

TEACHING FORUM
"SEVERAL TIRED CHILDREN HOWLING."
: AN INTRODUCTION TO MANX MUTATION.

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Introduction

Manx shares with the other Celtic languages a system of initial consonant mutations and although it appears to be the simplest of all the Celtic systems mastery of it can still present a major hurdle to learners.

Two papers from NAACLT's conference, in Limerick, Ó Direáin (2000) and Scott and Kenny (2000) referring to the teaching of Irish, highlighted for me the need for a fresh look, and perhaps a change of method, in the teaching of some elements of Manx mutation.

Since initial mutations alter the spelling, they can often mask even a well known word from both learners and more advanced speakers. This is so, particularly so in Manx, where the small numbers and physical dispersion of speakers means that conversations are not necessarily an everyday occurrence.

Word-initial mutations are a major impediment to oral comprehension. It is clear that some adjustment in normal teaching techniques is appropriate to address the mutation problem. Scott & Kenny (2000:138)

As in oral comprehension so too in any written examples of Manx, in that written Manx is not presently a commonplace method of communication outside the contrived environment of classroom lessons. Even in Irish, where spellings of mutated forms preserve the identity of the original consonant, problems arise.

In handling even the simplest written grammatical tasks, with all the time in the world allowed for completing the task at hand - as opposed to the "real-time" pressures of normal conversation - students are often completely at a loss in deciding whether to lenite, to voice, to nasalize or simply to leave alone the initial consonant of a given word. Students often try random solutions.

Ó Direáin (2000:103)

Teaching mutation

What then is the position for the learning of Manx? Hitherto, the introduction of mutation has been a loosely structured if not haphazard affair as most instructors remain enthusiastic amateurs rather than trained linguists. This approach has served us well until the present time, but we should now, perhaps, be making a more concerted effort to increase the standard and standardisation of usage. One of the main difficulties is that Manx language transmission is no longer from native speakers. Every Manx language speaker is now a second, if not third language speaker. Knowledge of mutation now has to be consciously learned rather than simply and naturally acquired.

The apparent lack of sophistication in the Manx system may well be symptomatic of a language that is often described as "on the road to death". Simplification of the mutational system, and loss of various tense/mode distinctions may have repercussions for the field of language death for it is possible that such a variety may represent the pre-terminal phase of some dying languages. Broderick (1996). However, it is a process which I prefer to regard as being nothing more than a natural development having a 'plain elegance and neatness of execution' of its own.

As in any learning situation there is no "one size fits all" solution, nor is there any such thing as a new learning method. The technique outlined here is aimed at adult beginners attending night classes of perhaps two hours duration per week and who need additional support systems to explain and aid the recall of letter changes and the circumstances in which they are applied.

The method

Those attending the workshop will see the basic Manx system demonstrated in "powerpoint" format. The lesson targets a mixed ability class of adult beginners and therefore assumes no previous knowledge of the language or of grammatical terms and so would not be suitable for those students who prefer the conventional grammatical approach. This raises yet another problem facing instructors of mixed ability adult learners, some of whom may have a somewhat inflexible if not fixed approach to learning.

Experience has shown that the acquisition of vocabulary is a relatively straightforward procedure but that mutation is the major hurdle in the teaching of Manx. Either the subject is ignored and some students learn by a system akin to osmosis, or is discussed in such depth that some students switch off at its very mention. Others become paralysed into inaction for fear of making a mistake, or they are happy to press on regardless of any grammatical conventions.

In Irish, Ó Direáin (2000:103) reports:

It is not unusual for third-level students of Irish in their third year of university Irish classes to have persistent and pervasive problems in internalizing the system of rules underlying the operation of lenition ("aspiration") and voicing/nasalization ("eclipsis") in both their spoken and their written Irish

The learning of Manx mutation often suffers from the same overload syndrome, in that much has been written but little

appears to have been learned, and as Ó Direáin states in the case of Irish.

Adding to the students' frustration, perhaps, is the fact that reference materials on the grammar though often quite comprehensive in their treatment of initial mutations, often present the student with ad hoc lists of rules for initial mutations and of the lexical and grammatical items which trigger the operation of the rules. Ó Direáin (2000:103)

Could it be that a different less grammar orientated approach would be a better model for learners who often have little knowledge of even basic grammatical terms? Such a system, which has had some impact on the successful rate of learning, is outlined below.

Spelling

It must first be noted that Manx spelling is distinctly non-Gaelic having the following peculiar features.

- The Manx spelling is based on phonology, the words are written as they are pronounced and although the etymology of the word is often obscured by this system of spelling, the spoken sound is preserved.
- The Manx alphabet is identical with English except that x and z are missing.
- In modern Manx the cedilla is placed under the dental *çh* to distinguish it from the guttural *ch*.

The system

For the Manx system the rules for aspiration of letters is presented in the following manner whereby eight phrases are memorised in any order. This is not a comprehensive list of aspiration changes **sh, sl, sn, str** being omissions, but it is more than sufficient to

enable learners to master most circumstances of Manx mutation in the early stages.

Several tired children howling
Big muddy van
Car key chain
Dark giant ghost
Poor photograph
Quiet whistle
Jolly youth
Fox ox

The students are required to:-

- Recall the phrase.
- Note the initial consonant(s).
- Know that the last word shows the spelling changes for all the previous words.

For those who prefer to visualise mutations in tabular form they are as follows.

S, T, ÇH	-	H
C, K	-	CH
D, G	-	GH
P	-	PH
QU	-	WH
B, M	-	V
J	-	Y
F	-	

For students, knowing first how to aspirate and then applying the knowledge of aspiration is necessarily a gradual process, but can be visualised below as being of two types, one - Un and two - Daa. type one having no changes for the dentals.

Type 1

Un + noun
Yn + fem sing noun
Yn + prep + noun
Yn + ordinals
Yn + masc gen sing
[J, D, T, ÇH]¹

Type 2

Daa + noun
Vocative
Fem sing + adj
My, dty, e + noun
Infinitive

Each element is introduced and practised individually until Students are familiar with each operation. Five examples of each type is considered more than sufficient initially.

Nasalisation

Moving on to nasalisation a similar system of mnemonics involving people and places has proved to be useful. In this case each letter mutates to the initial letter of the following word.

Type N - nasalisation

Farmer >	Vet	
Teacher >	Doctor >	Nurse
Painter >	Baker >	Mechanic
Chief >	Judge >	New York
Crown, King, Queen >		Governor >New Guinea

Nasalisation is applied after:

a) Nyn - *Our, your, their.*

Thie - house Nyn dhie - *Our, your, their house*

¹ These do not mutate in type 1 and are remembered by the phrase - Just Don't Take ÇHanges

b) In the perfect

Ta mee fakin	<i>I am seeing</i>	Ta mee er vakin	<i>I have seen</i>
T'eh ç heet	<i>He is coming</i>	T'eh er j ect	<i>He has come</i>
T'ee goll	<i>She is going</i>	T'ee er ng oll	<i>She has gone</i>

Care must be taken to choose verbs that follow the rules exactly as some variation is possible.

c) In the conditional dependent forms.

Cooinee!	<i>Remember!</i>
Gooineeagh eh?	<i>Would he remember?</i>
Cha gooineeagh eh	<i>He would not remember</i>

Verbs

Knowledge of aspiration and nasalisation is required for the operation of the verbal system and again may be visualised in the table below. It is convenient for learners of the system to regard type 1 and type 2 as belonging to group A for aspiration, and nasalisation as being of type N and then to visualise the following chart. Initial vowels take the prefix indicated.

Types A and N	+	?	-	vowels
Past	A	A	A	d+
Cond	A	N	N	n+
Fut + -ee		N	N	n+

It is interesting to note the findings of recent work done on the learning of the different forms of mutation. Is this result true for mutation in languages other than Irish? The question deserves study.:

A preliminary analysis of our results suggests that in general, lenited sounds (voicing change of the voiceless consonants) are more easily recognised than eclipsed sounds (nasalisation). Scott & Kenny (2000:137)

Conclusion

It is clear that no amount of mnemonic and visual clues can substitute for actual conversation and the natural process of language acquisition. However, in languages such as Manx where there is not, as yet, a sufficient pool of speakers such as those that can be found in Gaeltacht areas, we must try our best to assist the learner by every means possible. Is this then a solution to the problems of learning initial letter mutation? In a word, no! But it is perhaps a useful tool to assist learners in the daunting task they set themselves as they travel the long and tortuous road to fluency.

References

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