
Points of grammar

This short article focuses on some features of grammar which give rise to errors in written Irish. In addition, it explains the policy of the New English-Irish Dictionary (NEID) in relation to points of divergence that are to be found in various sources describing Irish grammar.

Nouns: genitive or nominative?

Even experienced users of Irish can be forgiven for uncertainty when deciding if a noun should change to the genitive case or remain in the nominative. Conventions vary from source to source, and rules set out in older grammars continue to influence written Irish. In order to grasp the issues involved, one must distinguish between definite and indefinite nouns and understand the various ways in which nouns can be qualified.

Definite nouns

In Irish, nouns are definite in the following cases:

1. proper nouns such as *Peadar, Albain, Cumann Lúthchleas Gael*
2. nouns with the definite article: *an bhialann, an scéal, na teagascóirí*
3. nouns qualified by *gach*: *gach mí, gach saoránach, gach uile fhocal*
4. nouns qualified by a number that follows them: *seomra 3, alt 10, caibidil a hocht déag*
5. nouns with possessive adjectives: *mo mhála, do theachsa, ár dtraidisiún ceoil*
6. nouns that are governed by a definite noun which is in the genitive case: **bainisteoir na bialainne, cósta na hAlban, bunreacht Chumann Lúthchleas Gael**

The genitive case: rules and exceptions

All nouns, both definite and indefinite, are placed in the genitive case in the following circumstances:

- When one noun governs another: *teach Pheadair, Rialtas na hAlban, fonn ceoil*
- When the noun is the object of a verbal noun: *ag ceistiú Pheadair, ag moladh na hAlban, ag seinm ceoil*
- After compound prepositions: *i láthair Pheadair, ar son na hAlban, le haghaidh ceoil*
- After the simple prepositions *chun, cois, dála, fearacht, timpeall, trasna*: *chun na bialainne, timpeall na hAlban, fearacht an cheoil*

There have always been situations, however, in which nouns are resistant to the changes of the genitive case. The most significant instance is the sixth category in the list of definite noun-types above, i.e. a noun which governs a definite noun in the genitive case. In circumstances where a noun would normally be inflected, these remain in the nominative case. The only grammatical change is that the initial letter is lenited, if possible.

- Noun + noun: *luach **theach** Pheadair, Urlabhraí **Rialtas** na hAlban, tréithe **cheol** na hÉireann*
- Verbal noun: *ag maisiú **theach** Pheadair, ag cáineadh **Rialtas** na hAlban, ag bailiú **cheol** na hÉireann*
- Compound and certain simple prepositions: *timpeall **theach** Pheadair, i gcoinne **Rialtas** na hAlban, i dtaobh **cheol** na hÉireann*

Another significant exception relates to nouns that are the object of a verbal noun in infinitive phrases:

- *ag iarraidh airgid* but *ag iarraidh airgead a shaothrú*
- *tar éis an chogaidh* but *tar éis an cogadh a bhaint*
- *chun na príomhchathrach* but *chun an phríomhchathair a chosaint*

NEID also uses the nominative form of definite article and noun following ordinal numbers: *stair an Dara Cogadh, tús an dara seachtain*. The only exception is *c(h)éad*: *stair an Chéad Chogaidh, tús na chéad seachtaine*.

In one other case, NEID exempts definite nouns from inflexion. This involves nouns which are preceded by a possessive adjective (*mo, do*, etc) and qualified by an adjective or by a noun in the genitive.

- *ag scríobh a dhialainne* ach *ag scríobh a dhialann taistil*
- *seomra a máthar* ach *seomra a máthair chéile*
- *os comhair do thí* ach *os comhair do theach saoire*
- *ag moladh mo ghasúr (pl)* ach *ag moladh mo ghasúir bheaga*

Indefinite nouns with qualifiers

Indefinite nouns which are qualified are resistant to the inflexions of the genitive case in the following circumstances:

- when the noun is the object of a verbal noun: *ag seinm ceoil* but *ag seinm ceol meidhreach*
- after compound prepositions: *i mbun ranga* but *i mbun rang oíche*

In the above examples, the qualifying words *meidhreach* and *oíche* are, respectively, an adjective and a noun in the genitive case. The result would be the same if the nouns were qualified in the following ways:

- an adjectival phrase: *ag seinm ceol den chéad scoth*, *ag seinm ceol as an ngnáth*, *ag seinm ceol ar leith*, etc
- a relative clause: *ag seinm ceol nár chualathas a leithéid riamh*, *ag seinm ceol a fhanfaidh i mo chuimhne go brách*, etc
- the words *aon* and *ar bith*: *nílimid ag seinm aon cheol*, *nílimid ag seinm ceol ar bith*
- the prefixes *an-*, *dea-* and *sár-*: *ag déanamh an-iarracht*, *ag déanamh dea-iarracht*, *ag déanamh sáriarracht*

So as to better reflect current use in Irish, NEID goes further than other reference works in exempting qualified indefinite nouns from the genitive case. Where nouns and qualifying words form a unit of meaning, they too are resistant to inflexion.

- *bainisteoir + foireann iomána* = *bainisteoir foireann iomána*
- *buidéal + fion dearg* = *buidéal fion dearg*
- *stiúrthóir + cláir oiliúna* = *stiúrthóir cláir oiliúna*

Finally, NEID uses the genitive plural of nouns governed by personal numbers such as *beirt*, *triúr*, etc:

- *beirt sagart*
- *beirt teagascóirí*
- *deichniúr fear*
- *deichniúr filí*

Other forms of the noun

NEID uses the nominative singular form of the noun following *dhá/an dá*, for example *dhá chat*, *dhá chos*, *dhá lámh*. All nouns are left unchanged after prepositions, with the exception of a few long-established words and phrases, for example *ar láimh*, *faoi chois*, *cur i gcéill*, *bolg le gréin*, *ó chianaibh*, *ar na mallaibh*.

Initial mutation

Lenition—what it is and what it isn't

Séimhiú, variously known as 'lenition' or 'aspiration', is the most common initial mutation in Irish. In the written language, it involves inserting *h* after the first consonant of a word: *Thit an bhean den chathaoir*.

h prefixed to a vowel is not lenition. While one *h* may seem much like another, the two are in fact completely different aspects of grammar and conflating them leads to error. The following are all examples of prefixed *h*.

- *an dara hoíche*
- *Sorcha agus a hiníon*
- *go hArd Mhacha*

Note that if the same words began with a consonant, no lenition would occur:

- *an dara seachtain*
- *Sorcha agus a mac*
- *go Cluain Meala*

Lenition, eclipsis and prefixed t

When singular nouns (with or without adjectives) occur with a preposition and the definite article in the dative case, there are two patterns as set out in CO 2017 (An Córas Lárnach and Córas an tSéimhithe). NEID follows the conventions laid out in An Córas Lárnach and also applied in FGB.

- Eclipsis is used where a noun in the singular follows a simple preposition + definite article: *ar an mbóthar* rather than *ar an bhóthar*. Note: the lenited version *ar an bhóthar* etc is also accepted in standard Irish.
- Lenition follows *den*, *don* and *sa* (if the noun can be lenited): *duine den chlann*, *bia don pháiste*, *cara sa chúirt*. Note: eclipsed versions such as *den gclann*, *don bpáiste* and *sa gcúirt* are also accepted in standard Irish.
- Nouns beginning with *d* and *t* are neither eclipsed nor lenited: *leis an dochtúir*, *faoi tábla*.
- Prefixed *t* is added to feminine nouns beginning with *s* only: *ag an tseanbhean* but *ag an seandúine*.

The adjectives that follow singular nouns are only lenited in the dative when they qualify feminine nouns: *ar an tsráid chúng* but *ar an mbóthar cúng*.

Lenition or non-lenition after certain words

Chapter 10 of *Gramadach na Gaeilge: An Caighdeán Oifigiúil 2017* (CO 2017), lays out a series of exceptions to the rules regarding the lenition of nouns that qualify feminine nouns. NEID and CO 2017 are in agreement with regards to many established exceptions to lenition, but diverge in the cases described below.

CO 2017	NEID
Qualifying nouns in the genitive plural are not lenited, e.g. <i>scoil buachaillí, traein paisinéirí</i>.	NEID retains lenition as in FGB: <i>scoil bhuachaillí, traein phaisinéirí</i>. NEID does, however, retain the long-established rule that nouns in the genitive plural are not lenited after collective nouns: <i>buíon cailíní, sraith mórchluichí, scuaine gluaistéán</i>.
The qualifying noun is not lenited if it is a person, animal or living thing or part of a person, animal or living thing, e.g. <i>scian búistéara, ubh circe, cill planda, ordóg coise, péist goile</i>.	NEID generally retains lenition as in FGB: <i>scian bhuistéara, ubh chirce, cill phlanda, ordóg choise, péist ghoile</i>.
A noun is not lenited if it qualifies an abstract noun derived from an adjective, e.g. <i>sábháilteacht bóthair, dílseacht pictiúir</i>.	This new rule is not applied in NEID entries: <i>sábháilteacht bhóthair, dílseacht bhranda</i>.
Certain feminine words associated with government and administration do not lenite the qualifying nouns that follow them. These are <i>aicme, corparáid, cuideachta, earnáil, feidhmeannacht, foireann, gníomhaireacht, institiúid, oifig, rannóg, scéim</i> and <i>seirbhís</i>.	In NEID, these words are treated like all other feminine nouns: <i>an aicme cheannais, earnáil mhiondíola, oifig thosaigh, scéim mharcála</i>, etc. Note, however, that the words <i>comhairle</i> and <i>roinn</i> do not lenite when used in the titles of administrative or state bodies. • <i>comhairle chogaidh</i> but <i>comhairle contae</i> • <i>roinn chainte</i> but <i>an Roinn Cosanta</i>

Numbers

Where nouns are governed by multiples of ten, NEID uses the nominative singular as in FGB: *fiche bliain*, *caoga cóip*, etc. This rule applies to both the singular and plural forms of the number:

- *céad duine/na céadta duine*
- *míle bliain/na mílte bliain*
- *milliún vóta/na milliúin vóta*
- *billiún dollar/na billiúin dollar*

This contrasts with CO 2017, which recommends using the plural form of the noun after the plural form of the numeral, e.g. *na céadta daoine*, *na mílte dathanna*.

Also in NEID, when an adjective is qualifying a noun after numbers, the adjective remains in agreement with the gender and number of the word, i.e.

- *trí bhosca mór* (masculine word in the singular)
- *cúig chathaoir mhór* (feminine word in the singular)
- *naoi gcinn mhóra* (masculine word in the plural)

This contrasts with CO 2017, where a lenited plural form of the adjective follows a singular noun, either feminine or masculine, e.g. *trí bhosca mhóra*, *cúig chathaoir mhóra*. The entries for numbers in NEID give both forms, with the CO 2017 form labelled ‘formal’ (online) or ‘fml’ (in print) to indicate that this is the form which should be used in formal writing:

three (counting things, units) *trí* (generally with singular noun in Irish) ~ **chairs** *trí chathaoir*; **in** ~ **places** *i dtrí áit*; **it has** ~ **parts** *tá trí chuid ann*; **answer the** ~ **questions** *freagair na trí cheist*; **it’s** ~ **cm long** *tá sé trí cm ar fad*; **it’s** ~ **miles from here** *tá sé trí mhíle as seo*; ~ **heavy boxes** *trí bhosca trom, trí bhosca throma fml*; **the** ~ **red apples** *na trí úll dearg, na trí úll dhearga fml*; ~ **busy months** *trí mhí ghnóthach, trí mhí ghnóthacha fml*; **the** ~ **cold nights** *na trí oíche fhuar, na trí oíche fhuara fml*; **it cost** ~ **or four dollars** *chosain sé trí nó ceithre dhollar, chosain sé trí nó ceathair de dhollair*

The copula

Ba and b’

In the past tense of the copula, *is*, the forms *ba* and *b’* are used before words beginning with a vowel or with *fh* + vowel. The same is true of the conditional *dá mba* and *dá mb’*. These forms are not interchangeable, however, but are used in particular circumstances, as described in the tables below.

Ba / Dá mba
With pronouns and prepositional pronouns: • <i>Ba í Eibhlín a bhí ann.</i> • <i>Ba iadsan ba chúis leis.</i> • <i>Ba aici a bhí an bua.</i> • <i>Dá mba agamsa an t-airgead sin!</i>
With prepositions: • <i>Ba as Luimneach í.</i> • <i>Ba in aghaidh mo thola a rinne mé é.</i> • <i>Dá mba ar an Luan a tháinig tú chugam.</i>

Ba / Dá mba
With non-adjectival adverbs, i.e. adverbs describing position, time, etc: • <i>Ba inné a labhair mé leis.</i> • <i>Ba ann a bhíomar inár gcónaí.</i>

B' / Dá mb'
With nouns: • <i>B'aisteoir fóna é.</i> • <i>B'fhile cumasach í.</i> • <i>Dá mb'fhear saibhir mé.</i>
With adjectives: • <i>B'iontach an radharc a bhí ann.</i> • <i>B'fhurasta dom í a thuiscint.</i> • <i>Dá mb'fhada an chéad leabhar, b'fhaide fós an dara ceann.</i>
With adjectival adverbs and with <i>amhlaidh</i>: • <i>B'annamh a bhíodh sé ina aonar.</i> • <i>B'amhlaidh a dhéantaí im sa teach fadó.</i> • <i>B'fhileata mar a labhair sí.</i>
With the shortened pronouns <i>eo, in, iúd</i>: • <i>B'eo chugainn na Gardaí.</i> • <i>B'in an fhirinne lom.</i> • <i>B'iúd amach an madra.</i>

Gur and gurb

When the conjunction *gur* precedes words beginning with a vowel, either *gur* or *gurb* may be used, as described in the tables below.

Gur
With nouns in general: • <i>Is dóigh liom gur Iodáilis atá á labhairt acu.</i> • <i>Nach dóigh leat gur airgead amú atá ann?</i> • <i>Deir sé gur oifigeach airm é.</i>

Gur
With adjectives and with adverbs (except <i>amhlaidh</i>): • <i>Is cinnte gur ait an scéal é.</i> • <i>Deirtear gur iontaí fírinne ná finscéal.</i> • <i>Cé gur annamh a labhraím léi.</i> • <i>Creidtear gur anall ón Mór-Roinn a thagann siad.</i>
With prepositions and prepositional pronouns: • <i>Ceapaim gur as Dún Dealgan í.</i> • <i>Cé gur in Éirinn atá sé.</i> • <i>Is dócha gur ormsa atá an locht.</i> • <i>Deirtear gur ann atá an talamh is fearr.</i>

Gurb
With the nouns <i>acmhainn</i>, <i>áil</i>, <i>éigean</i>, <i>eol</i> in prepositional phrases: • <i>Ní chreidim gurb acmhainn don chomhlacht fanacht i mbun gnó.</i> • <i>Ó tharla gurb áil leat casadh léi.</i> • <i>Is trua gurb éigean duit imeacht.</i> • <i>Ní féidir gurb eol dó na rudaí sin go léir.</i> <i>Gur</i> is used, however, when the words above are used as stand-alone nouns: <i>Is cinnte gur acmhainn nádúrtha luachmhar atá ann.</i>
With <i>amhlaidh</i>: • <i>Is trua liom gurb amhlaidh atá.</i> • <i>Deir sí gurb amhlaidh a goideadh airgead uaithi.</i>
With pronouns, including <i>eo</i>, <i>in</i>, <i>iúd</i>: • <i>Níl aon amhras ach gurb iad is fearr.</i> • <i>Glacaim leis gurb eisean a rinne é.</i> • <i>Tá a fhios agat féin gurb ea.</i> • <i>Deir sí gurb in an leigheas is fearr air.</i>