

from Pocket Irish Dictionary, 1997

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

There are three main dialects of Irish: Ulster Irish, Connacht Irish and Munster Irish. There is, at present, no standard spoken pronunciation, although important steps have been taken recently to establish such a standard. The aim of this short guide is to give you an outline of the way in which the sounds of Irish are made, and to help you pronounce them. Two kinds of information are needed if a word is to be correctly pronounced. We need to know about each of the sounds that make up the word, and we need to know about stress. There are essentially 18 letters in the Irish alphabet: **a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, l, m, n, o, p, r, s, t, u;** the letters **j, q, v, w, x** and **z** also occur in some loan words.

Vowels

The basic vowels of Irish are represented in the alphabet as **a, e, i, o** and **u**. These vowels may be either short or long. The difference in the length of vowels must be distinguished, as replacing one variety by the other can change the meaning of a word and lead to misunderstanding. The short and long vowels of Irish are listed below, together with their nearest English equivalents. It should, however, be noted that the following is simply a rough guide and that the vowels in question may vary considerably depending upon the surrounding consonants.

VOWEL	IRISH EXAMPLE	ENGLISH TRANSLATION	CLOSEST ENGLISH APPROXIMATION
a	cat	cat	cat
á	lá	day	law ¹
e	te	hot	che(rry)
é	mé	l, me	may ²
i	sin	that	shin
í	mín	smooth	mean
o	donn	brown	done ³
ó	mór	big	more ⁴
u	bus	bus	bus ⁵
ú	cúl	back	cool ⁶

- 1 With lips less rounded but more advanced than the vowel in standard English *arm*. In Ulster, pronounced as in the English *cat*, but with a long vowel.
- 2 As pronounced in Irish English, i.e. not diphthongized.
- 3 Also often pronounced as in the English *hot*.
- 4 In Ulster, often pronounced as in the English *law* when not flanked by a nasal consonant.
- 5 As pronounced in Irish English; in some dialects, pronounced as in the English *book*.
- 6 With more rounded lips.

Vowel combinations

The vowels combine with each other in a variety of ways. The vowels **i** and **u**, for example, combine with **a** to give **ia** and **ua**. These combinations consist of the two sounds **i** and **u**, which are normally long in this case, and a sound similar to the **a** at the beginning of the word across in English. Hence, **ia** = *ea* and **ua** = *oo* in the words **bia** (food), **fuair** (cold). Compare the vowels in English *theatre* and *cruel*.

In the middle of words, the combinations **a(i)dh**, **a(i)gh**, **o(i)dh**, **o(i)gh**, **eidh**, **eigh** also consist of two vowel sounds, pronounced like English *eye* or *my* in words such as **radharc** (view), **maidhm** (explosion, eruption), **laghdú** (reduction), **caighdeán** (standard), **oidhreacht** (inheritance), **oighear** (ice), **feidhm** (function, use), **leigheas** (cure).

In a similar position, **(e)amh** is pronounced like *ow* in English *how* and *cow* in words such as **samhradh** (summer), **deamhan** (demon, devil); **(e)abh**, **obh**, **omh**, **odh**, **ogh** are also pronounced in this way in some dialects, for example **cabhair** (help), **leabhar** (book), **lobhadh** (rot), **domhan** (world), **bodhrán** (deaf person; type of drum), **bogha** (bow); in others, they are pronounced like a long *o* sound as in English *more*.

The combinations **umh** and **ubh** are pronounced like a long *oo* sound as in English *cool*, for example, **cumhacht** (power), **subhach** (joyful).

The combination **ao** does not represent two sounds. In Ulster and Connacht Irish, it is generally pronounced *ee*, in Munster Irish like the vowel in the English *may* (as it is pronounced in Irish English); **aoi** is generally pronounced *ee*. Hence **saol** (life) = *see*l or *say*le; **O Laoire** (O'Leary) = *o leere*.

Because slender consonants are preceded or followed by **e** and **i** and broad consonants by **a**, **o** and **u** (see **Consonants**), it is sometimes difficult to determine which vowel or combination of vowels in a word should be pronounced. In the table below, one of the vowels simply indicates that the preceding or following consonant is either slender or broad.

VOWEL COMBINATIONS	IRISH EXAMPLE	ENGLISH TRANSLATION	CLOSEST ENGLISH APPROXIMATION
ai	caile	chalk	cat
ea	feair	man	cat
eá	meán	middle	law/arm
eái	coinneáil	keeping	law/arm
ái	páirc	field	law/arm
ei	peil	football	che(rry)
ae	tae	tea	may ¹
éa	béal	mouth	may ¹

- 1 As pronounced in Irish English.

VOWEL COMBINATIONS	IRISH EXAMPLE	ENGLISH TRANSLATION	CLOSEST ENGLISH APPROXIMATION
éi	féin	self	may
aei	traein	train	may
ui	duine	person	shin
io	fionn	fair	shin
aí	scéalaí	storyteller	mean
oí	oíche	night	mean
uí	suí	sitting	mean
uío	búiochas	thanks	mean
íó	síol	seed	mean
oi	coill	wood	done
eo	ceol	music	more
eoi	beoir	beer	more
eó	seó	show	more
óí	óir	because	more
úi	cúis	cause	cool
íúi	ciúin	quiet	cool
iai	faille	weeds	theatre
uai	duais	prize	cruel

Before **rd**, **rl**, **m** and **rr** short stressed vowels are normally lengthened:

ard	high	law/arm
orlach	inch	more/law
carn	cairn, heap	law/arm
corn	cup	more/law
barr	top	law/arm

However, if **rr** is followed by a vowel, the preceding vowel normally remains short:

carraig	rock	cat
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In parts of Munster and Connacht, short vowels are made long or become diphthongs before **ll**, **nn**, **ng** and **m**:

poll	hole	how
bin	sweet	eye or mean
im	butter	eye or mean
cam	bent	how or law/arm

However, if **ll**, **nn**, **ng** and **m** are followed by a vowel, the preceding vowel normally remains short:

folláin	healthy	done
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The "central" vowel

There is also a short "central" vowel in Irish which is often represented in writing by **a**, **e**, **ea** and **o**. It is pronounced like the *a* in the English word *across* and occurs in unstressed short syllables, for example: **ánois** (now), **briseann** (breaks), **paca** (pack), **cluiche** (game), **mú** (my) and **dú** (yours). In certain instances, this vowel is not written. It is pronounced after the first consonant in the following consonant groups: **lb**, **lbh**, **lch**, **lg**, **lm**, **lmh**, **lp** (from **lbth**), **nb**, **nbh**, **nch**, **nm**, **nmh**, **rb**, **rbh**, **rc**, **rch**, **rg**, **rm**, **rmh**, **rn**, **rp** (from **rbth**). Here are a few examples: **colm** (dove), **gorm** (blue), **colg** (bristle), **dearg** (red), **Albain** (Scotland), **tarbh** (bull).

The central vowel also occurs in Munster Irish when the order of consonants in these groups is in reverse order, eg: **eagla** (fear), **Alibreán** (April).

Consonants

The greatest difference between Irish and languages such as English, French and German is in the consonantal system. Irish has nearly twice as many consonant sounds as English. The reason for this is that there are two sets of consonant sounds in the language, each consonant having both a **broad** and a **slender** variety. As is the case with short and long vowels, broad and slender consonants must be clearly distinguished in pronunciation. Failure to make this distinction can change the meaning of a word. Roughly speaking, when pronouncing a broad consonant, the lips are relaxed and the tongue tends towards the back of the mouth. When pronouncing a slender consonant, the lips are tense and the tongue tends towards the front of the mouth. In written Irish, slender consonants are preceded or followed by the vowels **e** and **i**; broad consonants are preceded or followed by the vowels **a**, **o** or **u**. Hence, **b** and **p** are slender in the words **beo** (alive) and **peaca** (sin) but broad in the words **bó** (cow) and **paca** (pack). Similarly, both **t** and **r** are slender in the word **tréan** (strong) but broad in the word **traein** (train). To make things easier, we shall divide the consonants into so-called homorganic groups. Homorganic consonants are consonants which are alike in that they are pronounced by using the same position of the articulatory organs. For example, **p**, **b** and **m** are all made by bringing your lips together. The only difference is that **p** is unvoiced, **b** voiced, **m** both voiced and nasalized.

CONSONANT GROUP	IRISH EXAMPLE	ENGLISH TRANSLATION	CLOSEST ENGLISH APPROXIMATION
p (broad)	pór	seed	<i>pour</i> (lips closed and relaxed)
b (broad)	bonn	coin	<i>burn</i> (lips closed and relaxed)
m (broad)	mamaí	mama	<i>mummy</i> (lips closed and relaxed)
p (slender)	pé	who	<i>pay</i> (lips closed, tense and spread)

CONSONANT GROUP	IRISH EXAMPLE	ENGLISH TRANSLATION	CLOSEST ENGLISH APPROXIMATION
b (slender)	bí	be	<i>be</i> (lips closed, tense and spread)
m (slender)	mé	I, me	<i>may</i> (lips closed, tense and spread)
ph/f (broad)	fón	phone	<i>phone</i> (lips relaxed and close but not touching)
bh/mh (broad) ¹	an-bhán	very white	<i>Vaughan</i> or <i>wan</i>
ph/f (slender)	an pheil	the football	<i>fell</i> (lips tense and close but not touching)
bh/mh (slender)	an mhí	the month	the letter <i>V</i>
t (broad)	tae	tea	<i>toy</i> (tongue pressed against teeth)
d (broad)	donn	brown	<i>done</i> (tongue pressed against teeth)
n (broad)	naoi	nine	<i>knee</i> (tongue pressed against teeth)
t (slender)	tír	country	<i>cheer</i>
d (slender)	díon	roof	<i>lean</i>
n (slender)	ní	thing	<i>knee</i> (with <i>n</i> as in <i>onion</i>)
c (broad)	cam	bent	<i>calm</i>
g (broad)	gall	foreigner	<i>Gaul</i>
ng (broad)	long	ship	<i>lung</i>
c (slender)	cill	churchyard	<i>kill</i>
g (slender)	géim	roar	<i>game</i>
ng (slender)	cing	king	<i>king</i>
ch (broad)	loch	lake	Scottish <i>loch</i>
gh/dh (broad)	a dhroim	his back	French <i>r</i> as in <i>Rhône</i>
ch (slender)	oíche	night	German <i>ch</i> as in <i>ich</i>
gh/dh (slender)	ghéill sé	he gave up	<i>yell</i>
s (broad)	suigh	sit	<i>see</i>
s (slender)	sin	that	<i>shin</i>

¹ **bh/mh** (at the end and the middle of words): at the end of words and after long vowels and diphthongs, broad **bh** and **mh** are pronounced *v* in southern dialects, *oo/w* in northern dialects, eg: **scriobh** (writing), **leamh** (reading), **ábhair** (matter), **láimha** (hands).

Final -(a)idh, -(a)igh

In most Irish dialects, these are pronounced like *ea* as in *mean*. In parts of Munster, *ig* as in *fig*. In verbs before a subject pronoun, **aigh** is pronounced like the *a* in *across*.

Final -adh, -amh

Nouns: In northern dialects, *oo* as in *cool*. In many southern dialects, as the *a* in English *across*; **amh**, however, is normally pronounced as *av* in Munster.

Verbs: In northern dialects, *oo* as in *cool*. In southern dialects, *ch* as in Scottish *loch*. In parts of Munster, however, as either *g* or *v* in the past passive.

ts

After the article **an**, **t** is pronounced as *t* (tongue pressed against teeth) before broad consonants; and as *ch* as in *cheer* before slender consonants, eg: **an tsúil** (the eye) = *too!*, **an tséis** (the sense) = *chesh*.

Word stress

Words are normally stressed on the first syllable in Irish. Under certain conditions in Munster Irish, however, the stress may fall on the second or subsequent syllables. This occurs:

- 1 In words in which the second syllable has a long vowel or a diphthong, for example, **beagán** (little) and **móráin** (much).
- 2 In words of three syllables when the first two syllables are short and the third is long, the stress is attracted to the long syllable, for example, **leanbháil** (childish) which is pronounced like *lanibéé* and **aibreán** (April), pronounced like *ibírawn*. Note that both these words contain the central vowel referred to above which does not appear in writing.
- 3 In words in which **(e)ach** occurs in the second syllable, for example, **bacach** (lame) and **coileach** (cock). However, if **h** (written **th**) intervenes between the vowel of the first syllable and that of the second, the stress falls on the first syllable, for example, **fathach** (giant).
- 4 In prepositional pronouns such as **agam** (on me), **agat** (on you), **orm** (on me), which is pronounced like *irum* in some areas.

There are approximately 20 words in Connacht Irish, particularly in Connemara and Aran, in which a short vowel in the second syllable is not pronounced when it is followed by a long vowel in the second syllable. This happens most frequently before **r**, **l** and **n** for example, **(a)rán** (bread), **p(a)róiste** (parish), **c(o)láiste** (college). The same applies to Munster Irish both in this case and frequently also when the second syllable is short, for example, **t(u)ras** (journey), pronounced *trus*, **ch(o)nac** (I saw), pronounced *chinuk*.

In Ulster Irish, long vowels in unstressed syllables are normally shortened, particularly the vowels **a** and **o**, for example, **arán** is pronounced *aran*, **scioból** (barn) is pronounced *shgyobal*.

Some words are stressed on the second syllable in all dialects. These are mostly adverbs of time and place which originally had an unstressed initial element, for example, **inniu** (today), **inné** (yesterday), **amárach** (tomorrow), **anseo** (here), **ansin** (there). This stress pattern is sometimes found in loan words such as **tobac** (tobacco).

In compound words, the primary stress may fall either on the first or the second syllable, or the first two syllables may carry equal stress:

Stress on the first syllable **ollscoil** (university), **seandúine** (old person).

Stress on the second syllable **indéanta** (practicable), **ró-bheag** (too small).

Equal stress **an-mhath** (very good), **fíor-álainn** (very beautiful).

Sentence stress

Nouns are more strongly stressed than verbs: **dúirt Seán** (John said); **d'inis sé scéal** (he told a story).

Pronouns have much weaker stress than the verb: **tháinig mé** (I came).

A dependent adjective or genitive has stronger stress than the noun: **cailín deas** (a nice girl), **fear an tí** (the man of the house).

Adjectives and nouns used predicatively are more strongly stressed than the subject: **is deas an cailín í** (she's a nice girl); **tá sé fuar** (it's cold).

Adverbs have stronger stress than the words they qualify: **déan go maith é** (do it well).

Prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, the article, interrogatives and negative particles have weak stress or are unstressed.

Initial mutations

Under certain conditions, the beginning of words in Irish undergo a change in form. There are two kinds of change, both of which are caused by a preceding word. Some words cause **lenition** (called **séimhiú** in Irish), others **eclipsis** (called **urú** in Irish). Before feminine nouns, for example, the article **an** causes lenition of a noun which is the subject or object of a sentence. For example, the word for "a woman" is **bean**, but "the woman" is written **an bhean**, the **bh** being pronounced as a **v** sound. Similarly, the possessive pronouns **mo** (my), **do** (your) and **a** (his) cause lenition, as do many prepositions. For example, the word for "a car" is **carr**, but "my car" is **mo charr**, the **ch** being pronounced like the **ch** in Scottish *loch*. Words causing eclipsis include the possessives **ár** (our), **bhur** (your plural), **a** (their) and the preposition **i** (in, into), for example, **ár gcarr** (our car), where **gc** is pronounced **g**, **i mbád** (in a boat), with **mb** pronounced **m**. The following tables give the basic consonants and their mutated forms in writing and in speech.

CONSONANT	LENITED	PRONUNCIATION	
		BROAD	SLENDER
p	ph	f	f
b	bh	v or w	v
m	mh	v or w	v
n	no change	n	n
t	th	h	h
d	dh	French Rhône	y as in yell
c	ch	Scottish loch	German ich
g	gh	French Rhône	y as in yell
l	no change	l	l
f	fh	not pronounced	not pronounced
s	sh	h	h or as in ich before letters eó, iú and, in some cases, before ea

CONSONANT	ECLIPSED	PRONUNCIATION	
		BROAD	SLENDER
p	bp	b	b
b	mb	m	m
m	not eclipsed	—	—
n	not eclipsed	—	—
t	dt	d as in done	j as in Jean
d	nd	n	n as in onion
c	gc	g as in Gaul	g as in game
g	ng	as in lung	as in king
l	not eclipsed	—	—
f	bhf	v or w	v
s	not eclipsed	—	—