

Prepositions - Ri

One of the more entertaining prepositions that Gaelic has to offer but let's get the easy stuff out of the way first before you let yourselves be entertained by a mad linguist.

As most simple preposition, **ri** [r^ʲi] can be conjugated (i.e. the preposition has merged into one word with the pronouns **mi**, **thu** etc.)

mi	thu	e	i	sinn	sibh	iad
rium	riut	ris	rithe	ruinn	ruibh	riutha
r ^ʲ ium	r ^ʲ iu ^h t	r ^ʲ iʃ	r ^ʲ i.i	ɾuɪŋ	ɾuiv	r ^ʲ iu.ə

Now, easy bits first:

You will sometimes see **ruinn** and **ruibh** spelt as **rinn** and **ribh**. Also, you will have noticed that most unexpectedly, the **r** in **rium**, **riut**, **ris**, **rithe** and **riutha** is pronounced as [r^ʲ] even though you will have learned that at the beginning of a word all r-sounds are pronounced strong as [ɾ].

The reasons for this are shrouded in mystery. No, not really. The reasons for the **r** being slender is simple. In Old Irish, the **r** was simply not at the beginning of the word - **ri** used to be **fri**. The **f** simply got lenited away over time, but because **fri** was pronounced as [fr^ʲi], the **-r-** was fixed in the linguistic memory of people as being non-initial and slender. The whole paradigm can be found in the page on the history of prepositions.

So why has the **-r-**, which apparently was still slender in Old Irish changed to a broad one? Probably two things happening at the same time.

On the one hand, there has probably been a certain amount of re-analisation going on, that is, people trying to fit something which is irregular into a regular pattern. Like speakers of modern English are re-analysing irregular plurals and slowly getting rid of them - these days "fishes" is perhaps frowned upon, but certainly current in the spoken language. So in Gaelic people will have tried to some extent to squeeze **ri** into the regular pronunciation patterns by pronouncing **rinn** as it now "appears" to be - with an initial **r** which has to be strong.

But something else was going on at the same time - consonant length was shifting away from the consonant and onto the vowel. And we all know where that leads to in modern Gaelic. But let's take it one step at a time. This is what the daisy chain looks like: [fr^ʲiŋ:] > [r^ʲiŋ:] > [r^ʲi:ŋ] > [r^ʲuiŋ]. At this stage, we are probably somewhere around the year 1500 and we have a problem. The [r^ʲ] is suddenly in front of a very broad diphthong [ui] which makes it difficult to pronounce and "illegal" in terms of its phonetic structure (according to the rules of Gaelic of course.) Easy solution: we make the **r** broad, which fits in nicely with the usual rule that **r** at the beginning of words is always broad. So what about **ribh/ruibh** then? I'm not sure, but perhaps case of analogy i.e. people applying the pattern of another preposition e.g. **dhuibh** which used to be **duibh** and thus very very similar in its sound structure.

The variant spellings are thus simply reflexes of something that used to be (**rinn** & **ribh**) and what is now (**ruinn** & **ruibh**).

And the **Leòdhasaich** need a footnote again - remember that in Lewis Gaelic [r^ʲ] has changed to [ð], so don't be surprised if you hear things like [ðiʃ].

Now, that was the easy bit.

Meaning and use of **ri** are a bit more tricky. Rather than do what most textbooks do which is to give you a long list of ways in which this preposition can be translated depending on context and the verbs it is used with, we will try to give you an idea of what concept(s) **ri** entails within Gaelic. The primary meaning of **ri** is best summed up as "interaction between two participants in which some form of feedback or resistance is exhibited." Think of a man holding his head in front of a fan blowing at full force and you're not far off the concept. And contrary to some grammars, it *can* involve physical motion.



The reason for not just giving you a list of possible translations is that such a long list would suggest that it's a very convoluted preposition when it really isn't. We're just trying to get away from the English speaking point of view for a bit.

If you open your dictionary of Old Irish, you will see that the above definition squares largely with the original meaning of the word and is most commonly translated as 'against,' e.g. **fri fáil** 'against a wall.' A look into your etymological dictionary will tell you that **ri** is most likely connected to the Indo-European root of **vr̥ti* meaning to turn and is connected to Latin **versus** and the English suffix **-wards**. You're probably getting a pretty good idea of the fundamental meaning of the word already. So, meaning number one is 'against' both in a physical and metaphorical way. This covers phrases like the following:

tha fàradh ris a' bhalla	there is a ladder leaning against the wall
geug a' gnogadh ris an uinneig	a branch knocking against the window
sheas i ris a' chàr	she leaned against the car
déan strì ri nàimhdean	to fight against enemies
croch ri craobh	to hang from a tree
air neo bidh mi riut!	or else you'll get it!
tha an ite maoth ri m' aghaidh	the feather is soft against my face
shuidh e r' a thaobh	he sat next to him

So why is 'hang from a tree' in there? Think of it - the rope has to be attached to something, doesn't it? Something is keeping it from falling to the ground and that is the tree.

This is where some grammars get into really hot water because they look at **ri** from the English point of view. But staying with the definition that **ri** is used for the "interaction between two participants in which some form of feedback or resistance is exhibited" the following are quite logical:

tha e a' dol ris a' ghaoith	he is going against the wind
shnàmh i ris an t-sruth	she swam upstream/against the current
bha e ris a' ghréin	it was exposed to the sun
shreap sinn ris a' bhrutach	we ascended/went up the slope

The last one incidentally forms a nice pair with leis a' bhruthach which means exactly the opposite. Notice how in English we have to use different idiom because English looks at the world from a different angle - but in Gaelic we're still in the same system. This usage of ri is old too - Old Irish has words like [fresngabál](#) meaning 'ascent' (lit. 'taking against').

For the next meaning group we are simply going to state that in Gaelic you "compare against" rather than "with" - not as strange, think of the English idiom "to measure against!"

tha e coltach ri cù	he is similar to a dog
tha seo mòr an taca ris an té sin	this is big in comparison with that one
tha e cho glas ri càl Obar Dheathain	it is as green as grass
tha e an aon dath ri mo phlangaid	it is the same colour as my blanket

This use again is old and existed as far back as Old Irish. For the next group, we get closer to the meaning 'against' again. You can think of the following as "against, tackling," still staying within the Gaelic definition of ri:

tha e ris an iasgach	he's fishing (for a living)
bha i ri ùrnaigh	she was praying
dé tha thu ris?	what are you up to?
tha iad ri trod	they're having a fight
bha iad ris a-rithist	they were at it again

So where exactly is the difference between [bha i ag ùrnaigh](#) and [bha i ri ùrnaigh](#)? Not much - some dialects even use ri instead of ag with verbal nouns - slightly more emphasis on the action taking place than in phrases with ag.

The next group also stays quite close to home - even though it gets translated into English by a word whose meaning is seemingly unrelated - 'with.' Again, it's a question of your point of view. The physical reality of leaning against a wall and standing side by side with somebody aren't miles apart (unless you're trying to push the wall over of course ...) and in Gaelic they are just that:

chaidh mi ann còmhla ris	I went there with him
bha iad ann maille rithe	they were there alongside her
tha iad ri chéile a-nis	they are together now
rinn mi deasbad riutha	I argues with them

It still is the same concept in Gaelic. The next group is even more obvious as "two participants with some form of feedback or resistance:"

thachair mi ri muc-mhara	I met a whale
coinnichidh mi rithe	I will meet her
tha mi a' fuireach ris	I am waiting for him

If you look back the picture with the fan and compare it to this one, you'll notice an interesting coincidence - the same "symbol" is used in both cases to represent the action going on:



thuirt mi ris gun a dhéanamh	I told him not to do it
dh'éisd mi ruibh	I listened to you
eughaidh mi ris	I will yell at him

And then there is the remainder of expressions and idioms which use ri which are perhaps best just learned, things like réidh ri Dia 'at peace with God' where you could somehow invoke the above, but only with difficulty. Here's a list of usages which are difficult to predict but thankfully not that tricky to learn:

ri + Verbal Noun	> to be V-PAST
ri ithe	to be eaten
ri ràdh	to say
ri dhéanamh	to be done
aig + ri	> have to [present/non-tense]
tha agam ri èisteachd	I have to listen
tha aca ri bruidhinn	they have to speak
ri + Temporal Adverb	> during/in
ri linn Jingis Khan	during the age of Jingis Khan
ri a latha	in his day
ri aimsir theth	in hot weather

And then there is a number of verbs which take ri for reasons best known to themselves which you just have to learn such as feitheamh ri 'waiting for' and gabh ri 'to accept', but then every language has annoying constructions which don't fit into the paradigm easily.