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The Celtic languages: an overview

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1.0   THE CELTS: ORIGINS, MIGRATIONS, DISTRIBUTION

The original homeland of the Celts (if that is indeed a valid historical concept) is unestablished: no hypothesis of the many proposed has found general acceptance. The earliest named Celts (in Greek and Latin sources) are associated with two major central European Iron Age cultures, the Hallstatt, dated to the seventh century BC, and La Tène, dated to the fifth century BC. The archaeological evidence suggests a cultural continuity backwards through the late Bronze Age Urnfield Culture with no material evidence that the Celts were newcomers to the region.

During the Hallstatt and La Tène eras the Celts enjoyed a period of great power and expansion. They spread from their central domain in different migrations over the whole of Europe: east and south through the Balkans to Asia Minor (crossing through the Hellespont in 278 BC), south into Italy (Rome was captured in 390 BC), west into the Iberian Peninsula, north to the Atlantic coast and across into Britain and Ireland, where they were a dominant force by the third century BC.

With the rise of Roman power and expansion, the Celts lost their dominance in western Europe and southern Britain before the end of the first century AD. With the withdrawal of the Roman power from Britain in the second decade of the fifth century, British leadership sought to re-assert control and defend themselves against incursions from the Germanic tribes who settled on the east coast and expanded inland. These had conquered the greatest part of the territory of the former Roman province of Britain by the seventh century, confining the British kingdoms to the west.

The Britons also had to contend with the Irish, who had remained outside the sphere of direct Roman power and were in an expansion posture during the late fourth and the fifth centuries. They established settlements along the coast of

western Britain; and under the combination of pressures exerted by them and by the Saxons from the east, there was a large-scale emigration back to the continent from south-west Britain to north-west Gaul, giving rise to the territorial name, Brittany. The most permanent Irish settlement, however, was in north Britain. It is not clear when settlement began, but the colony of Dál Ríata was well established by 500 BC and descendants of these settlers eventually conquered the whole of 'Scotland' (a name derived from *Scotus*, the Latin name for 'Irishman').

1.1   CONTINENTAL CELTIC

The term Celt is, in the first place, a linguistic term: the first mentions of Celts are to be found in the writings of Greek and Roman ethnographers and historians, who identified them as a separate people speaking a distinctive kind of language. This language, referred to generally as Continental Celtic, is partially reconstructed from various sources such as place names, inscriptions, items borrowed into Germanic or Italic and references in Latin texts. It had a range of dialects, precisely how many we do not know. These dialects are reflected in the distinctive remains of Gaulish, Celtiberian and Lepontic (northern Italy) (see De Hoz 1988; Fleuriot 1988; Evans 1979; Schmidt 1986). No substantive remains of Galatian (Asia Minor) are extant, although it is reported as surviving into the fourth century AD. A distinctive tongue, Narbonensic, the language of the Narbonenses (southern France), has been postulated, along a number of other Gaulish dialects. Celtic speech, apart from possible enclaves, appears to have died out on the European continent by AD 500.

1.2   INSULAR CELTIC

In the British Isles, however, Celtic survived. Scotland north of the Forth–Clyde line, the territory of the Picts, avoided Romanisation and, along with Ireland, kept its Celtic tongue (or tongues) intact. Within the Roman province and its spheres of influence the British tongues were, in different degrees, affected by Latin but survived the occupation, and the later English settlement, developing northern and southern varieties which were the ancestors of Welsh and of Cornish and Breton, respectively. Cornish ceased to be a spoken community language in the eighteenth century.

    'Pictish' was superseded by the Gaelic brought in by the Irish settlers, establishing a Gaelic continuum covering Ireland and Scotland. This 'common

Gaelic' developed into Irish, Manx and Scottish varieties. Manx ceased to be a spoken community language in the nineteenth century.

1.3   THE SURVIVING CELTIC LANGUAGES

The surviving Celtic-language communities are located on the peripheries of states with other majority languages. (Irish is, of course, the designated national language of the Irish Republic.) In Brittany, Wales and Ireland there are in the region of half a million valid speakers and in Scotland there are around 80,000 speakers.

Many *émigré* Celts are dispersed in loose networks or as family groups or individuals throughout other majority populations around the world. Ethnic communities were established in America, notably by Scottish Gaels in Nova Scotia from the late eighteenth century and by the Welsh in Patagonia in 1805. A number of native speakers of Patagonian Welsh and Cape Breton Gaelic still remain.

1.4   LINGUISTIC AFFINITIES

Celtic has been long recognised as a branch of the Indo-European family of languages. Its most distinctive phonological innovation is the loss of Indo-European *$*p$*, which occurred both initially and medially: for example Gaelic *éan*, Welsh *edn* 'bird', compared with Latin *penna*, Greek *pterón*, English *feather* ($p > f$) 'feather'; Gaelic *caora* 'sheep' compared with Latin *caper* 'he-goat', Greek *kápros* 'boar' (Lewis and Pedersen 1937: 26–7 and ch. 1 *passim* for the full range of correspondences).

1.4.1   Whereas it is easy to demonstrate the status of Celtic as an Indo-European language, it has proved more difficult to find a consensus about its place in the language family, and various theories have been advanced about its genetic relationships.

Celtic is regarded as having archaic features. Typical of these are the lack of a fully developed infinitive, the lack of a verb 'have' (still true of the modern languages), the differentiation of gender in the numerals 3 and 4 (still surviving in Welsh) and the ancient SOV word order in Celtiberian and Lepontic (and still the order to be found in embedded non-finite clauses in Scottish Gaelic, and in Irish in a restricted range; see Schmidt 1986: sect. II). This has sometimes been related to its being a 'peripheral' language, that is, removed from an innovating centre.

1.4.2   'Proto-Celtic', reconstructed from the evidence of the earliest surviving fragments together with extrapolation from later materials, has been seen in the context of 'Old European' and of 'Western European'; as having a special relationship with Italic, to the extent of deriving from an Italo-Celtic common ancestor; and as having a special relationship with Germanic. The proponents of these theories have all had substantive and important data to present. However, as we get more information about early Celtic remains, about ancient languages in the Celtic contact areas and about languages of Indo-European origin elsewhere, the strong versions of these hypotheses have tended to dissolve as it becomes clear that what were considered defining criteria can no longer be regarded as restricted to the 'languages' concerned (e.g. 'Old European' and 'Italo-Celtic'; Bednarczuk 1988). Again new sources of information open out the possibilities of moving to new or revised positions along a positive rather than a negative path (e.g. the 'Western European' thesis). The evidence may, for instance, point more strongly to an early period of interlanguage contact rather than the presence of a genetic relationship. Indeed, it seems clear that this is the case with Celtic–Germanic relationships, and it is becoming increasingly acceptable to see the other cases we have cited primarily in those terms. It is certainly the case that similarities between the modern Celtic languages and genetically related tongues (such as English and French) owe much to contact. We are in the happy position, of course, in most of these cases, of having the data to enable us to distinguish innovation from survival (see Schmidt 1988; Evans 1979).

1.5   INTRA-CELTIC VARIATION

It has been common practice to divide the Celtic languages into Continental Celtic and Insular Celtic (as we have done above). This dichotomy as a historical and working definition serves its purposes: for example, when we speak of Continental Celtic we are talking of a very early period in the development of the Celtic languages, and when we speak of Insular Celtic we are talking about the direct ancestors of the modern tongues. Linguistically, however, the picture is different.

1.5.1   Two basic criteria (along with a supporting set of less distinctive ones) have been used to establish the primary linguistic division within Celtic. The first of these is the development of Indo-European $*k^w$ (and $*k + *u$, which came together with $*k^w$) which has different reflexes in different Celtic languages:

(a) It appears as /kụ/ in Celtiberian, in some dialects of Gaulish (where this is regarded as a mark of their archaism) and in Ogam inscriptions (where the symbol has been transliterated as Latin *q* – hence the term Q-Celtic). This yields /k/ in the historical Goedelic languages (Irish, Manx and Scottish Gaelic).

(b) It appears as /p/ in Gaulish, Brittonic and Lepontic.

This gives us early Gaelic, for example, *cenn*, Welsh, *pen(n)* 'head' and Gaelic *mac(c)*, Welsh *map*, 'son'. The latter is also attested in Ogam *maq(q)i* and Gaulish *Maponos* (the name of a divine being).

The second criterion is the development of syllabic nasals $^*m$ and $^*n$ which, unsupported and before stops, gives $^*em$, *en* in Goedelic but $^*am$, *an* in Brittonic, Gaulish and Celtiberian (the usage in Lepontic is doubtful: Schmidt 1988: 234). Examples are: Gaelic privative prefix *in-* as against Welsh *an-*; Early Gaelic *dét* (with loss of *n* and compensatory length) 'tooth', Welsh *dant*, etc. This second criterion separates Goedelic from the other early Celtic languages:
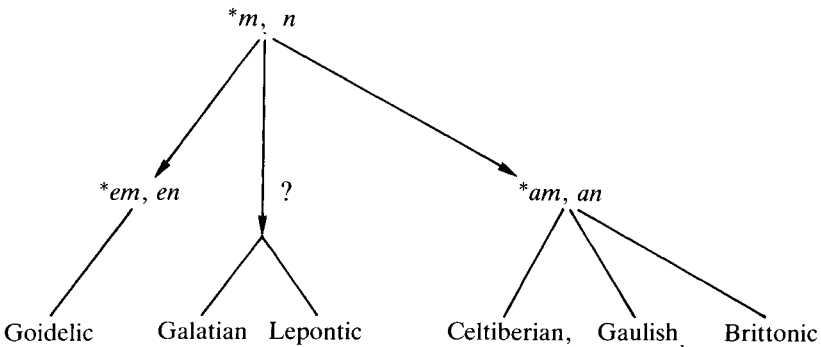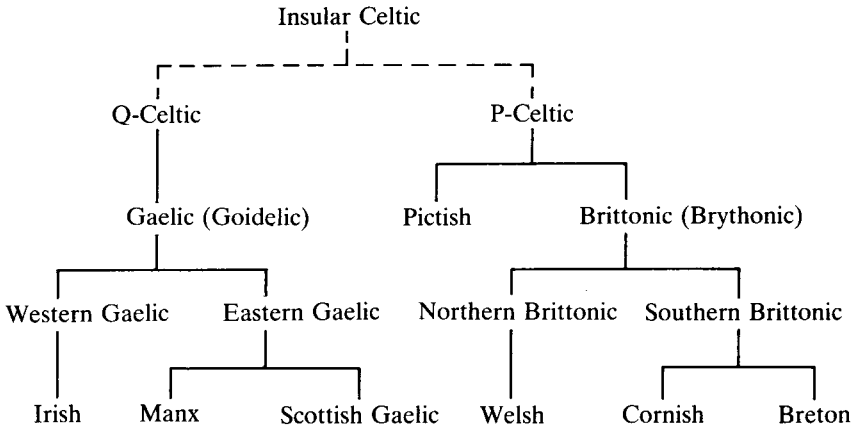

The first criterion shows relationships between Goedelic and Celtiberian and archaic Gaulish dialects:

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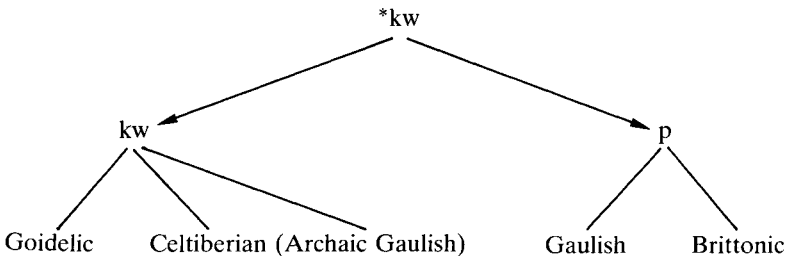
1.5.2   Modern Celtic languages

The relationships between the modern Celtic languages are as follows:

1.6   TYPOLOGICAL FEATURES OF MODERN CELTIC LANGUAGES

Some of the special typological features of the Celtic languages are archaic or conservative and some are innovative. Amongst the archaic features are the lack of a verb 'have' and the expression of the notion of possession by noun (possessed) + noun (gen.) (possessor) juxtaposition or by a noun (possessed) + locative preposition + noun (possessor) structure: *cù Chaluim/an cù aig Calum*, 'Calum's dog'; and, for example, the marking of gender in numerals 'three' and 'four' in Welsh: *tri*, *pedwar* (masc.) and *tair*, *pedair* (fem.), and perhaps the object–verb order in embedded non-finite clauses.

Locative structures, as well as being used to express 'location' and 'possession', are used to express aspectual modes. This covers the range of aspects, progressive, prospective and perfective in Scottish Gaelic and Welsh and optionally in Irish. Breton and Irish have innovated on the basis of their 'majority' contact languages, French and English respectively, to develop new perfective constructions. Contact with these languages is, as is demonstrated in the sections on the different languages below, a prime and accelerating source of innovation in all Celtic tongues.

1.6.1   Typologically, Celtic languages are VSO languages: that is, the order of elements in the structure of free, transitive, matrix sentences is

verb–subject–object. This is accompanied by a structural highlighting device in which the copular verb is utilised in an equative sentence with the highlighted element as its subject (or at least as the first element following the verb). Compare the simple Scottish Gaelic sentence, 'I am at the door' *Tha mi aig an dorus* (is I at the door) with its 'equivalent' with *mi* highlighted. *Is mi a tha aig an dorus* (is (copular V) I REL is (existential V) at the door). Such sentences are common in discourse, in all the languages, with the initial verb elided. Breton has developed this structure as its unmarked form.

As is usual in VSO languages, the adjective follows the noun in the noun phrase.

1.6.2   Distinctive also, and an innovative feature, is the exploitation of sets of systemically related consonants, historically derived from their positional conditioning, to denote morphological distinctions. This happens most notably in the initial consonants of nouns, and we can illustrate it briefly by looking at the noun *cù* 'dog' and the phrases 'his dog' and 'her dog' in Irish and Scottish Gaelic, in Welsh and in Breton.

	'dog'	'his dog'	'her dog'
Irish	cú /ku:/	a chú /ə xu:/	a cú /ə ku:/
Scottish Gaelic	cù /ku:/	a chù /ə xu:/	a cù /ə ku:/
Welsh	ci /ki:/	ei gi /i gi:/	ei chi /i xi:/
Breton	ki /ki:/	e gi /e gi:/	e c'hi /e xi:/

We note that the possessive pronouns are realised identically (phonologically) in all languages for both genders: that is, the distinction is carried by the form of the mutation of /k/. We note also that this distinction is realised in the same manner in both Gaelic languages and in both neo-Brittonic languages, and that the two groups differ from each other in this realisation (maintaining an ancient distinction in the treatment of intervocalic stops). We are unable, for reasons of space, to give more examples here. However, further examples of these systems and of the other points raised in this section, and indeed of many other typologically relevant topics relating to Celtic, are to be found in the relevant chapters of the description of the individual languages below.

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PART I

The Gaelic languages

2

The Irish language

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HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

2.0 EXTERNAL HISTORY OF THE LANGUAGE

The Irish language (*Gaeilge*) is, together with Scottish Gaelic and Manx, a member of the Q-Celtic grouping of Insular Celtic. Although it has existed in Ireland from at least the early centuries of the Christian era, the date of its introduction into the country is unknown and a number of theories have been proposed. One attempts to derive the language from a suggested invasion of an Indo-European warrior aristocracy in the first millennium BC as part of the large-scale expansions of the early Bronze Age from a central European heartland. An alternative suggestion is that the early Celtic inhabitants of Ireland were P-Celtic speakers rather than Q-Celtic (or, to be more accurate, spoke a language which later gave a form of Insular P-Celtic) and that the introduction of the Q-Celtic dialects into the country came about as the result of the dislocations and tribal movements in Gaul following the expansion of Roman power into that region and its subsequent incorporation into the Roman Empire. This latter suggestion would obviously place the origins of the Q-Celtic-speaking Gaels very much later than the alternative theory and unfortunately there is no definitive external evidence to allow us to decide between the two competing theories. From a linguistic point of view, the only suggestions to support the latter proposal are a number of words in Irish (such as *peata* 'pet' or *portán* 'crab') which appear to be old but which cannot be genuine Q-Celtic forms. It has been suggested that these represent the relics of the P-Celtic substratum in Ireland, as words which were part of the speech of the ordinary people which was displaced by that of the mainly warrior class involved in the late incursion from Gaul. For a summary of the position from the viewpoint of the first theory see Dillon and Chadwick (1973) and for the alternative suggestion see the discussion in O'Rahilly (1946); an up-to-date