

Prepositions - A

You will probably have come across this somewhat odd looking preposition already - it occurs quite a lot in the written language and perhaps even more often in the spoken language. You may also have come across authors of grammar books lamenting its existence going back as far as the year dot.

The reason they are lamenting is down to the fact that in colloquial speech Gaelic has merged two preposition - **de** and **do** into **a**. But there is little point in closing your eyes to reality - this funny **a** is here to stay so we have to learn how to deal with it. Here's a few examples to begin with:

chaidh e a dh'Éirinn	he went to Ireland
thig a Chanada	come to Canada
thug e duais dh'athair	he gave a prize to his father
gu leòr a dh'ùbhlán	enough apples < of
a bheag a dh'ùbhlán	a few apples < of
càil a dh'fhios	any knowledge < of
dad a thìde	any time < of
a latha 's a dh'oidhche	by day and night < of

The issue of the funny **dh'** is dealt with on the pages for **do** and **de** respectively, so we won't go into that part here. First, let us take a look at how on earth you get from **do** & **de** to a schwa. Quite easily actually if you remember a) that function particles lead a precarious life and that b) lenition is rife in the Celtic languages.

do [d̪o] > **dha** [ɣa] > **dha** [ɣə] > **a** [ə]
de [d̪e] > **dhe** [jɛ] > **dhe** [jə] > **a** [ə]

More or less like that anyway. It's not 100% clear cut because as you can see in the third example above, **do + a** gets merged into **dh'**. The legitimate question to ask here is how a language can merge two words which mean opposite things. The reason is context.

Languages rely heavily on context and what is known as "knowledge of the world" to encode meaning. Take one on Groucho Marx' famous quotes: "I once shot an elephant in my pyjamas". This sentence is funny because it can have two meanings - either that you were wearing the pyjamas or that the elephant was in your pyjamas. Because you're watching a Marx Brothers movie, you expect a joke so it's potentially ambiguous. But if you were telling this story to a friend who knows you do a lot of game hunting in Africa, he will infer that you were wearing your own pyjamas when you shot the poor pachyderm. Or take the sentence "Frank believed that he would succeed". Who will succeed, Frank or some other chap? You can't really tell, but then again, language is seldom completely without context.

Which is exactly what is happening here. Take the first example - **chaidh e a dh'Éirinn**. There is only one logical solution as to what the intended meaning is, namely that the intended meaning is to. Simply because you couldn't make a sentence like ***chaidh e de dh'Éirinn** without getting funny looks in the pub. Take another one - **cha robh dad a thìde agam**. It can only be an underlying **de**, because otherwise it just doesn't make any sense. That is why spoken Gaelic can afford to merge these two words.

So it's perfectly ok to use this **a**, especially in spoken Gaelic and even in written Gaelic. If the outcome is ambiguous and you want to be 100% certain you don't get misunderstood, you can use **de** or **do** as appropriate.