

Pre-aspiration or What is the [h] in mac about?

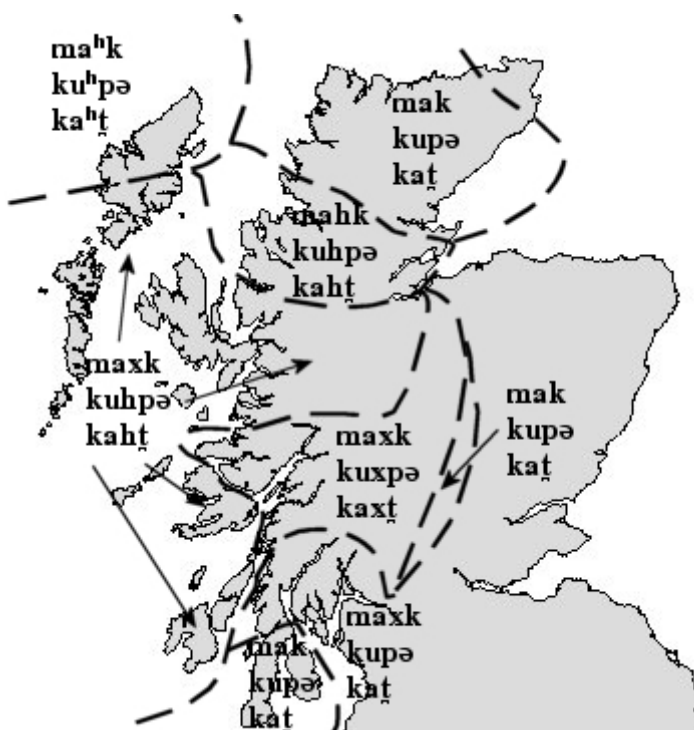
This is both a fascinating and slightly boring topic. Boring because it is probably one of the most often cited features of Gaelic. Fascinating because ... well, you'll see.

What pre-aspiration means is that certain languages insert aspiration (the puffing sound you get eg after p, t, c in English at the beginning of words) before such sounds when they occur in the middle or at the end of a word.

The weird thing about this is that it is one of those Sprachbund features. Which means that it is a phenomenon which occurs in a specific area within languages which are unrelated to each other. For example, Gaelic is infinitely closer to Irish and Manx yet it shares pre-aspiration with Icelandic, Sami, Greenlandic, Norwegian, Siksika (also known as Blackfoot, a native american language) and a few other languages on the Arctic Circle:

	k		p		t	
Gaelic	mac	[ma ^h k]	cupa	[ku ^h pə]	cat	[ka ^h t]
(Irish)	mac	[mak]	cupán	[kopə:n]	cat	[kaɾ]
Icelandic	sakka	[sahka]	koppar	[kɔhpər]	vítt	[viht]
Faroese	bakki	[ba ^h c:ɹ]	koppur	[kɔ ^h p:øɹ]	mítt	[møɣ ^h t:]
Siksika	ihkítsíka	[i ^h kit'sika]	ihpiyi	[i ^h piji]	staahtsitsis	[sta: ^h tsitsis]

Let's have a closer look at what happens in Gaelic:



This is where the weird stuff begins - but first for a few rules of thumb of what to do when.

1. Most Scottish Gaelic dialects have pre-aspiration these days, so if you are learning Gaelic, you should pre-aspirate.
2. The majority of speakers have moderate pre-aspiration ie most insert [ʰ] or [h] and only very few insert [x] throughout.
3. Pre-aspiration never occurs word initially and is strongest in the second syllable and weakest in subsequent ones (not that there are many instances of such syllables anyway). It is also weaker after long vowels.
4. Pre-aspiration adjusts for broad/slender: before a broad vowel it is [ʰ] but before a slender vowel this changes to [ç] (just like in *chì* [çi:] only less prominent). For convenience sake it is usually just transcribed as [ʰ].

Thus you should pre-aspirate as follows:

c		p		t	
càr (none)	ka:ɾ	pòr (none)	pɔ:ɾ	tùr (none)	tu:ɾ
mac	maʰk	cupa	kuʰpə	cat	kaʰt
mic	miçkʲ	cipean	kʲiçpan	lite	liçtʲɪ

So what's the weird bit? Well, for one thing it's the fact that pre-aspiration is rare amongst the languages of the world and most frequent around the "Arctic Circle". The other weird bit is that is "staggered" which means that [ʰk] is the sound most likely to be pre-aspirated (and most strongly) - but also that if pre-aspiration occurs before [ʰt] it must always also exist before [ʰp]. Look at the map above and have a look at pre-aspiration in Bute, Cowal & North Kintyre ... it has [maxk] [kupə] and [kaʰt].

Incidentally, there are/were some dialects which didn't pre-aspirate at all. Look at the map again - East Perthshire and Kintyre & Arran Gaelic did not have pre-aspiration at all. Something interesting to listen out for should you meet a speaker from one of these areas.

But why? What for? Interesting question - next time you meet a few linguists, ask them that question and watch them work each other into an apopleptic fit. The answer is that there are several theories, all of which have merit, but none that is fully convincing somehow. Not yet anyway. Some claim that it is a feature spread by Norse - which kind of worries Blackfoot linguists. Others say pre-aspiration derives from geminate stops (long consonants in other words) ... but since they are common and widespread, why only around the Arctic? Others base their theory on structural phonology ...

But that last bit needn't worry you as a learner or speaker of Gaelic as long as you know what to do when.