

The diachronic stability of syllable weight in Scottish Gaelic

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Stressed syllables in modern Scottish Gaelic (SG) display a binary opposition between light and heavy. In this paper I demonstrate that the lexical distribution of syllable weight shows a remarkable degree of cross-dialectal stability, in spite of extensive segmental variation. I also argue that this stability extends historically to the mediaeval period, with consequences for the interpretation of syllable weight in Early Irish (EI). This evidence strongly supports the existence of an autonomous durational tier in phonological representations, whose diachronic development may remain independent of changes at the segmental level.

I define a heavy stressed syllable in SG as one whose rhyme contains either (i) a long monophthong (V:), (ii) a diphthong (VY), (iii) a svarabhakti group (VCY), or (iv) in some dialects, a short vowel followed by a long consonant (VC:), while all other syllables are light. Although a given lexical item may display dialectal variation across these segmental types, the weight of its stressed syllable remains constant:

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| (1) | V: ~ VC: | im | /ĩ:m/ (Lewis) ~ /im:/ (Islay) | ‘butter’ |
| | V: ~ VY | cum | /k ^h ũ:m/ (Barra) ~ /k ^h ũm/ (Lewis) | ‘keep’ |
| | VY ~ VC: | ball | /pauL/ (Lewis) ~ /paL:/ (Islay) | ‘member’ |
| | VY ~ VCY | samhradh | /sãũrəy/ (Lewis) ~ /sevərəy/ (Islay) | ‘summer’ |
| | VCY ~ VC: | tilg | /t ^h iĩĩk/ (Lewis) ~ /t ^h iĩ:k/ (E. Perths.) | ‘throw’ |

Besides duration, the opposition in syllable weight is reinforced phonetically by differences of tone in dialects such as Lewis, where heavy stressed syllables are characterised by a later tonal peak, and glottalisation in dialects such as Islay, where light stressed syllables are characterised by glottalisation at their right edge. While this approach to syllable weight in SG runs contrary to several existing analyses of certain phenomena (Smith 1999; Hall 2003; 2006; Iosad 2015; Scouller 2017), I show that these turn out to be incorrect upon closer inspection of the data.

Modern SG syllable weight most often straightforwardly continues that of EI, with light syllables reflecting those containing short vowels and heavy syllables reflecting those containing long vowels. However, there are environments where original short vowels are reflected by heavy syllables (modern forms shown are from Lewis):

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|-----|--|---------|---|-------|--------------------------------------|
| (2) | a. V before word-final fortis sonorant | | | | |
| | | barr | /baR/ | → V: | bàrr |
| | | cenn | /k ^j eN/ | → VY | ceann |
| | | | | | /k ^h ãũN/ |
| | b. V before fortis sonorant + any other C | | | | |
| | | dorn | /doRN/ | → V: | dòrn |
| | | inntinn | /iN ^j t ^j əN ^j / | → VY | inntinn |
| | | aimser | /am ^j s ^j ər/ | → VCY | aimsir |
| | | | | | /ãmãs ^j ər ^j / |
| | c. V before voiced fricative or lenis sonorant + any other C except voiceless stop | | | | |
| | | adbar | /aḏvər/ | → V: | adhbhar |
| | | cuimne | /kuṽ ^j n ^j e/ | → VY | cuimhne |
| | | derg | /d ^j ərg/ | → VCY | dearg |
| | | | | | /t ^j əra ^j k/ |

It turns out that these contexts correspond almost exactly to those in which vowels are said to display *síneadh meadhónach* (‘middle length’) in EI poetic metre (Ó Curnáin 2012; Mac Cárthaigh 2014; Hoyne 2019). I therefore propose that *síneadh meadhónach* referred not to an intermediate degree of vowel length, as traditionally interpreted, but rather to any syllable that was phonologically heavy despite containing a short vowel. Syllable weight has therefore remained diachronically stable in the face of a wide variety of segmental changes.