

Compensatory lengthening in Primitive Irish

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Compensatory lengthening is a phonological phenomenon which occurred twice in the prehistory of the Irish language. According to Kortlandt (1979) and McCone (1996), two disparate processes of this kind took place in the period preceding Classical Old Irish. As a result of these, some short vowels underwent lengthening at the expense of disappearing consonants.

In particular, the first of these lengthenings allegedly occurred at the beginning of Primitive Irish and involved nasal loss before voiceless spirants and, sometimes, voiceless stops. The other one happened just before the end of Primitive Irish, and then voiceless and voiced fricatives were dropped before sonorants. In both cases we are dealing with simplification of consonant clusters.

Such phenomena are nothing unusual as regards language development. However, in the case of Irish, these may pose both structural and theoretical problems. In Government Phonology, a framework within which this analysis is conducted, it is assumed that consonant clusters are normally governing domains in which one segment is the governor, the other being the governee. Structurally, combinations of two consonants in a row are viewed as either branching onsets (typically: obstruents+sonorants) or coda-onset sequences (usually: sonorants+obstruents). All such groups and, consequently, governing domains are supposed to be licensed by the following nuclei, be they melodically empty or filled with vowels. Moreover, some combinations are easier to license (e.g. sonorants+obstruents) while others are more difficult (e.g. obstruents+sonorants). If a combination is easy to license, it is likely to survive longer than one in which licensing is harder to be had. If licensing fails, a break-up of the governing relation occurs and a loss of a consonant is expected. As for Primitive Irish, the first compensatory lengthening apparently involves consonant clusters which are easy to license, while the second one affects those in which this licensing is more difficult.

A logical question to be asked at this juncture is why this is possible. Since an easy-to-license governing domain is chosen to break up first, then there must be something wrong either with the theory itself or with the interpretation of linguistic facts. Given that both McCone and Kortlandt agree on the chronology of changes, the facts are apparently indisputable. The only option remaining, if the theory is not faulty, is that the structure of the consonant combinations is not what it seems to be.

Therefore, this paper seeks to understand the reasons for the chronology of Primitive Irish events which led to both types of compensatory lengthening mentioned above. In accordance with Jaskuła (2006), it will be proposed that the syllabic structure of Irish has been different from what is usually taken for granted and that a new interpretation of this structure can offer a new understanding of some linguistic facts, both historical and contemporary.

References

- Kortlandt, F. (1979) The Old Irish absolute and conjunct endings and questions of relative chronology. *Ériu* 30: 35-53.
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