

The Case System

Well, I suppose it's our own fault for having asked people to write to us if there is something in particular you have questions about. Someone wrote in and opened the can of worms about how to decline compound nouns - a topic whose basics are covered in every little language course but whose details, in particular the difficult issues are avoided everywhere (if we're wrong and you do know this excellent article on the Gaelic case system, do let us know!) - such as the intriguing question about what happens to nouns followed by compound nouns and feminine nouns forming their genitive by slenderising. We're by no means sure we've got all the answers, but we'll try to do our best anyway.

This is in two parts really, the first gives you the case system in bits and pieces with explanations, but at the end there is a .pdf file which contains a table of the case system which you can print out for reference.

But to begin with we need to answer someone else's question about what the point of having masculine and feminine nouns is and why we need a case system. Well, there's an easy and a more complex answer to that question. The easy answer is that Gaelic just has these things and you have to put up with having to learn them just as much as you'd have to contend with three genders in German, a pictographic writing system in Mandarin, politeness particles in Japanese and an indefinido in Castilian.

The more complex answer is that all living languages constantly develop and change. Change, mark you, not "simplify" as many people believe. Meaning? Well, there are different ways in which languages encode meaning once you go beyond simple words. One such method is syntax. This means that the meaning of a sentence arises out of the order of words in it, often using small words or particles to give finer shades of meaning. English is such a language - take two sentences like Jack hit Jill with a club and Jill hit Jack with a club ... using the same words, you paint a very different scenario.

The other way of doing this is to have a loose syntax but a fairly rigid and detailed way of marking who does what to whom and with what on the words. Basque is such a language. In Basque the first example above turns into Jackek Jill makilaz jo du. The -ek tells you who did something and -az tells you what was used and so on. Because the endings make this clear, you can shift the order around - Makilaz jo du Jill Jackek has the same meaning as the other sentence, something that would be impossible in a language like English.

So what does that have to do with Gaelic you may ask, since Gaelic has a rather rigid syntax but also a case system. Well ... languages are eternally shifting between these two extremes, so most language you will encounter will be somewhere in between relying completely on syntax and relying completely on endings.

Vietnamese is one of the few languages which (currently) rely on syntax 100% and Basque one of those that rely on endings 99%. English, still in the process of exchanging the case system inherited from Old English for syntax is closing in on the syntax end of the spectrum and has lost two of its three genders, Cantonese on the other hand has just started to move away from it. German is lagging behind English, with the genitive case rapidly losing ground to the dative case, Samoan is half way to the other end, acquiring more grammatical forms and relying less on syntax. So all these things have reasons for being there, to help encode meaning in an efficient way and while on the whole the picture keeps changing all the time, we have to accept a language for what it is now.

Gaelic is somewhere in there - moving towards the syntax end, but not as far along as English. Now this does NOT mean that we should therefore make away with the Gaelic case system altogether because that is "inevitable" anyway. For one thing, this is an unconscious process, speakers do not set out to "lose" the dative case, it's something that happens gradually, over time and without noticing (unless you're a linguist looking for this kind of thing). If you don't believe this, ask an English speaker whether they are aware of English losing the noun/verb distinction ... well, you CAN background a picture these days, can't you?

So what ARE we saying? The case system in Gaelic is something it has inherited from Common Gaelic and Old Irish, going even further back and ultimately Indo-European. In the light of language history, it makes sense and is (relatively) logical. If Gaelic will ultimately lose this case system, it won't be a "loss" because Gaelic will gain some structure elsewhere to make up for it. But that is a process that should be left to the language itself and not be tampered with by people, neither those who believe archaic-is-good nor those who think that everything has to be simplified-simplified to make it easier to learn. A healthy balance must be struck to reflect a good standard that is neither archaic and mental not one that reflects every lost vowel of the fast casual speech.

For layout reasons, these pages have been split into two, one for masculine and one for feminine nouns, rather than having them side by side. This is simply for layout reasons, on the .pdf file both genders are shown side by side. Click on the links to go to the respective sections:

[Masculine](#) [Feminine](#)