

Do Re Im or The History of the Prepositions

Urk ... where do I start.

In Old Irish, there was a fairly regular system of endings which you stuck on the back of the prepositions and presto, you had your conjugated form. But for a number of reasons, this changed to some extent over time and today we have a system that looks as if there should be some rule but it isn't obvious anymore.

So how did you make a conjugated preposition in Old Irish? First of all, you needed the preposition. Next you needed the ending, which was derived from the possessive pronouns ([mo](#), [do](#), [a](#), [a h-](#), [ar n-](#), [far-n](#), [a n-](#)) not the personal pronouns. You stuck them on the end and there you were. Mostly. Let's look at this paradigm:

	Singular	Plural
1	-m(m)	-n(n)
2	-t	-b
3 masc/neutr	-u/-o (prep. with accusative) -e/-i (prep. with dative)	-aib (prep. with accusative) -u (prep. with dative)
3 fem	-(a)e (prep. with accusative) -i/-e (prep. with dative)	-aib (prep. with accusative) -u (prep. with dative)

Now we're going to solve Big Mystery 1. 3rd person -s pronouns. If you had a look at the page on [lenition](#), you will remember that the old Indo-European definite article used to be [sindo/sinda](#). And wherever an Old Irish preposition which even longer ago had had a consonant at the end, this merged with the [s-](#) in [sindos/sinda](#) and got carried over into our day and age. An [s](#) with history you might say. Let's look at an example: [frith](#) + [sindos](#) > [friss](#) > [ris](#). Fascinating, isn't it?

We'll look at a few more examples, but not all (well, if you want more, let us know) and we'll also add the modern Irish and Manx forms for comparison.

RI

The basic form of this preposition was [frith](#). With the endings we get:

frium	friut	fris	frie	frinn	friḃ	friuthu
rium	riut	ris	rithe	rinn	ribh	riutha
* liom	* leat	* leis	* léi	* linn	* libh	* leo
rhy	rhyt	rish	r'ee	rooin	riu	roo

In case your computer doesn't display it properly: there is a little dot over the [f](#) in [frinn](#), which means the [f](#) has been lenited, so the initial [f](#)'s were on the way out even back then.

We'll solve another mystery for you: in Old Irish, the [r](#) was not at the beginning of the word as you can see. The [f](#) simply got lenited away over time, but because [fri](#) was pronounced as [fr̥i], the -r- was fixed in the linguistic memory of people as being non-initial and slender which is the reason why today we pronounce [ri](#) as [r̥i] and not *[r̥i] for the most part. If you want to know why some of these initial r's are now broad, read the section on modern [ri](#).

The asterisk before the Irish line means that Irish has merged [ri](#) with [le](#), so [ri](#) doesn't exist anymore as a preposition on its own and [le](#) is used throughout instead. Which can make for quite amusing idioms ...

AIG

The basic form of this preposition was **oc**; **ocind** with the article. With the endings we get:

ocum	ocut	occo	occi	ocunn	occaib	oca
agam	agad	aige	aice	againn	agaibh	aca
agam	agat	aige	aici	againn	agaibh	acu
aym	ayd	echey	eck	ain	eu	oc

As you can see, it's mostly regular. Except for the last form **oca** - even in Old Irish things weren't perfect!

MU

Now, we really want to look at one of those 'Nasal in Root' ones, don't we? This is also where the mystery of the weird **-p-** gets solved, because the oldest root forms of this were **imb**, although even back then **imm** had become the most common form ... except before certain endings:

immum	immut	imbi	impe	immunn	imib	impu
umam	umad	uime	uimpe	umainn	umaibh	umpa
umam	umat	uime	uimpi	umainn	umaibh	umpu
moom	mood	mysh	moe	moinn	miu	moo

Soo ... why does **imbi** lose the **-b-** and **impe** doesn't lose the **-p-**? Most likely because in the feminine 3rd person pronoun an **s** is kicking around somewhere (cf Irish **sí** 'she' or Old Irish **a s-** > Gaelic **a h-** 'her'). The **mm** is so dominant that it would normally gobble up (ok, assimilate) the soft **-b-** and leave no trace. But the **-s-** devoices the **-b-** into a much harder **-p-** ... which has been able to hang on till now. It would have gone something like this (the asterisk means that this form isn't attested (found) anywhere, but that we figure it might have been that):

imb-i	*imb-se
imbi	impe
immi	impe
uime	uimpe

Manx has changed this set quite a lot. It has dropped the initial vowel and - much more interestingly - developed the form **mysh**. Probably to align it with more commonly heard 3rd person forms like **lesh** and **rish**.

DO

Last but not least one of the mad ones:

dom	duit	dó	dí	dúnn	dúibh	doaib
dhomh	dhut	dhà	dhì	dhuinn	dhuibh	dhaibh
dom	duit	dó	dí	dúinn	daoibh	dóibh
dou	dhyt	da	jee	dooin	diu	daue

As you can see, **do** was irregular even back then ... so we might as well just learn it as it is. Righty, we've had two questions - one about the bho/o variants and one about chugam/thugam - we'll try our best.

BHO/O

Interesting case. Let's look at the paradigm first:

(h)úaimm	(h)úait	(h)úat	(h)úadi	(h)úainn	(h)áuib	(h)úaidib
(bh)uam	(bh)uat	(bh)uaithe	(bh)uaipe	(bh)uainn	(bh)uaibh	(bh)uapa
uam	uait	uaidh	uaithi	uainn	uaibh	uathu
voym	voyd	voish	voee	voin	veue	voue

It seems that even Old Irish was at a bit of a loss here - in the old manuscripts you find both forms freely scattered about, with the **h** and without. Seeing that Old Irish isn't one of those languages which do not permit a vowel at the beginning of a word, it may be the leftover of some sound that was there a long time ago. The literature doesn't say much about this **h** unfortunately. In the modern languages this seems to have ended up as a [v] sound because the Gaelic languages are very reluctant to allow initial **h-** without something going in front to cause this. So [v] must have seemed like a good substitute.

And as you can see, Manx has opted to have the [v] throughout, Irish has dropped it completely (and has done so for a long time, not even the famous dictionary by Ó Duínín mentions a form with **bh-** !!) and Scottish Gaelic is undecided. Which in a mad sort of way is a nice continuation of this very ancient headache. In modern Gaelic it's really a matter of choice (unless you follow GOC too closely) depending on whether you pronounce the [v] or not.

GU

This one is a bit easier. The question we got was whether **chugam** or **thugam** was a "more correct" form.

cuccum	cuccut	cucci	cucce	cucunn	cuccuib	cuccu
thugam	thugad	thuige	thuice	thugainn	thugaibh	thuca
chugam	chugat	chuige	chuici	chugainn	chugaibh	chucu
hym	hood	huggey	huick	hooin	hiu	huc

So what does this tell us? Quite a lot actually. the basic form of this preposition was **co** and all the forms are based on **cu-** so we can safely assume that the initial sound started life out as [k] to begin with and later lenited to [x]. So should we all be spelling it with **ch-** then?

Well ... yesno. The issue here is that in the modern languages, this sound has changed further to [h] in some dialects. Even in Irish you can hear two variants of this - both [xugəm] and [hugəm] just as you get both [xuġəm] and [huġəm] in Scottish Gaelic. As you can see, Manx has opted for the [h] whereas Irish has retained the **ch-** spelling. It appears that the [h] pronunciation is more common in Scotland today than the [x], so it makes sense to use the **th-** spelling. Does that help?

So much for Old Irish prepositions. Sometimes it helps to understand the history of something like this - it doesn't work for everybody though.