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PHONOLOGY OUT OF WORK –
THE *-igh* ~ *-í* ALTERNATION IN MODERN IRISH

1. INTRODUCTION

The verbal noun (henceforth VN) is one of the most important and at the same time most complex categories in Modern Irish, on account of its multifarious functions and complicated formation, which involves about 20 morphophonological exponents. Synchronically, these exponents are not on equal footing. Any account of various terminations marking VNs must make a distinction between productive desinences, whose attachment is subject to pure grammatical conditioning and unproductive ones, which have fallen into desuetude and whose attachment is regulated by lexical marking, in which case any concomitant alternations are not rule governed and represent fossilised remnants of inert phonological rules. The latter will comprise isolated examples such as, e.g. *dubhaigh* ‘blacken’ – *dúchan*, *tuig* ‘understand’ – *tuisint*. Cases of suppletion such as *deir* ‘say’ – *rá*, *teir* ‘go’ – *dul* constitute one end of this productivity cline, whereas regular formations the other. In the elsewhere block of regular affixation rules operating on verbal roots we find two rules which apply to verbs belonging to a specific conjugation.¹ The default markers are [ə] and [u:] for the first and second conjugation respectively.

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¹ Verbs in Irish fall into two conjugations depending on phonological characteristics of the base. First conjugation verbs are predominantly monosyllabic. They end in a consonant (*glan* ‘clean’) or the string *-igh* [igʲ]. Polysyllabic verbs which end in *-áil* (*bácáil* ‘bake’) also belong to the first conjugation. Members of the second conjugation are all polysyllabic and terminate in *-(a)igh* (*bailigh* ‘collect’) or *-il*, *-ir*, *-in*, *-is* (*oscail* ‘open’).

The aim of the paper is to weigh the pros and cons for regarding the morphemically conditioned alternation [ig' ~ i:] observed in the verbal root of some 1st conjugation verbs and their corresponding VNs (i.e. *nigh* 'wash' – *ní*) as automatic. In the paper we shall try to decide whether the regular rule of VN formation referred to above also subsumes monosyllabic verbs which end in *-igh* and the long vowel [i:] in the VN is a phonological reflex of $-\text{ə}$ attachment to the root, e.g. *nigh* + ə → *ní*. If this is not the case, and we do not have to do with an automatic phonological process consisting in the delinking of the palatalised stop [g'] and attendant compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel, the stem alternation *nigh* – *ní* should be viewed as morphologically motivated and as such comes within the purview of the lexicon.

THE DATA

Let us first have a look at the data in question. Monosyllabic verbs terminating in *-Vgh* [Vg'] whose corresponding VN terminates in a long vowel can be divided into three groups. As for these verbs, a traditional grammar such as Ó hAnluain (1999) suggests that *í* is put instead of *-igh* in forms where there is no long vowel or diphthong in the root, e.g. *nigh* 'wash' – *ní* (1a). If the root ends in *-igh*, only the element *-gh* is left out, e.g. *cnaígh* 'gnaw' – *cnaí* (1b). In the case of other verbs ending in *-igh* the entire sequence *-igh* is cut off, e.g. *dóigh* 'burn' – *dó* (1c).

| (1) | CITATION FORM | VN |
|-----|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| a. | <i>figh</i> [f'ig'] 'weave' | <i>fí</i> [f'i:] |
| | <i>guigh</i> [giɡ'] 'pray' | <i>guí</i> [gi:] |
| | <i>ligh</i> [l'ig'] 'lick' | <i>lí</i> [l'i:] |
| | <i>luigh</i> [liɡ'] 'lie' | <i>luí</i> [li:] |
| | <i>nigh</i> [n'ig'] 'wash' | <i>ní</i> [n'i:] |
| | <i>snigh</i> [ʃn'ig'] 'flow' | <i>sní</i> [ʃn'i:] |
| | <i>snoigh</i> [sniɡ'] 'hew' | <i>snoí</i> [sni:] |
| | <i>suigh</i> [siɡ'] 'sit' | <i>suí</i> [si:] |
| b. | <i>caígh</i> [ki:ɡ'] 'weep' | <i>caí</i> [ki:] |
| | <i>cnaígh</i> [kni:ɡ'] 'gnaw' | <i>cnaí</i> [kni:] |
| c. | <i>báigh</i> [ba:ɡ'] 'drown' | <i>bá</i> [ba:] |

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------------|
| brúigh [bru:gʷ] ‘press’ | brú [bru:] |
| clóigh [klo:gʷ] ‘tame’ | cló [klo:] |
| cneáigh [k'n'a:gʷ] ‘wound’ | cneá [k'n'a:] |
| crúigh [kru:gʷ] ‘milk’ | crú [kru:] |
| dóigh [do:gʷ] ‘burn’ | dó [do:] |
| dreoigh [d'r'o:gʷ] ‘decay’ | dreo [d'r'o:] |
| luaigh [luəgʷ] ‘mention’ | lua [luə] |
| meáigh [m'a:gʷ] ‘balance’ | meá [m'a:] |
| pléigh [p'l'e:gʷ] ‘discuss’ | plé [p'l'e:] |

Ó hAnluain does not describe the data, but only their orthography. The process is not uniform: in some cases it consists in attaching a vowel and truncation of the [igʷ] cluster, whereas in others only the final consonant is truncated. In cases where *-igh* [igʷ] is subtracted and *í* [i:] is supplied (i.e. in (1a), which is the focus of our discussion), the root is divested of all content but the initial consonant (cluster). It is very difficult to envisage a morphological rule of this kind. It is far more plausible that the lexical entry for ‘wash’ encompasses two variant stems.

The generalisations above are based on the citation form, which from the theoretical vantage point is the least suitable choice. It seems far more plausible to regard the root as the starting point for the morphophonological spell-out mechanisms involved.² In order to identify the root, we need to consider the conjugation of *nigh* ‘wash’ and *crúigh* ‘milk’ in comparison with a typical representative of the 1st conjugation such as *glan* ‘clean’. First conjugation verbs do not add any vocalic element to the root to form the

² The Verbal Noun is a blanket term for a number of grammatical categories. It can discharge the function of nominalisations and non-finite verb forms. The root serves as the base for various modifications as it would be completely counterintuitive to form transpositions (i.e. products of word formation) from the general stem let alone the citation form which is 2nd person sg. imperative, i.e. a form marked for morphosyntactic features. The stem is not a suitable base for nominalisations because, unlike in Latin, the theme vowel is appended to the root only to form inflectional forms of verbs. Inflectional markers are precluded from the position preceding affixes marking derivational categories. A universal tendency for derivational affixes to appear closer to the root than for inflectional formatives was formulated by Greenberg (1966: 93) – ‘where both derivational and inflectional elements are found together, the derivational element is more intimately connected with the root’. Inflectional forms of verbs such as infinitives and present participles are inherent inflectional categories (cf. BOOIJ 1996) not regulated by the syntactic context. As inherent inflection contributes to the meaning of the verb, it seems appropriate to attach inherent inflectional markers to the root. We arrive at the form of the root by analysing other inflectional forms and deducting person and number desinences.

stem (cf. Ó SÉ (1991)). Hence, the two are identical and in order to arrive at the root we only have to subtract inflectional desinences. Let us have a look at singular present indicative forms.

| | | | | |
|-----|------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| (2) | I | glan ‘clean’ | crúigh ‘milk’ | nigh ‘wash’ |
| | 1. -(a)im | glanaim | crúim | ním |
| | 2. -(e)ann | glanann tú | crúnn tú | níonn tú |
| | 3. -(e)ann | glanann sé, sí | crúnn sé, sí | níonn sé, sí |

When we subtract the person/tense endings in the second column we are simply left with *crú-*. As far as VN formation is concerned, in the case of verbs which contain a long vowel or a diphthong such as *crúigh* ‘milk’ it would be enough to say that the VN equals the root, i.e. it is formed by adding a zero morpheme to the root or by implementing no morphophonological modification at all. Consequently, the *-igh* cluster in the citation form would have to be considered an inflectional desinence.

Apparently, this rationale is not applicable to verbs such as *nigh* ‘wash’. As we can see most present forms contain a long vowel: *ním*, *níonn* etc., but the citation form has a short one. Which is the root – *nigh-* or *ní-*, where does this long vowel come from, and is *-igh* an inflectional marker or an integral part of the root? We have to account for this somehow. According to Bauer (1988: 253) the root is ‘the basic part of a lexeme which is always realised, and it cannot be further analysed into smaller morphs.’ Therefore, if we encounter word-forms with a short vowel, we cannot claim that the root contains a long one, i.e. that it is *ní-*. In addition to this, there are verbs terminating in *-gh* which contain a long *-í* in all word-forms, e.g. *caígh* [ki:g] ‘weep’, *cnaígh* [kni:g] ‘gnaw’, *cloígh* [kli:g] ‘cleave’, which strengthens the argument that the radical vowel in ‘wash’ is not long. If it were long, it should be long in the citation form as is the case with the three verbs under discussion. Alternatively, we can postulate the attachment of a vocalic suffix, i.e. a neutral vowel [ə] to a root, *nigh*. The palatalised stop [gʲ] will then be delinked in the intervocalic context, which in turn will trigger compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel. If this proposal stands up to closer examination, monosyllabic verbs ending in *-igh* will be legitimate members of the category of monosyllabic verbs which attach [ə] to the root. We can then maintain that these are ‘regular’ first conjugation verbs, where the citation form equals the root. The only difference is that in one case the VN ending [ə] is spelt *-adh* (*glan* [glan] ‘clean’ – *glanadh* [glanə]), in others it is

indicated merely by the long vowel *-í* (*nigh* + $\varnothing \rightarrow n\acute{i}$). The disappearance of [g'] will then be due to the operation of phonology. It will follow automatically from the general principles defining phonological structure. This interpretation is tempting as it makes our overall description of VN formation more economical and hence more elegant. We must, however, furnish sufficient evidence that the change in question is required by the phonotactic pattern of the language.

ARGUMENTS FOR AN AUTOMATIC ALTERNATION

Two linguists of different persuasions – Ó Siadhail (1989) and Cyran (1997) – make a case for consonant loss and compensatory lengthening as an active synchronic phonological rule in Modern Irish. Also Ó Cuív (1944: 110) notes that fricatives exhibit a tendency ‘to be weakened and vocalized and lost. This vocalization of fricatives usually results in the lengthening or diphthongization of preceding short vowels’. However, he regards this process as diachronic.

Chomsky and Halle (1968) constitutes the methodological frame of Ó Siadhail’s analysis. It will, therefore, suffer from the shortcomings of the model itself³ as few scholars would nowadays defend the strictly generativist SPE approach to allomorphy in which an abstract underlying form is assumed for the alternants involved and subjected to phonological rules. The underlying representations frequently identical with historical forms are established to ‘derive the required forms in the major dialects, with a minimum of generally applicable rules’ (Ó SIADHAIL 1989:16). The proposed underlying forms are often too far removed from their respective surface forms.⁴

That is why we prefer to choose Cyran (1997) as a point of reference for our further investigation. His analysis is restricted to one dialect (Munster Irish)⁵ and carried out in the model of Government Phonology which is a

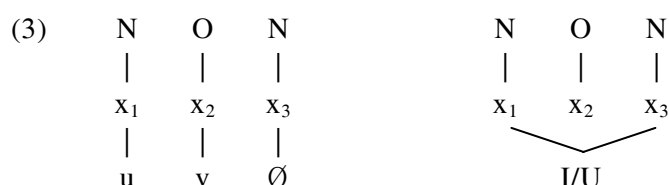
³ The criticism thereof can be found in Lass (1984) or Gussmann (2000).

⁴ In the introduction we noted that default VN markers of first and second conjugation verbs are [ə] and [u:] respectively. To account for the same facts Ó Siadhail evokes the ending *-dh* [ɣ]. One major objection we could raise to this is that the author relies on the old spelling and not the pronunciation of the forms in question. In the old orthography, the VN of *ardaigh* was spelt *ard-aghadh*. The modern spelling *ardú* reflects the pronunciation. Synchronically, there is no sign of the ending [ɣ].

⁵ There are three major dialects in Modern Irish: Donegal, Connacht and Munster. Overall, a fundamental distinction can be made between northern and southern Irish (O’RAHILLY 1932: 17-18),

non-transformational framework, where phonological processes are viewed as static constraints on well-formed structures.

Traditionally, the term compensatory lengthening means lengthening as a result of consonant loss. In Cyran (1997: 154-156) it has been demonstrated that structurally compensatory lengthening is in fact nuclear fusion following the loss of an intervocalic consonant, as is evident from his representation of *ubh/ uibhe* [uv / i:] ‘egg/ gen.sg.’.⁶



The intervocalic consonant (onset x_2) is deleted, which yields a vowel constituted by two consecutive nuclei. The delinking can be effected only if the second nucleus (x_3) is realised phonetically, yielding [i:].

To support this view Cyran (1997: 148-153) uses alternations of the type VC(V) > VV, which may be viewed as suppression of the intervocalic consonant and subsequent compensatory lengthening. The resulting vowel is always either [u:] or [i:] as in (4a) and (4b) respectively.

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|-----|----|--------------------------|-------------------|
| (4) | a. | talamh/talmhan (talún) | ‘land/gen.sg.’ |
| | | [taləv] / [talu:n] | |
| | | ollamh/ollamhna (ollúna) | ‘professor/pl.’ |
| | | [oləv] / [olu:nə] | |
| | b. | ubh/uibhe | ‘egg/ gen.sg.’ |
| | | [uv] / [i:] | |
| | | tigh/tighe (tí) | ‘house / gen.sg.’ |
| | | [t’ig’] / [t’i:] | |

with Connacht and Donegal falling into the northern group and Munster representing the south. The greatest degree of variation can be observed in the area of phonetics and phonology. The dialect of Munster, which will be the focus of our investigation, in terms of its diachronic development can be regarded as the most conservative in its morphology but most susceptible to phonological change.

⁶ It is worth noting, however, that this alternation is confined to Munster and in other dialects we get *ubh/ uibhe* [uv / iv’ə] ‘egg/ gen.sg.’.

Cyran concludes that the quality of the final vowel is contingent not so much on the place defining element of the delinked consonant (in generative terms – the feature defining the place of articulation) as on its secondary place specification, i.e. whether it is palatalised or velarised. The form [tʰalʷn] results from the addition of the genitive singular ending *-an* as in *teanga* – *teangan* ‘language/gen.sg.’, i.e. [tʰaləv] + ən → [tʰalʷn]. Turning now to (4b), [ə] is another genitive singular ending as in *cos* – *coise* ‘leg/gen.sg.’. In Munster *uibhe* is pronounced as [i:], and not as one might expect as [ivə]. Cyran concludes that in the intervocalic context [vʰ] and [gʰ] tend to be lost, which entails the fusion of the flanking nuclei.

Apart from the arguments above, which are restricted to the dialect of Munster, we have been able to identify other contexts in which the same change is effected (Vgʰ + ə → VV) and which additionally are valid for all varieties of Irish. Let us first consider the formation of genitive forms of adjectives. Masculine forms are formed by the palatalisation of the final consonant, whereas feminine forms arise due to the palatalisation of the final consonant and the addition of a vowel as in:

- (5) a. bog [bog] boig [bigʰ] boige [bigʰi]
 ‘soft’ ‘soft, gen.masc.sg.’ ‘soft, gen.fem.sg.’

What happens in the case of adjectives ending in *-ach* ties in with Cyran’s observation. Palatalisation of the final consonant yields *-aigh* [əgʰ]. Further addition of a vowel results in consonant delinking, followed by the fusion of nuclei, i.e. [əgʰ] + [ə] → [i:] as in:

- (5) b. déanach [dʰianəχ] déanaigh [dʰianəgʰ] déanaí [dʰiaʰni:]
 ‘late’ ‘late, gen.masc.sg.’ ‘late, gen.fem.sg.’

Furthermore, in the old orthography the form *déanaí* was represented as *déanaighe*.

The formation of the comparative degree of adjectives terminating in *-ach* [əχ] also supports our claim. In order to form the comparative of some adjectives in Irish, we need to palatalise the final consonant and add a vowel, e.g. *ard* – *airde* ‘high/ comp.’ or *geal* – *gile* ‘bright/ comp.’. In the case of adjectives terminating in *-ach* [əχ] we observe the same effects as in the case of adjective declension.

| (6) ADJECTIVE | COMPARATIVE |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| déanach [d'ianəχ] 'late' | níos déanaí [d'ia'ni:] |
| díreach [d'i:r'əχ] 'straight' | níos dírí [d'i: 'r'i:] |
| aisteach [aɪt'əχ] 'strange' | níos aistí [aɪ't'i:] |
| iontach [u:ntəχ] 'wonderful' | níos iontaí [u:n'ti:] |

What is more, consonant delinking and vowel lengthening can be observed when the verbs in question are inflected. The forms of the past tense demonstrate that *nigh* shows a close affinity to verbs such as *glan*, discussed in the preceding section.

| (7) | glan 'clean' | nigh 'wash' |
|----------------------|--------------|------------------|
| 1. ^L - as | ghlanas | níos (nigh + as) |
| 2. ^L -ais | ghlanais | nís (nigh + is) |
| 3. ^L - Ø | ghlan sé, sí | nigh sé, sí |

Only if the desinence begins with a vowel do we observe compensatory lengthening effects.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST AN AUTOMATIC ALTERNATION

Before we turn to counter-arguments proper let us briefly comment on the points made so far. Cyran's observations regarding compensatory lengthening effects can be put into question due to the fact that he bases his argument on a few nominal alternations which display a limited subregularity. The formation of the plural and in some cases that of the genitive is exception-ridden, hence lexicalised. Without the old spelling the regularity would not be detectable, as in the lexicalised pair *tigh* – *tí* (4b). Even in Munster Irish we find plural forms which do not conform to the proposed pattern, e.g. *luibh* [liv'] 'herb' – *luibheanna* 'herb, pl.' which is pronounced as [liv'ənə] and not as *[li:nə]. Also our argument relating to the declension of adjectives proves to be a *cul de sac*. It assumes (only on the basis of old orthography) that the declension of adjectives in *-ach* is the same as that of e.g. *bog* 'soft'. Furthermore, in phonological terms the palatalization of *-ach* [əχ] should yield [əχ'] rather than [əg']. Even if we accept this line of argument there is also the question why the form *boige* [big'i] at all surfaces, as the addition of the vocalic suffix should yield [bi:].

One of the arguments in favour of compensatory lengthening was that the change occurs in paradigms, where *-igh* is followed by a vowel. This generalisation, however, is not absolute. Compare the 2nd person imperative singular and plural. In the case of monosyllabic 1st conjugation verbs such as *cuir* and *glan*, no ending is added to the root in the singular, whereas to form the plural the ending beginning with a vowel is employed.

- | | | |
|--------|--|--|
| (8) a. | 2 nd person singular imperative | 2 nd person plural imperative |
| | glanØ [glan] | glanaig [glanəg'] |
| | cuirØ [kir'] | cuirig [kir'ig'] |

If the same endings are added to verbs from (1a), we do not observe the expected compensatory lengthening effect in the plural.

- | | | |
|--------|--|--|
| (8) b. | 2 nd person singular imperative | 2 nd person plural imperative |
| | suighØ [sig'] | suighig [sig'ig'] *suíg [si:g'] |

Our analysis runs into trouble in future tense forms, where the final consonant is not intervocalic, and yet the vowel is long, i.e. *nigh + fidh* [hig'] → *nifidh*. The same happens before the verbal endings with an initial consonant in the conditional, e.g. *-f(e)adh nigh + feadh* [həχ] → *nifeadh* (cf. Ó SIADHAIL (1989: 48-50)).

If we argue for an automatic phonological process, we are also hard put to account for the present indicative forms of some other first conjugation verbs whose root terminates in [g']:

- | | | |
|-----|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| (9) | Verb | 1st person sg. present indicative |
| | lig [l'ig'] 'let' | ligim [l'ig'əm] |
| | tuig [tig'] 'understand' | tuigim [tig'əm] |
| | baig [bag'] 'bag, heap' | baigim [bag'əm] |
| | ruaig [ruəg'] 'chase' | ruaigim [ruəg'əm] |
| | gróig [gro:g'] 'huddle' | gróigim [gro:g'əm] |

If the change $Vg' + V \rightarrow VV$ is automatic these forms should not exist. The same holds for feminine nouns terminating in a palatalised consonant and their corresponding genitive case resulting from the addition of *-e*.

| | | |
|------|------------------------------|-----------------|
| (10) | NOMINATIVE | GENITIVE |
| | cnaig [knag'] 'scowl' | cnaige [knig'ə] |
| | braig [brag'] 'brag' | braige [brig'ə] |
| | claig [klag'] 'dent, hollow' | claige [klig'ə] |
| | graig [grag'] 'hamlet' | graige [grig'ə] |
| | meig [meg'] 'bleat' | meige [meg'ə] |

Glaring counter-examples such as these render the entire process of consonant delinking unnatural phonetically, as purely phonological processes apply whenever the conditions for them are satisfied.

CONCLUSION

The relevant generalisation does not hold across the board so it cannot be accounted for by the phonological component. Synchronically, it should be viewed as segment replacement. It is a morphological fact that sometimes *ni-* and sometimes *ní-* appears. Both allomorphs must be listed for an enumerable set ((1a) lists all representatives) and their distribution must make reference to grammatical information. A short vowel appears in second person imperative singular and plural (*nigh* [n'ig'] and *nighigh* [n'ig'əg']), in the present autonomus form (*nitear* [n'itər]) and in the verbal adjective, i.e. past participle (*nite* [n'it'ə]). Otherwise a long vowel appears in the root (cf. Ó SÉ 2000). We can conclude that what is often claimed to be phonology falls within the domain of morphology. VNs of monosyllabic verbs terminating in *-igh* have to be listed in the lexicon.

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FONOLOGIA NIEPRODUKTYWNA

– ALTERNACJA *-igh ~ -f* WE WSPÓŁCZESNYM JĘZYKU IRLANDZKIM

Streszczenie

Rzeczownik odsłowny stanowi jedną z centralnych kategorii gramatyki irlandzkiej ze względu na wielość pełnionych funkcji, jak i skomplikowany proces jego tworzenia, w którym wyróżnić można około 20 wykładników morfofonologicznych. Celem artykułu jest określenie charakteru alternacji między krótką samogłoską rdzenia czasowników jednosylabowych zakończonych na *-igh* a długą samogłoską występującą w formie rzeczownika odsłownego, np. *nigh* 'myć' – *ní*. Jeśli rzeczownik odsłowny tworzony jest w sposób regularny, w więc przez dodanie neutralnej samogłoski do rdzenia czasownikowego, alternacja może być uwarunkowana fonologicznie, co ozna-

cza, że długa samogłoska powstaje w wyniku elizji poprzedzającej ją spółgłoski, tj. $Vg' + ə \rightarrow VV$ ($nigh + ə \rightarrow níl$). Dokładna analiza alternacji w systemie koniugacyjnym czasownika oraz w systemie deklinacji rzeczowników i przymiotników wskazuje, że mamy do czynienia z nieaktywną synchronicznie regularnością, rzeczowniki odsłowne zaś, o których mowa, są typem nieproduktywnym, czyli grupą wyjątków, które należy umieścić w leksykonie z informacją o towarzyszącej im alternacji.

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Słowa kluczowe: morfologia, alternacja, rzeczownik odsłowny w języku irlandzkim.

Key words: morphophonology, alternation, verbal nouns in Irish.