n (and changes the meaning slightly)
a' bhean	the wife	Bingo!

Funnily enough, Gaelic seems to have come full circle in some instances - back to the consonant between two vowels gets lenited - but not always (see **air an fhear** etc.). And that is why it's all your mothers fault!!! Hopefully it makes just a bit more sense now.

Enough etymology now - let's have a look at the [real stuff](#).