

Liquids or 'L N & R in Gaelic'

This is undoubtedly one of the most challenging bits of Gaelic grammar and phonology a learner will come across. Ever.

There are several reasons for it being so difficult. For one thing, unless you are a learner from an Irish speaking background, Gaelic has a number of sound distinctions which English - and most other languages of Europe - simply does not have, which makes it very difficult for the learner to even begin to distinguish them. The other reason is that, dialectal differences aside, the system inherited from Common Gaelic is not 'clean', not for learners anyway.

There is, however, no need to despair. In spite of what linguists might tell you about Second Language Acquisition, Performance, Representation and stuff, it is a feasible approach to learn how to produce the right sound in the right place, even though you might never learn how to "hear" the difference. This is possible because in 99% of all cases, context will clarify whether the fine distinction you have just missed means A or B. And as long as you make the right sounds, you will shed the **Blas na Beurla air do chuid Ghàidhlig**.

A last word of advice - a lot of the following might sound like nit-picking about "irrelevant" detail. Try not to be anglo-centric; just because from the point of view of the English language a distinction is irrelevant or minor does not mean the same goes for another language. To many German learners of English <then> sounds like <den> and <thin> like <fin> - because to begin with German does not have a <th>, much less a "minor distinction" between two of them, so they substitute with the closest their native language can come up with. While that does not make communication impossible, most people would agree that it does not constitute "good English". The same goes for Gaelic, making the wrong L does not constitute "good Gaelic".

Common Gaelic and why "simplification" doesn't always make things easier

Not to worry, this is not going to turn into a lecture in historical linguistics, but it just might help a bit to make things more clear. If you find it confuses you more than it helps, just jump down to the "hardcore" stuff.

Common Gaelic, the language common to both Ireland and Scotland up until the 16th/17th century, had a "clean" system of liquids, that is, a clear 4 way distinction. Sounds scary, but from the point of view of a learner it might have actually been easier to learn. Symmetry and all that. So Common Gaelic had (IPA in slashed brackets; in round brackets the annotation commonly used amongst celticists which you might find useful to correlate the two):

/l̪/ (L)	/l̪/ (L')	/n̪/ (N)	/n̪/ (N')	/r̪/ (R)	/r̪/ (R')
latha	liath	nàire	nèamh	ràmh	rionnag
mall	caill	ceann	binn	barra	girre
/l̪̪/ (l)	/l̪̪/ (l')	/n̪̪/ (n)	/n̪̪/ (n')	/r̪̪/ (r)	/r̪̪/ (r')
balach	baile	manach	faoineas	caran	fireann
màl	càil	làn	coin	mar	fir

* no one actually knows which sound exactly this was and no Gaelic, Irish or Manx dialect has preserved initial slender R. All three languages have merged them with initial broad R.

This system was very symmetrical (something which languages seem to favour) - even from the point of view of lenition, that is, a lenited sound of the top row is the corresponding one in the bottom row.

But moving on from Common Gaelic, both Irish and Gaelic lost phonemes. The most "complete" set can be found in Ulster Irish which has the following:

/t̪/	/l̪/	/l̪ˠ/	/ɲ/	/ɸ/	
/t̪̥/	/l̪̥/	/l̪̥ˠ/	/n/	/r/	/rˠ/

East Sutherland Gaelic has a very "reduced" system (please note that by that we do not mean it is a degenerate dialect, simply reduced in comparison to Common Gaelic):

/t̪/	/l̪/			/ɸ/
	/l̪̥/	/l̪̥ˠ/	/n/	

Most Scottish Gaelic dialects have established a three way system though (which is the one we will present here. For those interested in a four way system, Harris Gaelic has all four L's:

/t̪/	/l̪/	/l̪ˠ/	/ɲ/	/ɸ/	
	/l̪̥/		/n/	/r/	/rˠ/

Now this reduction in itself would not constitute a problem, after all, it means that there are fewer sounds for the learner to master. But it does become a problem because the "lost" category had to be distributed into the remaining categories - which did not always happen in a clear and straightforward fashion, making it very tricky for learners. We will see some examples of this later on, for now enough historical linguistics and some nitty-gritty useful guidelines.

"Give me an L!"

There are three L sounds in Gaelic. Former non-initial broad L /t̪/ (in italics) has now been grouped with /t̪̥/:

<p><i>/t̪/</i></p> <p>Broad Initial L Broad LL (also called Dental L)</p> <p><i>latha, lorg balla, talla; call, mall balach, ealan; màl, gal</i></p> <p>1. Tongue in an L position 2. Tip of tongue rests against the incisors 3. Body of tongue lowered 4. Back of tongue raised slightly This produces a hollow sounding "dark L"</p>	<p>/l̪/</p> <p>Slender Initial L Slender LL (also called Palatal L)</p> <p><i>leapaidh, leum cailleach, maille; caill, cill</i></p> <p>1. Tongue in an L position 2. Body of tongue pressed against the Palate This produces a palatal L sound. If it helps, think of it as squeezing the L against your palate. For those with foreign language skills, this is the same as Spanish <ll>, Portuguese <lh>, Italian <gli> and French <ill>. Note that this is ONE sound, so do NOT make an L followed by a <y> sound.</p>	<p>/l̪̥/</p> <p>Non-initial Slender L</p> <p>- <i>baile, cuilean; càil, sùil</i></p> <p>This is essentially the same "neutral" L as in English, German etc. This means the tip of your tongue is at the alveolar ridge, not the teeth. By neutral we mean L's without "secondary articulations" i.e. slight modifications caused by surrounding sounds.</p>
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Leniting L's

Because the /t/ sound has been lost, only slender L is lenited.

1. Normal Lenition

By "normal" we mean lenition caused by anything except the definite article, e.g. possessives, vocative particles, relative particles, noun induced lenition.

/l/ > /l/	leapaidh > mo leapaidh
/t̪/ > /t̪/	lámh > mo lámh (no change)
/s̪t̪/ > /t̪/	slaodach > glé shlaodach
/ʃl/ > /l/	sleamhain > glé shleamhain
/ʃl/ > /l/	sleamhain > glé shleamhain (NB: both pronunciations of sl- are heard)

In traditional Harris Gaelic for example, the lenition would work as follows:

/l/ > /l/	leapaidh > mo leapaidh
/t̪/ > /t̪/	lámh > mo lámh (to produce this sound, make an /l/ sound but lower the back of your tongue to "darken" it).

2. Article Lenition

There are a few peculiarities regarding article lenition. Since lenition is **blocked** for words beginning in DNTLS, the only exception here is with words beginning with fl-

/l/ > /l/	leapaidh > air an leapaidh (no change)
/t̪/ > /t̪/	lámh > air an lámh (no change)
/fl/ > /l/	fleasgach > air an fhleasgach

“Give me an N!”

There are three N sounds in Gaelic. Former non-initial slender N /n̪/ (in italics) has now been grouped with /n/:

<i>/n̪/</i>	<i>/ɲ/</i>	<i>/n/</i>
Broad Initial N Broad NN (also called Dental N)	Slender Initial N Slender NN (also called Palatal N)	Non-initial Single N
naoi, nàire ceannaich, beannaich; gann, teann	nì, nead fàinne, cainnt; cruinn, binn	ainm, faoineas; mìn, sin dona, dèanamh; làn, bean
1. Tongue in an N position 2. Tip of tongue rests against the incisors 3. Body of tongue lowered 4. Back of tongue raised slightly This produces a hollow sounding "dark N"	1. Tongue in an N position 2. Body of tongue pressed against the Palate This produces a palatal N sound. If it helps, think of it as squeezing the N against your palate. For those with foreign language skills, this is the same as Spanish <ñ>, Portuguese <nh>, Italian and French <gn>. Note that this is ONE sound, so do NOT make an N followed by a <y> sound.	This is essentially the same "neutral" N as in English, German etc. This means the tip of your tongue is at the alveolar ridge, not the teeth. By neutral we mean N's without "secondary articulations" i.e. slight modifications caused by surrounding sounds. Note that many dialects pronounce slender non-initial single N as /ɲ/ (e.g. ainm, duine...)

Leniting N's

Seeing that the /n̪/ /n/ distinction has been lost, we would expect lenition of N to work like that of L. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Both slender and broad N lenite to /n/

1. Normal Lenition

By "normal" we mean lenition caused by anything except the definite article, e.g. possessives, vocative particles, relative particles, noun induced lenition.

<i>/n̪/ > /n/</i>	nàire > mo nàire
<i>/ɲ/ > /n/</i>	nead > mo nead
<i>/s̪n̪/ > /n/</i>	snàthaid > mo shnàthaid
<i>/ʃɲ/ > /n/</i>	sneachda > mo shneachda

2. Article Lenition

Again, there are a few peculiarities regarding article lenition. Since lenition is **blocked** for words beginning in DNTLS, the only exception here is with words beginning with **sn-**

<i>/n̪/ > /n̪/</i>	nàire > an nàire (no change)
<i>/ɲ/ > /ɲ/</i>	nead > air an nead (no change)
<i>/sn/ > /-n̪ tʰr/</i>	sneachda > anns an t-sneachda

3. And the article itself actually

Even though the plural definite articles <na> ans <nan> have initial N's, they are pronounced with /n-/. Before vowels and lenited F, the final N strenghtens to /n̪/ and /ɲ/, depending on the environment.

/n/ > /n̪/

an > anns an fhàrdach

nan > nan aibhnichean

/n/ > /ɲ/

an > air an fheur

nan > nan eun

4. And one more - possessives

As if life wasn't difficult enough already, we must include a note on the pronunciation of N after possessives. The plural possessive pronouns prefix <n-> to a noun beginning with a vowel. Although one might be tempted to follow the rules under (1), this N is always pronounced as /n/.

ar n-ubhal

/ar nuəɲ/

'gur n-iarraidh

/gər niəri/

an ubhal

/a nuəɲ/

Note for the curious: the reason for this is that historically the <n-> is not part of the noun, but of the possessive - as you can see in the third person possessive **an** where the spelling still reflects that. So in Old Irish <ar> and <bhur> were <aron> and <svaron> - which is, incidentally, the reason that in Irish these eclipse i.e. 'our cat' is **ár gcat**.

So why shift around the N? It's all to do with syllable structure and things like that - happens in all languages, e.g. English <nickname> used to be <an eekname> - but let's leave it at that.

"Give me an R - hang on, almost there!"

And there are three R sounds in Gaelic. Former slender initial R has (in italics) has now been grouped with /r/:

/r̪/

Initial R
Double R

rùn, ràmh; rionnag, ruith (< rith)
barra, urram; giorra (< girre)*
ceàrr, bàrr

1. Tongue tip at the alveolar ridge
2. Back of tongue lowered
3. Trill the R

This is the "Scottish Rolled R". Rather difficult for English monoglot speakers; it is similar to the Spanish <rr> and Standard German <rr>.

/r/

Non-initial Broad R

caran, darach; cur, còr

1. Tongue tip at the alveolar ridge
2. Back of tongue lowered
3. Tap the R

Another sound difficult for English monoglots. You can also think of this sound as an extremely quickly said (English) <d>, but tapped more with the very tip of your tongue rather than the blade as for <d>.

/rʲ/

Non-initial Slender R

mirean, birlinn; cìr, air

This sound is like /r/ but pronounced closer to your incisors. A variant of this sound is /ð/as in English <the>, which is in a way an extreme variant of /rʲ/ because instead of your tongue being at your teeth, it is pushed in between your teeth.

*Here the change in pronunciation is reflected in the spelling

Note that the preposition <ri> (and its conjugated forms) are pronounced with /r^j/.

Leniting R's

Once you have actually mastered trilling and tapping your R's, leniting them is easy, since there is only one initial R sound left in Gaelic.

1. Normal Lenition

Again, by "normal" we mean lenition caused by anything except the definite article, e.g. possessives, vocative particles, relative particles, noun induced lenition. Note that the whole /str/ cluster gets reduced to /r/.

<i>r/ > /r/</i>	rathad > mo rathad
<i>r/ > /r/</i>	rionnag > mo rionnag
<i>/str/ > /r/</i>	sruth > mo shruth

2. Article Lenition

Again, there are a few peculiarities regarding article lenition. Although lenition is NOT **blocked** here after the definite article, R in fact does not lenite after the definite article. After <fr> R is even "strengthened" to /r/.

<i>r/ > r/</i>	rathad > air an rathad (no change)
<i>/r/ > r/</i>	fraoch > anns an fhraoch

Sin agad e - That's it, you've done it. Now all you need to do is remember it.