

Prosthetic F, Backformation or 'Feagal vs Eagal'

Prosthetic sounds are nothing unusual in the ... oh ... a prosthetic sound is a "random" sound that gets stuck in front, the middle or at the end of a word to make it conform better with the sound rules of whichever language.

Many languages do this, e.g. Spanish. Spanish phonology (sound laws) has a rule saying that no word may begin with [sp] [st] or [sk]. But there are words in Spanish which either historically have these initials ... or loan words coming into Spanish. To get around this problem, Spanish phonology says "prefix [e]" ... so Latin *spīritus*, *scola*, *stabilis* become *espíritu*, *escuela* and *estable*. Similarly *Scandinavia*, *spot* and *Stockholm* become *Escandinavia*, *espot* and *Estocolmo* ...

Backformation means that speakers of a language take a native or adopted word and re-analyse it as it were. This often happens in loanwords or native words whose meaning has become opaque. English for example adopted the French word for cherries, *cerise* from Latin *ceresia*, both mass nouns. But because English has a very prominent -s plural, English speakers "figured" that the *s* must obviously be a plural, so if many of those little fruits are 'cherries', one must obviously be - a cherry. This is called backformation. Gaelic does that too, but because it has this phenomenon of lenition at the beginning of words, unlike English it tends to do that at the beginning of words ...

Now, Gaelic phonology does not forbid words beginning with a vowel (don't laugh, some languages have no words beginning with vowels!) but it does have prosthetic sounds. Most notably [f]. In the case of Gaelic this comes about when native speakers re-interpret words beginning with a vowel as "a word which has lenited X". There is more than just one backformations however. Let us have a quick look at what can happen:

1. [h] > t because lenited t yields [h]
2. ø > f because lenited f is silent (this is by far the most common one and about the only one still active in modern Gaelic)
3. ø > t or g, d this happens in words with a soft onset i.e. an almost [j] sound e.g. in Engl. *iota*, which to Gaelic ears sounds like the word begins with *gh th* or *dh*

Examples to your hearts content, a lot of them are loanwords (except the ones beginning with f + vowel):

	Gaelic	Irish
Engl. halberd	taileabart	halbard
Engl. hogshead	tocasaid	oigiséid
Engl. throng	trang 'busy'	trang(láil)
Lat. iota 'a bit'	tiota	giota
Norse hqll 'hall'	talla	halla
Olr. áinne 'ring'	fàinne	fáinne
Olr. allas 'sweat'	fallas	allas
Olr. ásaim 'I grow'	fàs	fás
Olr. ecla 'fear'	(f)eagal	eagla
Olr. ilur 'eagle'	(f)iolaire	iolar
Olr. osclaicim 'I open'	fosgail	oscail
Olr. rádharc 'vision, view'	fradharc	radharc
Olr. uacht 'cold'	fuachd	fuacht
Olr. uath 'hate'	fuath	fuath
Olr. urusa 'easy'	furasda	furasta
Scots haggis	taigeis	hagaois

A particularly bizarre example of this is the Gaelic word for sister ... because it went through this several times:

Indo-European	swesōr
Old Irish	siur which lenites to shiur so often (think about it ... mo, do and a (his) all lenite, and you talk about this sort of relationship so much more than you do about 'our sister') it becomes re-analysed as
Early Irish	fiur/siur (genitive fethar/sethar) which yields modern
Irish	deirfiúr 'sister' from dearbh phiuthar 'true sister' and fiúr 'kinswoman' (because two words are better than one ...)
and Scottish Gaelic	piuthar - from the old genitive which has now become the nominative for sister and <p> because <f> is obviously lenited <p> ... now why didn't you think of that before? ☺

Anyway, to get back to the point ... this is the reason why you will hear some Gaelic speakers pronounce certain words with f and some without ... it is a process that is still in the middle of happening, so until the language decides on whether it will stick with eagal or adopt feagal, you can take your pick about which one you prefer, it really makes no difference either way as both are "good Gaelic words".