



Christopher Lewin

*No. 6 - September 2011*

*A series of short articles on Manx Gaelic grammar, idiom, vocabulary and pronunciation.*

This month, a few notes on pronunciation. Although all Manx spoken today is necessarily an approximation of traditional Manx, it is certainly possible to have better and worse approximations. In addition, there is some variation in the type of Manx pronunciation learners wish to adopt, whether following strictly the recordings of the last native speakers, basing it more on the pronunciation indicated by the spellings of Classical Manx, or taking a lead from the other Gaelic dialects, or from contemporary Manx English. Nevertheless, some general guidance may be useful to help people sound ‘more Manx’, which is probably what most learners aim for. In addition, adopting a more authentically Gaelic pronunciation helps us to hold our heads up with the Scots and Irish, who are too often wont to look on Manx as a rather dubious, overly anglicized dialect.

The standard advice is to speak with a Manx accent, and this is probably sound inasmuch as the stronger varieties of Manx accent still heard today have a good deal of the general intonation of Manx Gaelic in them; nevertheless a hundred years or more have passed since Manx English was directly influenced by Gaelic phonology and many of the Gaelic sounds and sound patterns once no doubt current in Manx English have faded away. For this reason, while adopting a Manx accent is a good starting point, especially for the vowel sounds, specific guidance is needed for certain sounds that are not found in English. The following then, is only general and approximate advice on a few issues, the objective being to raise awareness and encourage avoidance of the most noticeably un-Gaelic phenomena which may creep into our spoken Manx.

### Vowels

Long vowels in Manx should be purer than they are in standard English. Many vowel sounds in English are in fact diphthongs, that is, made up of two vowel sounds, for example, English ‘bay’ generally has a slight ‘y’ sound on the end, basically ‘beh-ee’ run together, whereas the vowel in Manx *bea* is a single pure sound, like northern English pronunciations of ‘bay’. Manx English traditionally has pure vowels, but the diphthongal variants are very common today, so this is one of the cases where a Manx accent is not always a sufficient inoculation against non-Gaelic sounds.

The worst offender is the long 'oh' sound, as in English 'low', 'toe', 'phone' etc. Northern English again may have the (correct Manx) pure sound 'oh', but the English of the Isle of Man today usually has a diphthong 'oh-oo' (where the 'oo' element is very short, basically just a 'w' sound tacked on the end of the main vowel). Received Pronunciation (the Queen's English) goes even further and has a neutral vowel as in 'sofa', 'mother' (phonetic symbol ə, called 'schwa') followed by an 'oo' glide. Liverpool English, which of course is also influential here, has 'eh-oo'. So instead of 'boat' with a single pure vowel sound 'oh', one in fact usually hears today 'bo-wt', 'bə-wt' or 'be-wt'.

Of course if your habit of speaking English (and Manx) uses these sounds, it is difficult to change; a good way might be to focus on a particular sound, say the long 'oh', and consciously concentrate on pronouncing it in the non-diphthongal way in everyday life. Try it even in English, and it will then easily carry over into Manx. For example, say the sentence 'I'm going on the boat', with Manx vowels in 'going' and 'boat', a few times every day, then say some Manx words like *ro*, *s'çhoe*, *bio*, and before long it will be *aa-ghooghys* (second nature) to you. And it will have the side effect of making your English sound more Manx too, if you want.

### **Dental t(h)-, d(h)-**

Everyone is aware that Manx *thie* is 'tie', not 'thigh', but this is not quite the whole story. The 'h' is there for a reason. The Manx sound is dental (tongue pushed against upper teeth), whereas the English is alveolar (tongue pushed against the gum ridge). The difference is subtle, and many English-speakers find it hard to pick out. However listen carefully and you will notice that the English sound sounds quite 'wet' and 'hissy', if that makes sense, whereas the Manx is somehow thicker and breathier. The Manx sound exaggerates these natural properties of the dental 't' with particularly heavy aspiration, or breathiness. The equivalent 'd', as in *nyn dhie*, *dewil*, *dow* etc., is similarly dental, but without the breathiness.

It is all about training your ear. Force yourself to be a perfectionist, a pedant. Notice other Manx speakers' mistakes (but of course don't point them out unless you know the person very well!) and you will notice them in yourself. At first I did not notice these subtleties, but now my ears prick up immediately when I hear *thie* with an English 't' sound.

This may sound silly or not a priority, but such fussiness about little points is the only way to get good Manx. You may say 'worry about the bigger issues', but the bigger things are more blatant and therefore will sort themselves out; you don't need to worry about them. But the little faults are the most stubborn, and these are the things that make learners despair of ever reaching the top. Awareness of them however, allows them to be dealt with.

NB These notes only apply to the 'broad' t, d. The 'slender' variants are spelt 'çh' and 'j' at the beginning of words in Manx orthography, but 't' and 'd' (often flanked by the letter 'i', vaguely resembling Gaelic spelling of 'slender' consonants) in other positions, as *aitt* 'funny', *aittin* 'gorse'. This sound is similar to the 'ty' sound in British English 'Tuesday', if it is pronounced carefully and not simply 'chewsday'. So the broad 't' as in *thie* is articulated further forward in the mouth than the English

sound, whereas the slender ‘t’ as in *aitt* is further back. (It is a palatal sound, and the palate is behind the gum ridge, while the teeth of course are in front of it.)

In the middle of words it is often voiced (becomes *d*) or spirantized (becomes a fricative<sup>1</sup>), so being pronounced ‘ajin’ or ‘azhin’ (where ‘zh’ represents a voiced form of ‘sh’ as in the sound of ‘pleasure’, ‘collage’). The broad ‘t’ medially can become ‘d’ or ‘th’ (as in ‘this’) in pronunciation: so ‘*baadey*’ or ‘*baathey*’ for ‘*baatey*’.

A special note about ‘tr-’ and ‘dr-’. The ‘t’ and ‘d’ in these are always more or less broad in Manx, even if they are slender in Gaelic originally. So the Manx for ‘three’, *three*, is traditionally spelt with an ‘h’, which is there for a reason. In most dialects of English, however, ‘tr-’ and ‘dr-’ are automatically pronounced something like what in Gaelic would be called slender, i.e. they are palatal, like the sounds in ‘Tuesday’, ‘dew’, or even more or less like English ‘ch’ and ‘j’. So English speakers usually say roughly ‘çhree’ and ‘jragon’ for ‘tree’ and ‘dragon’. This is all too often imitated in Manx, but is not warranted; especially with original broad ‘t’ there is no excuse for it whatsoever. So the Manx word *traa*, should be pronounced with a dental, breathy ‘t’, (tth-raa), NOT as ‘çhraa’; *troo* does not sound the same as English ‘true’ (çhrue), but rather is ‘tth-roo’. Likewise *drappal* is ‘ddh-rappal’, not ‘jrappal’. (By the way, in the pseudo-phonetic spellings, I use hyphens to encourage you to pronounce the sounds carefully and not allow the ‘r’ to influence the preceding consonant; there should not actually be a gap.)

### ‘r’:

Much can go wrong with ‘r’ sounds in Manx. In the world’s languages, there are many different ‘r’ sounds (just think of the French ‘r’ in the back of the mouth, or the two Spanish ‘r’s’). In addition, many of these ‘r’ sounds are found in different frequently-heard dialects of English. There were originally several different ‘r’ sounds in Gaelic, but now there is more or less only one in Manx. It is basically the same as the ‘r’ of Received Pronunciation, that is, a short flap at the gum ridge. It is not generally a strong trill like the stereotypical Scottish and Spanish sounds, though such a trilled ‘r’ may occur at the end of words and in initial consonant clusters (HLSM 3 p.18). There is also occasionally a palatalized sound, in words like *rieau* and *rio*, where this sound is indicated by the spelling ‘ri-’. Unless you can do this well, it is probably best not to attempt it, since using the normal ‘r’ is not wrong, and it is difficult to get right; there is no separate ‘y’ sound after the ‘r’, still less a vowel. It is better to think of *rio* being pronounced like *ro*, rather than run the risk of saying the South American city-name ‘Rio’! Similarly, *rieau* is basically *roo*, with an optional palatal tinge on the ‘r’.

Most dialects of British English, outside Scotland and the West Country, are ‘non-rhotic’ (*rho*—name of the Greek letter ‘r’), that is, they do not pronounce the ‘r’ after vowels and before consonants, in words such as ‘mother’ (>motha), ‘car’ (>cah), ‘hard’ (>hahd). Contemporary Manx English is also non-rhotic, which is problematic for learning Gaelic. It is true that the last native speakers often omitted r’s as per

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<sup>1</sup> that is, a consonant where there is a gap between the articulatory organ—tongue and teeth, say—which is wide enough for a continuous sound to be made but narrow enough for there to be audible friction / turbulence.

English, saying ‘ahn’ for *ayrn*, ‘mooa’ for *mooar* etc.; however, the fact that r’s are virtually never omitted in writing, and the fact that the last native speakers *did* often pronounce their r’s, suggests that this change is a very recent (and incomplete) influence from English, and there is no reason for us to imitate it.

Again, the best way to get this into your head is probably to foRce youRself to pronounce these R’s when you aRe speaking English, and then extend this to Manx. Or do this: say ‘moo’. And then ‘moon’. Notice how the ‘moo-’ element doesn’t change much when you put ‘-n’ on the end. Now do the same but put ‘-r’ on instead of ‘-n’, but without changing the ‘moo-’ element in any way. If it feels more clumsy and unnatural to say ‘mooR’ than ‘moon’, this is just because you are not used to it. But keep at it, and soon you will be able to say the Manx word for ‘big’ without any trouble. Also, watch that your r’s don’t make Manx short vowels long, as they might in English. For example, *er* has a short ‘e’ sound like in ‘bet’, not long as in ‘bear’.

An added side effect of English non-rhoticity is the so-called ‘intrusive r’. This originates in the ‘linking r’, whereby an original ‘r’ is usually silent except when a closely related word (as in a compound) beginning with a vowel directly follows, e.g. in ‘far’ the historical ‘r’ is usually silent but is pronounced in ‘Far East’. From here, the addition of an r-sound between vowels spreads to situations where it is not historically justifiable. For example, I remember being told off by an elocution teacher for pronouncing ‘drawing’ as ‘drawring’. Typical examples would be ‘I saw-r-a film’, ‘Hosanna-r-in the Highest’. I have heard this sort of thing several times in Manx; it should be avoided.

An increasingly prevalent realization of ‘r’ in many varieties of English today is the labiodental approximant. This is most famously exemplified in the pronunciation of the English television personality Jonathan Ross. He is popularly thought to be unable to pronounce his r’s, but this is not strictly true. Although he is sometimes jokingly called Jonathan Woss, his ‘r’ and ‘w’ sounds are not the same. His ‘r’ sounds like something between ‘v’ and ‘r’ and ‘w’, and that is basically what it is: it is ‘labiodental’ (pronounced with the upper teeth near the lower lip), but only an approximant: the articulators are not as close together as for the fricative ‘v’. This sort of ‘r’ is associated especially with ‘Estuary English’, which is basically a mix of more vernacular forms of Received Pronunciation with working class London accents, but it is on the rise in many forms of English. I have heard it in some peoples’ Manx, and it sounds very un-Gaelic: it should be strenuously avoided.

### L’y, ch

When you learn a new language, which has sounds different from what you are used to, the new sounds are often explained in a simplified and approximate manner, and the learner is patted on the back for getting vaguely in the right direction with the pronunciation, and rightly so, for something is better than nothing. Pseudo-phonetic spellings, such as I have sometimes resorted to, are by definition such approximation. However, it is important to graduate on to more accurate representations of the language, and not take what one is taught in introductory classes, or in approximate phonetic spellings based on the learner’s first language, as final. One progresses to more accurate use of grammar and vocabulary, so why not also in pronunciation? This does not matter so much in English, since if you are a foreigner a foreign accent does not impede your purposes, unless it is very thick: the aim is to be able to

communicate. In learning Manx however an important aim, if not the most important, is to get closer to the authentic language: one learns Manx for the love of Manx, its sound and texture among other things, and not just as a bare tool of utility.

For instance, the slender or palatal ‘l’ is often explained as being an English ‘l’ followed by an English ‘y’, written ‘phonetically’ as <l’y> or the like. However, this is only an approximation. In fact, it is a single sound, the ‘l’ and ‘y’ elements (which are illusory) being melded together. It is basically an ‘l’ sound pronounced slightly further back in the mouth, on the palate rather than the gum ridge as in English. Any element of ‘y’ is subtle, and should not be labelled. It is more accurate to pronounce the word ‘balley’ as the English transliteration ‘balla’ in Ballasalla etc., rather than a clunky ‘bal-yuh’. Similarly, *elley* is closer to ‘Ella’ than ‘el-yuh’. This goes for other sounds too, as in *niart*, *kiaddey*, *giare*, *aitt*, but not for the labials (lip sounds), where the palatal element has either disappeared, as in *molley* from Gaelic *mealladh* or *baght* from *beacht*, or *has* indeed become a full ‘y’ sound, as in *mioyr* (*meabhair*) and *bio* (*beo*) and *feeu* (*fiú*).

There are two versions of the lenited ‘k’ or ‘c’ in Manx, broad and slender (both spelt *ch* initially, *gh* in other positions, where only the broad form appears). In phonetic transcription, the broad *ch* is written [x], and is like Scottish *loch*, German *Bach*. [x] is pronounced by placing the back of the tongue near the soft palate (the velum or ‘veil’ of soft flesh that separates the mouth from the nasal cavity, hence ‘velar’ consonants). The slender version, transcribed [ç], is pronounced further forward in the mouth against the hard palate (so ‘palatal’ consonants), and is like German *ich*. This sound is found in Manx *mychione*, *my chione*, *feer chiart*. The orthographic ‘i’ tries to capture the palatal nature of the consonant; you should not try to pronounce broad velar [x] followed by a ‘y’ sound \*[xj]: it is a single sound [ç]! Sometimes there is no orthographic ‘i’, and conscious knowledge of the etymology of the words is necessary to discern their true pronunciation, thus *cheddin* has a slender ‘ch’ sound [ç] because it is *chéadna* in Gaelic<sup>2</sup>. I often hear *cheddin* pronounced with initial [x], and it sounds very bad, because the natural development of the language would not have produced that result, and it screams ‘learner! non-native! English-speaker!’ Of course all of us are those things, but a little awareness of these points helps to get us much closer to authenticity.

In actual fact, initial [x] and [ç] were almost obsolete in Late Manx, and had probably already begun to disappear at the end of the eighteenth century, and be replaced by the unlenited consonants. It is therefore perfectly acceptable to pronounce *my chione* as *my kione* and *cheddin* as *keddin*, and *yn chied* as *yn kied*, and if you have trouble producing [x] and [ç] correctly and naturally, using the unlenited forms is perhaps in fact preferable, just so long as you still make the broad / slender distinctions. *Keddin* is therefore ‘*kieddin*’.

Next month I will discuss a few points to do with stress and emphasis.

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<sup>2</sup> The hopelessly ambiguous Manx spelling therefore represents something like \**chéadan*, when it could just as easily, for all the learner knows, represent (non-existent) \**chaodain* or \**chaoidin* or the like.

**Proverb of the Month:**

My she breag t'aym, breag cheayll mee<sup>3</sup>. - If it is a lie I tell, it is a lie I heard.  
[A story is often begun or ended with this saying.] (*Manx Proverbs and Sayings*)

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<sup>3</sup> A true Gaelic proverb. In Scottish they say *Mas breug bhuam e, is breug thugam e* - 'If it's a lie from me, it's a lie to me'.