

Nasalisation 2 or Why am I married to /ə ɲʉnə aɔ̃am/?

Good question indeed - but that is really a personal issue between you and your partner. Anyway, this is particularly strange when it comes to Gaelic, as you will see later on. But first of all, what are we on about this time?

Depending on your exposure to spoken Gaelic, you will have come across speakers who do something apparently strange to nouns after the definite article - when according to the grammar books nothing strange is supposed to go on. At least not lenition anyway. It sounds as if they mutate the first sound of the following noun or sometimes even drop it completely. As this is most prominent in the dialects of Lewis and certain parts of the Isle of Skye, where a lot of speakers hail from these days, you should at least be familiar with this phenomenon so it won't baffle you when you ask for planning permission in Gaelic for your new luxury detached home with a heated outdoor swimming pool on the Isle of Harris (swipe at Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's "Bilingual Policy" intended) and the planning officer talks about **an taigh ùr agaibh** as /aɲ hɔj u:r ɛɔ̃iv/.

So what is going on here? Without going into the details (for a change) just accept that nasals often do strange things to sounds surrounding them, not only in Gaelic. Compare French where -n indicates nasalisation, but not always ... **tres bon** is [tʁɛ bɔ̃] with a nasalised vowel, but in **bon appetit** it suddenly re-appears [bɔn apɛti]. Or German, where something bizarre happens with certain syllables like **-ten** which are produced as a "stop with nasal release", transcribed as [ɛnt̚n] (**Enten** meaning 'ducks'). Bit like snorting an <n> sound through your nose. Anyway, we digress.

In Gaelic the final **-n** and **-m** of the definite article assimilates the following consonant in the above mentioned dialects, into something which is phonetically closer to a nasal consonant. Let's leave it at that and look at some examples:

Orthography	Pronunciation (elsewhere)	Pronunciation (Lewis, parts of Skye)
am bàta	əm ba:t̪ə	ə ma:t̪ə
am pìos	əm bi:s / əm bhi:s	əm hi:s
an gille	əŋ gʲiɫe	ə ŋiɫe
an càr	əŋ ga:r / aŋ gha:r	ə ha:r
an duine	əɲ d̪uɲə	ə ɲuɲə
an taigh	əɲ d̪ɔj / əɲ d̪hɔj	ə ɲɔj

Luckily, only words beginning with b, p, g, c, d, t are affected. Well ... that doesn't leave that many, but at least L N R are unaffected. One more thing - this is one of the few instances where <g> <d> are voiced in Gaelic (for an explanation on voicing click [here](#)) because the strongly voiced quality of the -n preserves (or assimilates, it doesn't matter) the voicing of the following consonant.

Whether you actually want to adopt this in your own speech is up to you - since not all dialects do it, you won't sound odd if you do not.

So why is this a bit odd in Gaelic? Well, just from a historical point of view really. Old Irish had this as a regular sound change, much like lenition in modern Gaelic and Irish still has it (Donegal, the fortress of the foreigners for example is **Dún na nGall**, <on the road> is **ar an mbóthar** etc). Gaelic on the other hand first lost this process - only to re-introduce it later on (admittedly in a somewhat different fashion, but it's still very similar to what Old Irish did). That's why it's a bit odd.