

ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GROUP *-rt*
IN SCOTTISH GAELIC

THE consonant systems of the Scottish Gaelic dialects,¹ on account of the manner in which they have evolved, often present interesting contrasts to those of Irish dialects, most notably with regard to the plosive consonants. A recent article by Máirtín Ó Murchú (1985:195–8) demonstrated how the origins of one particular sound change may sometimes be usefully looked for in the effects of another, apparently unrelated, change, the instance discussed by him being the possible connection of pre-aspiration with the loss of an historical distinction between inherited fortis and lenis stops in particular dialects.

There is no reason to suppose that unusual developments which only affect consonants when they are members of particular clusters may not likewise be connected with, and indeed, in certain cases, find their origins in, other sound changes having a more general application in the language. In the case presented below the evolution of the so-called ‘intrusive *s*’ in the historical group *-rt* is discussed and an origin proposed for this in the context of the historical sound change referred to as pre-aspiration. The appearance of a pre-plosive sibilant in the cluster in question is itself quite widespread in modern dialects of Scottish Gaelic (Ó Baoill 1978:53–4) and, as a sound change of general application, is quite unknown in Irish dialects, unlike the intrusive *-t* in *sr* clusters which is found, but with a differing distribution pattern, in dialects of northern Irish.²

From accounts given of the modern realizations of pre-aspiration in the various dialects of Scottish Gaelic it is clear that this may take the form of either ‘true pre-aspiration’ (Borgstrøm 1940:21)³ or else of a consonantal phoneme which has developed between the vowel and the following plosive. This phoneme may appear as a /h/, /x/ or, before a palatal stop, /ç/. A parallel development clearly took place where *-r* or *-l* preceded the plosive, i.e. in the case where ‘true pre-aspiration’ existed in a dialect the lateral or vibrant in question would be devoiced as a result, cf. Lewis [faL̥t] *falt* (Oftedal 1956:138); in other dialects, however, a fricative consonant could arise between the lateral or vibrant and the following plosive, cf. Barra [k^hærxk] *cearc*, [ɔLxk] *olc*, [ə Nul’çk’] *an uilc* (Borgstrøm 1940:168). Where a lateral preceded a dental plosive a fricative consonant would not normally arise, as the lateral would carry

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²Cf. Wagner and Ó Baoill 1965:208

³For accounts of the various types of pre-aspiration, see Thomson (1983:104) and Ó Murchú (1985:195–8). In the present article ‘fully developed’ pre-aspiration is used to refer to a situation where not only historical *-c*, but also *-p* and *-t* are affected by the phenomenon.

its own dental occlusion over, to be released in the following dental plosive, though a form [molxt] has been recorded by researchers from one Argyll informant on an occasion.⁴

Where, on the other hand, some form of *r*-consonant preceded the *-t* there is no intrinsic reason to believe, given that a sound of the former type would not involve occlusion, that a fricative would not have arisen in this case also between the two consonants in question in those dialects where this had developed between *-r/l-* and *-c*, and it is in exactly that position, i.e. between *-r-* and *-t-*, that the intrusive *s* is currently found in many Scottish Gaelic dialects. A /h/ or other fricative sounded during the transition from a *r*-sound, whether of dental, alveolar or even pre-palatal variety, to a dental or alveolar plosive would have been blown through a constriction (formed in the course of such a transition) between the apex of the tongue and the point of articulation of the following plosive in the same way that a *s*-sound is produced by the emission of air through a narrow groove in the alveolar or gingival region.

The similarity of clusters of the types /r+s, ʃ/ and /r+h, ç/, and hence the possibility of substituting one type for another, are in fact exemplified elsewhere in the Gaelic-speaking world, for in the dialects of north Mayo what is apparently the reverse development has taken place. The dialects of Erris show forms of the following kind: /torhəx/ *tuirseach*, /farhiN'/ *fairsing* (Mhac an Fhailigh 1968:156, 159) while [fuəɾhɛ] *fuair sé*, [əɾ 'heʃən] *ar seisean*, [tɔɾhax] *tuirseach*, [pɔɾh] 'purse', [fəɾhɔN'ax] *fairsingeach* have been noted from the neighbouring dialects of Achill (Stockman 1974:340).⁵ That both types of cluster are actually in the process of falling together in such Mayo dialects is confirmed by pronunciations such as [kɪɾʃənəx] *caorthannach* from Achill and /g'ɑɾʃi/ *gearrtha*, /oɾʃu/ *orthu* from Erris. The inherited palatalized and non-palatalized *rs*-groups have fallen together in these dialects, as often in northern Irish and Scottish Gaelic. Mhac an Fhailigh, in the case of Erris, referring to the articulation of such clusters as 'homorganic, post-alveolar' and indicating tongue-inversion for them, describes the variety of *s*-sound found in connection with *r* as an allophone of /ʃ/ (Mhac an Fhailigh 1968:156) and it is likely that as a sound it continues the historical palatalized cluster. The retroflex nature of such clusters in Scottish Gaelic and Ulster Irish has led to the frequent realization of the *rs* as a retroflex or otherwise modified *s*, rather than a true cluster⁶ – which may possibly have been responsible for the metathesized forms

⁴Wagner and Ó Baoill 1969:219, with the additional comment 'almost [moLɿ]' which perhaps indicates that the lateral was not released independently of the plosive. A north Argyll provenance would appear to be indicated for the informants mentioned at this Atlas point [= pt (c)]: cf. *ibid.*:218.

⁵Wagner (1966) also cites forms from Mayo pts 54 and 56 which show the same development.

⁶Cf. Borgstrøm 1937:110–11; 1940:76, 170–71; Oftedal 1956:126–7; Evans 1969:46–7; Jackson 1955:126.

such as /bo:ɾʃi:/ *bóithrí* in Erris and [əʃru:lʲ] *ar síúl* in east Mayo (Lavin 1956-7:319) – and a similar development seems to occur sporadically, at least in initial position, in the case of the cluster [çr], not only in Erris, e.g. /ʃev/ *threíbh*, /ʃohu/ *threabhfadh* (Mhac an Fhailigh 1968:157), but in other western Irish dialects in which forms in [ʃr-, ʃr-], reflecting historical palatalized *thr-*, are found⁷ ([ç] is a regular modern reflex of inherited *th-* in the group *thr* in Ulster Irish: Quiggin 1906:117; Wagner 1959:35).

Since this alveo-velar and the palato-alveolar [ʃ] referred to above are perceptively quite similar, as are their congener plosives, they are thus liable to be confused (Ó Dochartaigh 1987:147) as in fact they have been in some modern Gaelic dialects, e.g. Inverness County, Nova Scotia.⁸ It is, moreover, likely that [ç] in Scottish Gaelic, when sounded following a *r*-consonant, would, like [ʃ] in a similar environment, be subject to a retroflex articulation, in a manner not unlike that referred to above, and that in such a position, therefore, the two voiceless fricatives would have been even more liable to become confused. The existence of phonetically similar clusters in the language reflecting historical *-rs-* would probably have facilitated the interpretation of the intrusive fricative which developed in the historical *-rt* group as a sibilant.

Data such as these would seem to indicate that when in combination with an *r*-consonant [ç] is more likely than its non-palatalized equivalent to give rise to a palato-alveolar fricative such as that described above (cf. Erris /ʃev/ *threíbh* vs /hraii/ *thráigh*), and in the light of this there would seem to be a strong possibility that it was the palatalized group *-rt* in stressed syllables which was the point of origin for the development of the intrusive *s*, from which it would subsequently have spread to the non-palatalized cluster. Confirmation for the line of development suggested here may be forthcoming from the findings of a recently completed study of the Islay dialect, in which the researcher has noted that, while /s/ has not evolved in the non-palatalized cluster in Islay, 'in words containing slender *rt*, such as the word *cairt*, some of my . . . informants sporadically introduced ʃ between the *r* and *t*' (Grant 1987:403). As Islay Gaelic is a dialect with fully developed pre-aspiration the appearance of the sibilant here would have been based at least to some degree on the element of aspiration which followed the *r* rather than have resulted merely from interdialectal influencing. Indeed, evidence from the neighbouring dialects of southern and eastern Kintyre in which both pre-aspiration and the intrusive *s* had begun to appear under the influence of neighbouring dialects (Holmer 1962:52-3) shows the *s* not only in a non-palatalized cluster but also in an unstressed syllable which appears to be a development connected (see below) with dialects further to the north (Borgstrøm 1940:171; Wagner and Ó Baoill 1969:222 qq. 431, 601)

⁷Cf. Wagner (1966) pts 25, 36, qq. 48, 943, 1011; pt 37 q. 608.

⁸From my own field-notes (work undertaken June-September 1983, Broadcove, Inverness County, Nova Scotia).

which have fully developed pre-aspiration and intrusive *s* as a universal feature in historically stressed as well as unstressed syllables.

In view of the origin proposed here for the intrusive *s* in the group *-rt* as a reflex of historical pre-aspiration which intervened between the *r* and the following *-t*, in a manner similar to that in which the modern pre-plosive fricatives [x, ç] evolved from the presence of the same feature in historical *-l/rc* groups, it is likely that both intrusive features, namely the sibilant and the (palato-)velar originated within the same dialect-group in which pre-aspiration had developed in such a way as to produce pre-plosive fricatives of a more intense variety than /h/ in such groups. A survey of available monograph and other sources shows that the intrusive *s* feature is indeed found in those same areas which show the other intrusive fricative, namely Skye (Borgstrøm 1941:43-4), west Inverness (Dieckhoff 1932 s.v. *cearc*, *ceart*, etc.), north Argyll (Wagner and Ó Baoill 1969:218 qq. 35, 39; 219 q. 113; 222 q. 656; 225 q. 1154), Uist and Barra (Borgstrøm 1940:236). Assuming that the sibilant originated within this core-area of the western Highlands / southern Hebrides, it would seem clear that it spread subsequently to, and independently of, pre-aspiration, to cover a much wider area, affecting in particular those dialects in which pre-aspiration featured, in most of which the existence of the pre-plosive fricative element (in particular the [ç]) which had resulted from the pre-aspiration, could be readily equated with a sibilant. Scholars seem agreed that pre-aspiration itself spread out from one core area or another (Jackson 1951:91; Borgstrøm 1974:98-9; Thomson 1983:94, 99, 104-5), and indeed writers of modern monographs etc. have noted signs of its continued expansion (Holmer 1962:51-2; Wagner and Ó Baoill 1969:211 [ahkə] s.v. *páirt*), or of that of features related to it (Holmer 1962:52 § 101). The connection between pre-aspiration and the sibilant under discussion is underlined by the fact that the intrusive *s* is, like pre-aspiration, to be found most generally in historically stressed syllables (Borgstrøm 1937:104, and especially 1940:167). Its extension to unstressed syllables appears to be confined to a small group of the 'core' dialects referred to above, viz. Harris, North Uist, Barra (Borgstrøm 1940:236), west Inverness (Dieckhoff 1932 s.v. *sagart*, *streothart*, *thoir* (*toirt*), etc.), Wester Ross (Ternes 1973:93), and north Argyll (Wagner and Ó Baoill 1969:221 q. 431). Indeed a handful of dialects, including again Harris and North Uist (Borgstrøm 1940:169-70), as well as part of Skye (Borgstrøm 1941:44) and Wester Ross (Ternes 1973:93; Borgstrøm 1941:145), have extended the feature to historical *-rd* groups also. The exceptional nature of this latter development serves to reinforce the view that it was the aspirate, rather than the dental element of the stop which has been responsible for the generation of the intrusive fricative.

The intimate connection of the intrusive *s* with pre-aspiration may be further evidenced by the fact that as a feature the former appears to have spread more generally to dialects in which pre-aspiration is also found. (We have already noted the absence of both developments in Irish.) In

addition to the varieties of speech referred to above, the sibilant in question is also reported in the Gaelic of Wester Ross, Easter Ross (Watson 1986:73), Lewis (Oftedal 1956:126–7) and north-east Perth (Ó Murchú 1976:188; Robertson 1900:18), all of which feature pre-aspiration, and we have already observed indications of its initial development in another pre-aspirating dialect, namely Islay, with possibly a similar situation obtaining in one or two others in the same region, such as Jura and Gigha (Ó Baoill 1978:54).

That the sibilant is unknown in the Gaelic of St Kilda⁹ would appear to substantiate the theory proposed here, according to which it was within the group of dialects in which the intrusive (palato-)velar evolved in historical *-l/rc* groups that the intrusive *s* first developed within the *-rt* cluster. In spite of the close relationship of the Harris dialects with that of St Kilda the intrusive *s* has not developed in the latter even though it is strongly present in Harris, and is also found in the neighbouring Lewis dialects. It would appear that the sibilant must have spread to Harris some time in the period after the colonization of St Kilda and that the isolated nature of the St Kilda dialect prevented the feature from becoming established there. It would seem that the sibilant is more rarely found in the group of dialects in which pre-aspiration is absent. It is missing, for example, in Arran (Holmer 1957:13–19), Rathlin (Holmer 1942:30–37), south Kintyre (Holmer 1962:52) and parts of Sutherland (Henderson 1903:496), though it has spread to some, as for example east Sutherland (Dorian 1978:49) and parts of east Perth (Robertson 1900:18), and we may, very likely have evidence of its beginnings in others, notably south Kintyre (Holmer 1962:53, 107). If we are correct in connecting the rise of the intrusive *s* with the phenomenon of pre-aspiration in a particular dialect group there would seem to be no reason for assuming that the pre-plosive fricatives /x, ç/ which appear before post-vocalic velars would not also have arisen in the *-lc-*, *-rc-* groups during the same period, given that we are dealing here also with voiced elements. Since there are indications of such a fricative in post-vocalic position in Scottish Gaelic orthography as early as the Dean of Lismore's Book,¹⁰ it would seem likely, should the case be accepted for linking the rise of the intrusive *s* with that of the intrusive (palato-)velar fricative, that the former began to appear in the language at a date much before its earliest recorded appearance in an orthographic form, namely the Fernaig manuscript (1688–93, Wester Ross).¹¹ Regarding the documentation of its subsequent spread, there may be one or two indications which can be looked to, such as the St Kilda data referred to above, as well as the signs which show the continuing progress of the feature towards the extreme southern periphery of the Scottish Gaelic-speaking area up until the present day.

⁹Information on St Kilda dialect supplied by Prof. K. H. Jackson.

¹⁰Cf. Thomson 1983:104.

¹¹Cf. Jackson 1951:90.

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