

The diachrony of coronal stop contrasts in Scottish Gaelic and Gaelic-accented English

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Past and present varieties of Scottish Gaelic, and corresponding varieties of Gaelic-accented English in the bilingual context, may be classified into two types according to whether or not they display an opposition between (laminal) dento-alveolar stops /tʰ t/ and (apical) alveolar ones /tʰ t/. *Merging* speakers have only dento-alveolar stops, both in Gaelic and in English. On the other hand, *non-merging* speakers have dento-alveolar stops in native Gaelic words, but alveolar ones in relatively recent English loanwords in Gaelic, as well as in English:

(1)		Merging	Non-merging	
a.	Gaelic, native words			
	<i>tobair</i>	[tʰopəð]	[tʰopəð]	‘well’
	<i>slat</i>	[sʲvaʰt]	[sʲvaʰt]	‘rod’
	<i>dath</i>	[tʰa]	[tʰa]	‘colour’
	<i>sgadan</i>	[skaʰaŋ]	[skaʰaŋ]	‘herring’
b.	Gaelic, English loanwords			
	<i>teatha</i>	[tʰê:]	[tʰê:]	‘tea’
	<i>lot</i>	[lɔʰt]	[lɔʰt]	‘croft’ (← <i>lot</i>)
	<i>doile</i>	[tɔlə]	[tɔlə]	‘doll’
	<i>seada</i>	[ʃɛtə]	[ʃɛtə]	‘shed’
c.	English			
	<i>tea</i>	[tʰi:]	[tʰi:]	
	<i>lot</i>	[lɔʰt]	[lɔʰt]	
	<i>doll</i>	[tɔl]	[tɔl]	
	<i>shed</i>	[ʃɛt]	[ʃɛt]	

This talk will draw from a variety of descriptive sources in order to track the development of these systems over time. Diachronically, there is a tendency for merging varieties to become non-merging, seemingly in tandem with the increasing prevalence of English in the community. Dentalisation was apparently common in the English of Gaelic speakers in the early 20th century (Grant 1913: 27), from which it can be inferred that these speakers were non-merging. By around the mid-20th century, the dialects of Arran (Holmer 1957) and Kintyre (Holmer 1962) – where the shift to English was at an advanced stage – were already non-merging, while the Outer Hebrides (Borgström 1937; 1940; Oftedal 1956) and Islay (Holmer 1938) – where Gaelic was still the main language of the community – remained merging. More recently, non-merging varieties have been described for Jura (Jones 2010), Wester Ross (Wentworth 2005), and Easter Ross (Watson 2022), and appear to be the norm in present-day Lewis. It seems that greater exposure to English has allowed recent generations to more faithfully reproduce the alveolar stops of English, and apply these to a special stratum of English loanwords in the Gaelic lexicon.

The mechanism behind the creation of this loanword stratum, however, remains unclear. Given that previous generations used dento-alveolar stops in all words, it is not obvious how later generations were able to correctly identify those relatively recent English loans in the Gaelic lexicon. It cannot be that non-merging speakers simply assigned Gaelic words to this loanword stratum on the basis of their synchronic similarity to English words, since this would falsely predict that a native Gaelic word such as *cat* [kʰaʰt] ‘cat’ – not an English loanword, yet identical to English *cat* [kʰaʰt] for merging speakers – would become *cat* *[kʰaʰt] for non-merging speakers. One speculative explanation would be the continued maintenance, ever since the time of borrowing, of a “hidden” non-merging minority – perhaps those most proficient in English – in otherwise-merging communities, who stood poised to act as a model when the remainder of the community eventually acquired the ability to distinguish the two stop series.