

Possessives and Syllabic Structure of Ar n-Athair a tha air Nèamh

Well, maybe prayer is called for when learning Gaelic ... Where shall we start? Well, let's be pompous: Gaelic, like many other languages does not have a verb for 'to have' and distinguishes between alienable and inalienable possession.

It is nowhere near as horrible as it may look at first sight. There are two ways of expressing possession, so let us start with an overview over the two:

	màthair	athair	càr	eun
my	mo mhàthair	m' athair	an càr agam	an t-eun agam
your	do mhàthair	d' athair	an càr agad	an t-eun agad
his	a mhàthair	athair	an càr aige	an t-eun aige
her	a màthair	a h-athair	an càr aice	an t-eun aice
our	ar màthair	ar n-athair	an càr againn	an t-eun againn
your	ur màthair	ur n-athair	an càr agaibh	an t-eun agaibh
their	am màthair	an athair	an càr aca	an t-eun aca

So what is this all about? For one thing note the lenition, prefixing of *n-* and ellision of vowels. A noun beginning with a consonant is lenited by *mo*, *do* and *a* (his); *a* (her), *ar*, *ur* and *an* cause no changes. A noun beginning with a vowel will cause the vowels in *mo* and *do* to drop off yielding *m'* and *d'*; *a* (his) disappears completely (both in pronunciation and writing) while *a* (her) prefixes *h-* (No, this is not madness without reason - for those of you curious about the reason, read the [historical note](#) at the bottom of this page). Of the last three, *ar* and *ur* prefix *n-*; *an* does nothing except to change to *am* before labial consonants (*b p m f*), for the same reason the definite article does.

Note on Pronunciation

"Why? The sounds all look pretty straightforward (as straightforward as <n> sounds get in Gaelic anyway)!" Unfortunately there is a tiny snag with *ar* and *ur* ...

Because the prefixed *n-* historically is part of the possessive pronoun and not the noun, this influences their pronunciation. Meaning?

That the *n-* in *ar n-athair* and *ur n-athair* does not get pronounced as a broad <n> would normally be pronounced but rather as a single, slender <n> just as if it still were attached to *ar* and *ur*.

<i>ar n-athair</i>	<i>ur n-athair</i>
ar nahər ^j	ər nahər ^j
our father	your (pl) father
<i>ar nàthair</i>	<i>ur nàthair</i>
ar ɲa:hər ^j	ər ɲa:hər ^j
our snake	your (pl) snake

It IS important to get this distinction (and your vowel length) right in Gaelic, as the above example shows, because otherwise it will seem to a native speaker that you are talking about snakes rather than someones father! This is also where it is important you have your L N R sounds sorted, because these are likewise lenited my **mo**, **do** and **a**, particularly in the case of <his> and <her> where lenition or the lack of it is very significant (See the special chapter on [leniting LNR](#)!) So, back to the constructions. The second one is a periphrastic (roundabout) way of expressing possession by using the preposition **aig** 'at' either with or without the definite article depending on what you are trying to say. So, **tha cat agam** lit. 'be cat at-me' expresses the concept of 'I have a cat' and similarly **tha an cat agam** lit. 'be the cat at-me' expresses 'I have the cat'.

And no, you can not just use either indiscriminately, which is where this stuff about alienable and inalienable comes in. This essentially means that anything that is considered to be connected to you in such a way it can not be taken away from you (=inalienable) or considered to be very close and personal to you requires the first type (**mo**, **do** etc). Anything else requires the second - mostly material possessions like your herd of gnus, TV, ocean liner, fire extinguisher and automatic grape peeler.

So what is considered inalienable in Gaelic? Blood relatives are, a wife (but not a husband!), clothes, children, parts of your body and certain special entities as kings, queens and religious icons. A very nice illustrative example is the difference between **mo làmh** and **an làmh agam**. The first one talks about your hand (being attached to your body and therefore inalienable) - but the second expression would suggest you are talking about a severed hand that you are holding in your own hand!!! Or, less macabre, **seo an làmh agam** might mean you are showing your hand in a game of cards - this is my hand (of cards).

Another nice examples are the two sentences **tha i a' sguabadh na fiaclan aice** and **tha i a' sguabadh a fiaclan**. In the first case granny is treating you to one of those unforgettable moments where she's holding her false teeth and brushing them with a toothbrush that belonged to her great-uncle Seumas. In the second case, she's standing in the bathroom brushing her own Mother Nature® teeth.

Now, bearing in mind two things, firstly that this distinction is not 100% clear cut and secondly that the first type (**mo**, **do** ...) is getting less common in modern Gaelic, here is a indicative list of when to use the first (with special attention given to personal relations as they are particularly tricky):

	noun	mo etc	an X agam
most blood relatives	màthair, mamaidh, athair, dadaidh,	✓	-
	seanmhair, seanag, seanair, sean,		
	bràthair, piuthar, uncail, antaidh		
	mac, balach	✓	✓
	nighean*	-	✓
	bean	✓	-
	duine	-	✓
	cailleach, bodach	-	✓
	céile	✓	-
	ogha, co-agma, iar-ogha ...	✓	-
friends and partners, depending on how close or serious you are	càirdean, bràmair, leannan, caraid ...	✓	✓
bodyparts (read the notes above!)	ceann, cas, sròn, beul ...	✓	-
opinions in general	cliù, onair, beachd, moladh, càineadh ...	✓	-
your clothes	briogais, brògan, ad, aodach ...	✓	-
celebs	rìgh, Dia, tighearna ...	✓	-
pets	cù, cat (peatannan), ...	✓	-
heritage	dùthaich, tìr, cànan, ceòl, dualchas, oighreachd ...	✓	-
history, both personal and historic	sinnsireachd, eachdraidh, òige, bàs, beatha ...	✓	-
your home	taigh, teaghlach, dachaigh	✓	-
your name and mind	ainm, anam, inntinn, ...	✓	-

* **mo nighean** is permissible, but it would imply the girl being your girlfriend rather than daughter.

Beyond this business of alienable vs inalienable, as you can see the use of **mo** vs **agam** can mark a perceived closeness, for example **mo charaid** implies a much closer friendship than **an caraid agam**. If in doubt, use the **an X agam** construction, it will seem less odd if used inappropriately to the attuned native ear than an overuse of **mo**, **do** etc.

One last thing to note is that a noun followed by either of these constructions will cause them to appear in the genitive case, e.g. **taigh mo mhàthar** 'my mothers house', **càr a' mhanaidsear aige** 'his manager's car' ...

Historical note for the curious

So why is this not madness without reason, because it sure looks like it ... As with a number of things in Gaelic (and Irish and Manx) the reasons for prefixing **h-** and **n-** go back a long time. A very long time actually, way back to Indo-European more than 4000 or so years ago. This is what happened:

Indo-European

A "straightforward" system, but Celtic starts leniting intervocalic consonants (see [lenition](#)). Note that 'her' ends in **s** and 'our' 'your' and 'their' all in **n**. Now lose some of the initial sounds, including **p** in 'father'.

mei pētēr / mātēr (my father/mother)
tū pētēr / mātēr (your father/mother)
esja pētēr / mātēr (his father/mother)
esjās pētēr / mātēr (her father/mother)
ṅsaron pētēr / mātēr (our father/mother)
svaron pētēr / mātēr (your father/mother)
esjon pētēr / mātēr (their father/mother)

Somewhere in between

What used to be a simple rule saying "lenite any consonant between two vowels" is now getting messy. It still is the "rule" but **á** <her> has already broken the rule - even though it is a vowel, it does not lenite because the original **s**, which has been lenited to **h** blocks lenition. And because it is easier to say **a h-athir** rather than ***ah athir** (try it!) the **h** has shifted to become part of the noun.

mo athir/mháthir
do athir/mháthir
á athir/mháthir
á h-athir/máthir
aron athir/máthir
varon athir/máthir
esan athir/máthir

Old Irish

Now it is becoming really messy. The final **n** of the 1st 2nd and 3rd person plural has now also shifted to become part of the noun, prefixing **n-** to a noun beginning in a vowel and geminating (doubling) nouns beginning with a consonant.

mo athir / mháthir
do athir / mháthir
a athir / mháthir
a h-athir / mmáthir
ar n-athir / mmáthir
far n-athir / mmáthir
a n-athir / mmáthir

Modern Gaelic and Irish

Now we are reduced to learning when we have to lenite. But because 'her' had a final **s** and 'our', 'your' and 'their' had a final **n** thousands of years ago, these still crop up in odd circumstances. Curiously, Gaelic has shifted the **n** in the 3rd person plural (yet again) - back to where it originally was!!

m' athair / mo mhàthair
d' athair / do mhàthair
athair / a mhàthair
a h-athair / a màthair
ar n-athair / ar màthair
ur n-athair / ur màthair
an athair / am màthair

mo athair / mo mháthair
do athair / do mháthair
a athair / a mháthair
a h-athair / a máthair
ár n-athair / ár máthair
bhur n-athair / bhur máthair
a n-athair / a máthair