

Gaelic Orthographic Conventions. Project Consultant: Donald John Maciver; Advisors: Annie MacSween, A.G. Boyd Robertson and Iain MacDonald. Glasgow: Scottish Qualifications Authority [SQA] 2009. English pages (including Word List): iv + 35pp., Gaelic pages: iv + 21pp. Without ISBN. Also available online at <<http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/38390.html>>.

The *Gaelic Orthographic Conventions (GOC)* were initiated in 1976, when the Scottish Certificate of Education Examination Board, at the request of their Gaelic Panel, set up a sub-committee to draw up guidelines on Gaelic spelling. *GOC1*, published in 1981, was intended to be used in the Board's exam questions from 1985 and used by candidates from 1988.

GOC1 was superseded by *GOC2* in 2005. A new edition of *GOC2* (the Report), the edition under review, was published in October 2009 in bilingual format as part of SQA's Gaelic Language Plan and contains a number of amendments to the 2005 edition, including corrections, but no substantive changes.

GOC2 is essentially a simplified version of *GOC1* and not all issues covered by *GOC1* are covered by *GOC2*; indeed, there is no reference to *GOC1* within the body of *GOC2*. Omitting items covered by *GOC1* is potentially a recipe for confusion, however, and, where it is not done, one can justifiably ask whether *GOC1* or pre-*GOC1* practice is considered correct. Although *GOC2* is intended to be easier to use than *GOC1*, the absence of cross-references in the Report's (albeit expanded) Word List is a drawback and the reduced explanatory notes within the main text, while they give the reader less to read, have a tendency to rely more on providing examples than on expounding principles.

The Report appears to fall somewhere between the executive summary, which might be used as a reference guide, giving clear, simple directions with a small number of examples, and the full report, which would contain a set of argued recommendations within an account of the spelling system along with copious examples. While it is clear that the intention behind the current document is to provide something closer to the executive summary, it is clear that a full report, which would act as its foundation, is also required. Some

of the Report's limitations, of course, can be seen to be due to the nature of its intended readership – school pupils – yet, given that Higher Education, Comhairle nan Leabhraichean, publishers and most other organisations and institutions have signed up to *GOC* in principle, a full report is all the more necessary.¹

Page 1 of the Report states that '[i]n most cases a single orthographic form is recommended, although it is recognised that, in some instances, more than one form is in use'.² There is a danger, however, where no alternative forms are listed, for this presentational principle to become proscriptive – for example, omitting examples such as *lethcheud* (besides the cited *leth-cheud* §11 and Word List) may suggest to the reader that *lethcheud* is not acceptable, whereas, according to principles exemplified under §§3, 5 and 10 of the Report, it should be.³

The observations appended here relate to each of the Report's 12 sections (including Word List) in turn.

§1 The spelling rule

Section 1, whose title unfortunately gives the impression that there is only one rule, introduces the practice of 'leathann ri leathann is caol ri caol' and the use of vowels of the same class in tandem to flank consonants,⁴ noting three categories of exceptions: verbal adjectives (*glacte*), compounds (*rudeigin*) and borrowed words (*telefòn*). The notable exception of *esan* is not given (contrast *GOCl* §1.4).

§2 Consonant quality

Section 2 demonstrates how consonant quality is indicated using either broad or slender vowels. The notable exceptions of the conjunction *is* and the verb *is* are not given (contrast *GOCl* §1.4).

While it is stated that *taigh* should be used instead of *tigh*, it might have been worth noting that the latter form is often an exception in terms of established signage (cf. §3). Some place-names, e.g. *Ormacleit*, might also have been exempted for structural reasons.

§3 Consonant groups

Section 3 notes how certain consonant groups should now be spelt: (a) *sc* > *sg* (*Sgalpaigh*), (b) *sb* > *sp* (*uspag*) and (c) *sd* > *st* (*aosta*).

Exempted under (b) are *easbaig*, *Gilleasbaig* and *taisbeanadh*, because of ‘their frequency and familiarity’. The claims of frequency and familiarity in the use of *-sb-* in these forms seem to be largely spurious, however, otherwise it is difficult to see why other words were not also exempted on similar grounds (e.g. *aosda*, now *aosta*). In the case of *leasbach* (Word List), neither frequency nor familiarity seem to be especially relevant, unless the latter is on account of English spelling; if so, with or without justification, it should have been acknowledged. Under (c), exceptions given include established forms of, or forms within, proper names (*Alasdair*, *Taigh-òsda*). Place-names in [Old Norse-derived] *-dal* are also exempted when preceded by *s* (*Loch Baghasdail*).

It is not clear why *GOCI* §2.6, for example, is not covered under this section: if it is because alternatives such as *mac/machd*, *sloc/slochd* are acceptable, it would have been useful to have had it confirmed.

The section continues by explaining the use of *co(-)* (*co-chomann* ~ *coileanta*, according to stress pattern) and *comh/còmh* (*comhaois*, *còmhradh*, with nasal vowel).⁵ Anomalously (because of the two long vowels), *còmh-thràth* ‘twilight’ is given in the Word List; ?leg. *co-thràth* (cf. McDonald 1972: *comh-thràth* s.v.).

Finally, it is recommended that consonant groups should be simplified in *cudrom*, *cudromach*, *meòraich* and *meòrachan*, although it is not stated from what, which might confuse some readers.⁶

§4 Vowel representations

This section does not proceed systematically, but moves between issues of representation of stressed, on the one hand, and unstressed vowels, on the other.

Unstressed vowels in *u(i)* or *io* are to be spelt *a* or *ea* in words like *comann*, *àlainn*, *boireann*. Exceptions given are *agus* and, in order that they ‘should reflect the element *trom* in their spelling’, *aotrom* and *cothrom*.⁷

Of stressed vowels, the section recommends distinguishing between *feur* ‘grass’, *fiar* ‘crooked’ and *fior* ‘true’, between *ceud* ‘100’ and *ciad* ‘1st’, between *mìos* ‘month’ and *mias* ‘basin’, and between *seun* ‘charm’, *sian* ‘bad weather’ and *sìon* ‘anything’, as spelt here; it is not explained why.

In the case of *feur* (OG *fér*), *fiar* (OG *fiar*) and *fior* (OG *fír*), of *mìos* (OG *mís*, oblique form of *mí*) and *mias* (OG *mías*), and of *seun* (OG *sén*), the spellings are essentially historical; they also continue more or less to reflect pronunciation differences.

Ceud and *ciad* were both formerly spelt *ceud* (OG *cét*) and so the modern differentiation is an imposition on the earlier system.

Seun, *sian* and *sion* are more problematic. *Seun* ‘charm’ (OG *sén*) is historical (cf. *feur* OG *fér*). *Sian* ‘bad weather’ and *sion* ‘anything’ have often been interchangeable in form or written in the same way. Indeed, *sian* ‘bad weather’ (OG *sín*, later *síon*) would be better spelt *sion* from an historical point of view (cf. *fior* OG *fír*). *Sion* ‘anything’ is associated with *sian* ‘bad weather’ by MacBain (1911, s.v. *síon*) but is conceivably a semantic extension of *seun* ‘charm’ > ‘sign’ ?> ‘thing’.

The form *siad* ‘hero’ (Word List) fails to acknowledge the word’s etymology (OG *sét*, cf. OG *fér* > modern *feur*); it also fails to take into account the inflectional form *seòid* (*seòid* gen., *a sheòid ort!* voc., *na seòid* pl.; cf. *feur* ~ *feòir* gen.). This word should obviously be spelt *seud*, as it usually has been.

Central /ə/ (*adhbhar*) is distinguished from *ao* (*daor*).⁸

The section also deals with the question of accents or lengthmarks. Only the grave accent should be used and it should be used on both upper and lowercase letters.⁹ It is pointed out that the accent is used on *àm* ‘time’ in order to distinguish it from *am* (article, preposition etc.). It might also have been mentioned that the preposition *à/às* carries the accent for the same reason (contrast *a*, pronoun etc., and *as*, relative of the verb *is*). A note on the use of the accent in words such as *ùghdarras*, *Dùbhlachd* (Word List) would have been useful.

Banrigh (§§1, 5, Word List) is written *bànrrigh* in *GOC1*, but we are not told of the reason for the change. Similarly, *baidhsagal* (§7, Word List) is written *bàidhsagal* in *GOC1*. In *GOC2* *baidhsagal* compares with *haidhp*, *naidhlean*, *raighd* and *taidhr* (Word List), all of which contrast with the spelling of *daineamaig*, *daineamait*, *daineamo* etc. (Word List). Assuming the latter have diphthongs, an explanation for their not being spelt *daidhneamaig* etc. is required.¹⁰

Rùm (the island) and *rùm* (*rùm-cadail*) (Word List) both carry an accent, without explanation (contrast *tum*, *cum* ‘to shape’¹¹). Because monosyllables in final *-m* are inherently heavy syllables, there is no need for an accent, the final *-m* indicating that the syllable will in general be long, either by virtue of a diphthong or long monophthong or by virtue of a long consonant. Exceptionally, *im* has a long monophthong almost everywhere (SGDS item 515), hence the accent is representative of most dialects. Monophthongal *rùm*, however, as opposed to diphthongal *rum*, is not so widespread. The same applies to words such as *greim* and *suim*, spelt *grèim* and *sùim* in the Report (Word List). In these instances, the unmarked forms are preferable, as they cater for all.

For the same reason, in spite of its appearance in Thomson’s *New English-Gaelic Dictionary* and the *Teach Yourself Gaelic Dictionary*, the interpolated *dh* in *braidhm* (Word List) is unhistorical and unnecessary (OG *broimm*), cf. *cam* ~ *caim* obl. (OG *camm* ~ *caimm* obl.). It is worth noting that the form *braidhm* does not account for inflexional, polysyllabic forms: so *braim* ~ *brama*, *bramannan*, cf. *greim* ~ *grama*, *greimean(nan)*, *suim* ~ *suime*, *suimeannan* etc.¹² The recommended form *braidhm* misconstrues the system, while the traditional form *braim* conforms to it.

At the end of the section, it is noted that words such as *till*, *fillte*, *sanntach*, *cinnteach*, *inntinn*, *bonn* and *cunntas* should continue to be spelt without an accent. This position results from essentially the same phenomenon described above. Originally geminate *-ll*, *-m*, *-nn* and *-rr* in stressed syllables, either in final position or before another consonant, yield heavy syllables (O’Rahilly 1976, 49–52; Ó Baoill 1990, 131; Cox 2000, 213–16). Hence *cinnteach* etc. need no accent; besides which, an accent would assume a long monophthong, whereas some speakers use a diphthong, as is the case with *rum* and *greim*.

Where a vowel follows these original geminates, however, the stressed syllable remains light, contrast *till* ~ *tilleadh*, *dinn* ~ *dinneadh*.¹³ However, the rule has again been misconstrued in the Report, as the section continues: ‘This principle [of not using an accent on *till* etc.] should also be applied to words formerly spelt with the accent, e.g. *dilleachdan*, *dinnear* and *trilleachdan*’. Words such as *tilleadh* and *dinneadh* amply demonstrate that the stressed

syllable remains short in such an environment and that, in order to show that their stressed vowels are long, an accent is indeed required on *dilleachdan*, *dinnear* and *trilleachdan*.¹⁴

§5 Word stress and emphasis

This section begins with a note on representing initial stress: ‘Where stress is on the first syllable, including proper compounds, these should be spelt as one word.’ Examples given include the compounds *atharrais* (i.e. < *ath* + *aithris*) and *banrigh* (i.e. < *bean*¹⁵ + *rìgh*), but also, surprisingly, *cuingealachadh*, *imeachd* and *smaoineachadh*, which have never been spelt other than as one word.

Regarding the use of the hyphen in non-initial stressed words (*ban-diùc*), exceptions in borrowed words are noted (*buntàta*, *tebhisean*, *tombaca*), but not native forms such as *MacLeòid*, *Diluain*, which are now spelt as one word, without a hyphen.

Although adverbs of time and place stressed on non-initial syllables – i.e. those consisting of preposition + noun (*a-màireach*) – are now spelt with hyphens, the example of *an àiteigin* (Word List) is arguably anomalous. The adverbial forms *a tuath*, *a deas*, *an ear*, *an iar* are exempt, as implied by *àird an ear* (Word List); so also *an seo*, *an sin*, *an siud* (§10).¹⁶

According to the Report, adverbial forms in *ath* ‘next’ should be hyphenated (*an-ath-bhliadhna*), as opposed to nominal forms, which should not (*an ath bhliadhna*). Given that the phonetically significant functions of grave and acute accents were done away with by *GOCl*, the merit and workability of such a system seem questionable, besides *an-ath-* being typographically inelegant.

§6 Apostrophes and spacing

This section recommends limited use of apostrophes only – generally as a result of apocope (*a th’ ann*) or aphæresis (*tha mi ’n dòchas*) – allowing combinations of preposition or conjunction + pronoun to form unapostrophised forms (*nam thaigh*, *gam thuigsinn*), although uncompounded, disyllabic forms are also recognised (*na mo thaigh*, *ga mo thuigsinn*). It is recommended that apostrophised words should generally be written separately using word spacing (*’s e*, *b’ e*).

§7 Sound adaptation and loan words

This section is an attempt at establishing basic correspondences between graphs or digraphs in English and Gaelic (e.g. *ch* > *se/te: seic, seòclaid, seans(a)/teans(a)*).

A number of categories of which there are examples in the Word List are omitted: *g* > *sioraf*; *c* > *seilear, siogàr, siogarait*; *s* > *seagsaidh, Siog, siostam*. Also absent is any indication of the pronunciation of the Gaelic graphs. For example, the description that ‘Initial Z may be represented by *s*: *sinc* (sink/zinc)’ does not indicate whether *sinc* ‘sink’ and *sinc* ‘zinc’ are homophonous or not – if they are, does the value of /s/ extend to *seabra* (Word List)? Similarly, the question of the value of *d* and *t* in *comadaidh* ‘comedy’ and *comataidh* ‘committee’¹⁷ is not addressed. Furthermore, although *y* > *gh*eat, *iogart, Iorc* is listed, non-initial *y* in *gay* (e.g. *Gath* 8, 39) might have been included also.

A note on the use of *dh* and *gh* in denoting diphthongs (*baidhsagal*) is added, but not on the apparent exceptions (*daineamo*), see §4, above.

§8 Verbs

This section deals mainly with forms of the verb *bi* and past tense forms of other irregular verbs. From the forms given, it is to be assumed that a space is recommended after the particle *do* (*cha d’ fhuair, cha do ràinig, cha d’ ràinig*).

§9 Prepositional ph[r]ases

This section attempts to lay out orthographic rules governing prepositions with or without an article. For some prepositions, several alternatives are cited; in the case of *do* + article, besides *don bhaile* and *don a’ bhaile*, the further, rare alternative *dan bhaile* is also admitted.

§10 Hyphenation

This section deals with the issue of hyphens in compound nouns. Along with *bana-phrionnsa* ~ *banacharaid* – the hyphen indicating a different stress pattern – variants such as *leth-cheud* ~ *lethcheud, leth-uair* ~ *lethuair* might have been included also.¹⁸

Not all prescriptions appear to quite hold up to scrutiny. For example, a hyphen is to be used after words such as *luchd*, *neach*, *sgioba* (*sgioba-glanaidh*). There should be no hyphen, however, ‘when the second or following noun is a proper noun’ (*sgioba rugbaidh na h-Alba*). By this token, ‘the Council’s cleaning squad’ would be *sgioba glanaidh na Comhairle*, despite there being no discernible difference between this squad and a hyphenated *sgioba-glanaidh*.

As far as pre-posed adjectives are concerned, the Report’s analysis is disappointing. The Report recommends that (a) a hyphen should be used where an adjective is prefixed to a noun (*dubh-fhacal*) but that (b) adjectives that always precede the noun should be exempt (*fìor dhuine*). This has prompted a rash of re-spellings of place-names such as *Glas Bheinn* as *Glas-Bheinn*, without taking into account the fact *glas* in such examples also always preceded the noun. In addition, the distinction between what are simply grammatical compounds (*fìor dhuine*), on the one hand, and semantic compounds (*fìor-eun*), on the other, is not taken into account. In this light, the Report’s *droch shùil*, assuming ‘evil eye’ is meant, would be better spelt *droch-shùil*.¹⁹

§11 Other orthographic issues

This section contains recommendations on the spelling of numerals, dates, days of the week etc., surnames, place-names, titles, acronyms and abbreviations.

The article before ordinal numerals preceding their nouns is said to depend on the gender of the noun (*an seachdamh bogsa* masc., *an t-seachdamh bròg* fem.), but the use of the gender of the noun to determine the form of the article here is artificial in some dialects, e.g. Oftedal 1956, 231, Borgstrøm 1940, 244.

Under days of the week, *Oidhche Diluain* is a typographical error for *Oidhche Dhiluain*.

The display of abbreviations of titles may have been influenced by the overall typographical style chosen by SQA, who published the Report, which uses forms such as *eg*, *adj* and *pl* – strongly redolent of a house style (note 3, above) – and sees no functional value in full stops in such forms. Recommended, therefore, are *Urr* for *Urramach*

and *a' Bh-uas* for *a' Bhean-uasal*. Other abbreviations given include *me* and *td*, but inconsistently *àir.*, which is explained as, and presumably contains a full stop by virtue of, English (no.). Omitting a stop (*Mgr* for *Maighstir*), except where the abbreviation is not 'closed' (*An t-Oll.*), would be an appropriate standard to adopt.

The recommendation that surnames in *mac-* and *nic-* should be spelt as single words, but with a capital letter on the second and any succeeding element (*MacAilein*), might have been tempered by noting exceptions regarding questions of historical fact or personal choice, e.g. *MacIlleathain* ~ *MacGill-Eain*, *MacilleDhuibh*.

§12 Word list

The Word List, which in general consists of Gaelic words only, although occasionally English equivalents are given, is intended to give examples of the Report's orthographic principles and recommendations in action. However, the fact that there are no cross-references to the location of words within the Report nor the sections they exemplify reduces the Word List's effectiveness.

Issues of voiced vs voiceless consonant quality include: *teacsa* rather than *teagsa*, cf. *ogsaidean* 'oxygen' and *tagsaidh*; and the unexplained *cuspann/cusbann*, whose alternation can be due neither to frequency and familiarity (cf. §3, above) nor to pronunciation (as there is no phonemic distinction between *sb* and *sp*, hence the recommendation that the clusters *sb* and *sp* should both be written *sp*, so too *sd* and *st* as *st* and *sc* and *sg* as *sg*). Issues of palatal vs non-palatal/velar consonant quality include: *calaraidh* 'calorie' rather than *cailearaidh*; *pannal* 'panel' rather than *panail*, cf. *seanail* 'channel'; *poilitigeach* rather than *poileataigeach*; and *traidiseanta* rather than *tradaiseanta* (?cf. Ir. *traidisiúnta* – a connection reminiscent of the fashionable *pròiseas* 'process' (not in Word List) rather than *pròsas* (?cf. Ir. *próiseas*)).

Other examples of words on which further discussion would have been useful include:

ars (before a vowel)/*arsa* (before a consonant), *latha/là*, *càit(e)*: such variants are not discussed within the Report.

bàt'-aiseig and *bàt'-iasgaich* are typographically inelegant. The apostrophe could be omitted on the grounds that *bàt* reflects a

reduced form of the noun in composition before vowels (cf. *ars* above).

bhìoras and *dioro*, assuming stressed /ai/, contrast with *baidhsagal* etc., see §4, above.

cia mheud lacks the alternative *cò mheud*.

dinichean [‘jeans’] conforms, in terms of language culture, by using a Gaelic plural morpheme, but shows a short stressed vowel, whereas a long one seems as, if not more, likely.

haidridean,²⁰ *maicreasgop* and *tribiùnal* contrast with the recommendation regarding the stressed syllable of *baidhsagal* etc., see §4, above.

mìlegram, *mìleliotair* and *mìlemeatair*: are the stressed vowels in these forms really long, or long by alignment with G. *mìle*?

pàrtaidh ~ *partaidh*: if the Report could recognise the alternation here, it might have recognised it in *Gàidheal* ~ *Gaidheal*.

Prìomh Mhinistear should read *prìomh mhinistear*, as it is not a particular prime minister that is being referred to, although an example of both usages might have been given. The same goes for *Ball Pàrlamaid*.

tèile does not automatically rhyme with *cèile*; for this reason and as a contraction, it might be better spelt *tè'ile*.

uamh lacks the alternative *uagh* (cf. *fomhar* ~ *foghar*, not included in the Word List).

Urànas: whether this indicates /e:/ or /a:/ might have been discussed in §7.

x-ghath is not addressed in §7.

For its original purpose – a guide for school pupils – the Report is to be commended for its simple presentation of orthographic rules. It contains several shortcomings and errors of fact, however. Furthermore, as a tool upon which almost all organisations, especially granting bodies, in Scotland now rely, it is clearly inadequate.

NOTES

¹ The notable exception in Scotland is *The Scotsman*. *GOC* is not followed in Nova Scotia.

- ² Contrast *GOCI*, Introduction, para. 4: ‘... the Sub-Committee was of the opinion that were it to recommend a single form this would, in some cases, entail judgements that had nothing to do with orthography and were, therefore, outwith the Sub-Committee’s remit.’
- ³ A related point is that there is no acknowledgement of house styles in the Report.
- ⁴ I.e. slender vowels (*i* and *e*) to flank slender consonants (*caileag*) and broad vowels (*a*, *o*, *u*) to flank broad consonants (*bodach*).
- ⁵ Although included in 2005, the example *coimhleanta* ‘compos mentis’ has been excised from the 2009 edition.
- ⁶ In other words, *cudthrom*, *cudthromach*, *meòmhraich* and *meòmhrachan* should be simplified to *cudromach* etc. The practice of not citing proscribed forms in this way is used elsewhere in the Report.
- ⁷ Although included in 2005, *cudrom* and *cudromach* have been excised from the 2009 edition, perhaps because it was felt that they did not so obviously reflect *trom*. (Modern *cudrom* < OG *cutrummae* < *com* + *trummae/truime* f. < *trom* adj.).
- ⁸ Murchadh MacLeòid (*Scotland on Sunday* 25/9/05) does not understand why *aobhar* should be written *adhbhar*.
- ⁹ The recommendation, introduced by *GOCI*, is for a simplified system of lengthmarks using the grave accent alone, regardless of vowel. The earlier system consisted of using a grave accent on *a*, *i* and *u*, and either a grave or acute accent on *e* and *o*, depending on whether the vowel was open, e.g. *gnè*, *Mòrag*, or closed, e.g. *dé*, *mór*.
- ¹⁰ *Daineamaig* etc. contrast with *daingeann*, *daingnich* etc., whose palatalised cluster *-ng* tends to yield a heavy syllable, i.e. with lengthening; see below.
- ¹¹ From which *cùm* ‘to keep’ is distinguished artificially by an accent. The verb *cùm* ‘to keep’ is derived from the verbal noun *cumail* (< EG *congbàil*) and rhymes with *tum*; the verb *cum* ‘to shape’ is from EG *cummaid* ‘shapes’ and also rhymes with *tum*. Any differentiation in pronunciation there may be between *cùm* and *cum* is secondary and has been imposed.
- ¹² As a rule, the monosyllabic forms have long stressed vowels, the polysyllabic forms short stressed vowels.
- ¹³ Here, again, monosyllabic forms have long stressed vowels, as a rule, polysyllabic forms short stressed vowels.
- ¹⁴ McDonald 1972, 248, in addition to *trilleachdan* and *drilleachdan*, gives *trinnleachan* s.v., which indicates either a long nasal monophthong or diphthong.
- ¹⁵ Strictly, the reduced composition form *ban*.
- ¹⁶ And, presumably, *ann an seo* etc., although they are not mentioned.
- ¹⁷ Another doublet that might have been cited is *prionnsapal* ‘principal’ and *prionnsabal* ‘principle’. In Gaelic, distinction between /d/ ~ /t/ and /b/ ~ /p/ is

not expected in post-tonic syllables. (Although *prionnsapal* is cited in the Word List, its meaning is not given.)

¹⁸ Only *leth-cheud* and *leth-uair* are admitted in the Report.

¹⁹ Cf. *dà-shealladh* ‘second sight’, as opposed to *dà shealladh* ‘two views’.

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Sabhal Mòr Ostaig

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