

Aig, Air agus Ann An or The Severed Head

Now you've probably read and mastered the chapter on possession and when to use **mo** and when to use **an X agam**. There is another obstacle however.

There are a number of expressions that in English are all constructed with the same possessive construction 'to have', e.g. I have two eyes, he has one arm, I have a headache, she has a foul mouth, he has a scowl and so on.

The fun begins when you try to say these things in Gaelic, because Gaelic looks at the world differently and uses 3 different ways of expressing what English bunches into the one form. All three hinge on the correct use of the preposition **aig**, **air** and **ann an**.

Take the sentence 'Mórag has a big head' for example. How would you say that in Gaelic? A lot of you are probably going to say **tha ceann mór aig Mórag**. Which is a well formed sentence but ... more about this further down. How about **tha ceann mór air Mórag**? Or even **tha ceann mór ann am Mórag**? The latter two are also well formed sentences, that is, they are 100% grammatical. So why these three constructions and where is the difference, of there is on?

There is a big difference. The first one **tha ceann mór aig Mórag**, which most of you will have at least considered, does mean Mórag has a big head, but it implies that this unfortunately has been severed from its owners body. **Aig**, as you will remember from the page on [possessives](#) implies alienable ownership. Which means that item X can be taken away from you and the only way you can do that with **ceann** is by cutting it off. Right ... if you're a Dungeons & Dragons fan, this may well apply but in most settings this won't do. What about the next one, **tha ceann mór air Mórag**?

This is the one we're really after - Mórag has a head (still attached to her, no stitches, no seam). By using **air**, we imply that the possession is still inalienable. Which is what we want here. So what on earth is the the third one about, **tha ceann mór ann am Mórag**? Here we are getting idiomatic and imply a trait or disposition - that Mórag is big-headed and a bit full of herself.

This three way distinction applies in most settings, so here's an overview with a few more examples (note that a three way distinction is not always possible, but the correct preposition still has to be chosen):

(ann) an	air	aig
inherent quality, disposition, nature	physical inalienable possession, physical attribute, permanent state	alienable possession, temporary possession or act
tha beul mór an Mórág Mórág has a big mouth [talks too much]	tha beul mór air Mórág Mórág has a [physically] big mouth	
tha ceann mór an Seoc Jock has a big head [is full of himself]	tha ceann mór air Seoc Jock has a [physically] big head	tha ceann mór aig Seoc Jock has a big [severed] head
chan eil tur ann an Iain Iain has no sense		
	tha falt dubh air Màiri Màiri has black hair [growing on her head]	tha falt dubh aig Màiri Màiri has black hair [which has been cut off]
	tha ceithir làmh air he has four hands [physically attached to his body]	tha ceithir làmh aige he has four [severed] hands
tha cluasan móra ann an Jo Jo has big ears [likes to listen, eavesdrop]	tha cluasan móra air Jo Jo has [physically] big ears	tha cluas mhór air Jo Jo has [severed] big ears
chan eil casan ann it has no legs [it isn't possible, feasible]	tha casan air Jo Jo has [physically] legs	tha casan aig Jo Jo has [severed] legs
	tha e air leth làimh he has one hand [attached to himself], is one handed	tha leth làimh aige he has one [severed] hand
tha sradag ann He has a temper [by nature]		tha sradag aige he has a spark [for lighting a fire etc]
tha stac-crùbaich ann an Jo Jo has a limp [e.g. developed due to old age]	tha stac-crùbaich air Jo Jo has a limp [since birth]	tha stac-crùbaich aig Jo Jo has a limp [temporarily due to a sprained ankle]

I think you get the idea. Of course there are other uses of the same prepositions in **tha cnatan orm** or **tha sròn orm** "I'm in a huff" the use of **air** implies a non-permanent state, i.e. you will get better at some point. This doesn't upset the system from the Gaelic point of view though, because the noun in question will give you an idea of what the only possible interpretation can be i.e. if it's **cnatan**, it must be temporary, if it's **ceann**, it must be permanent.

"But I've heard **tha ceann agam!!!**" I'm sure you have, but this is just due to the ever-increasing influence of English. It's up to you whether you want to learn good idiom or Gall-Ghàidhlig.

And a footnote for good measure: remember that just because English uses a certain construction doesn't mean that Gaelic will use the same - in many cases Gaelic will not use a possessive pronoun where English uses one. A good example is **thilg mi an t-uisge mun dà shùil**, I threw the water into his eyes or **thug mi a chliù dhà eadar an dà shùil**, I told him how little I think of him straight to his face.

You ever watch Jackie Chan Adventures? "One more thing" ... in very idiomatic Gaelic **ann** is sometimes used to denote ability - **chan eil òran innte** "she can't sing" or **tha seinn annta** "they can sing". The underlying idea here is that there are certain skills which are innate - you either have or don't have them. The ability to sing is one of them, so from the Gaelic point of view it is treated as an inherent ability or disposition and thus uses **ann**. Yes, you will hear **chan urrainn dhomh seinn**, but strictly speaking that implies there is some external factor preventing you from doing so - you have a sore throat, you're not getting paid for it or you have been forbidden to do so.

This, by the way, leads us to another issue - the difference between expressions like **tha sùnd orm** and **tha mi sùndach**. Click [here](#) for the full story.