Proper Names in Scottish Gaelic

ERIC HAMP

Few languages, if any, seem to show consistent formal linguistic markers characterizing proper names. Indeed, for the most part, the category which we conventionally term *proper name*, or simply *name*, seems to be defined not at all (or to a very limited degree) by formal linguistic criteria, but by a complex of correlates between the linguistic structure and the extra-linguistic systems (often called collectively the *semantics*) of a culture.[1] It is therefore a matter of special interest when we find a case where a high correlation exists between linguistic form and the category of proper name. It is even more significant when the distributional rules for the formal markers are extremely clear-cut and compact, i.e. when they affect very short morphological or phrasal units of homogeneous membership. Such is the case in Scottish Gaelic.

1. Nouns in Scottish Gaelic are maculine or feminine (defined by suffixal form-class and by concord); they combine with morphemes of number (singular, dual, plural) and case (nominative, genitive, dative, vocative). The state of affairs just enumerated applies to the most conservative dialects, typified by those of the Outer Hebrides, or Western Isles. Many dialects (such as those of the southern Inner Hebrides and much of the mainland) show only two numbers, singular and plural; after the morpheme *dáa*^{L}- "two," with which it combines to form a compound, the plural simply has a special allomorph. In these latter dialects case has a marginal or vestigial value, and many nouns show no variation; in many of these dialects it seems quite likely that the fossilized case forms are now synchronically nothing more than allomorphs (and usually optionally used in free variation, or as variants for different stylistic levels) which occur after certain particles and in attributive position. Despite these dialectal differences in structure, what is discussed below is not materially affected, and applies generally. For those

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[1] I have remarked this in similar terms, *Romance Philology*, 9.348–9 (1956).

dialects lacking case entirely, it is probably safe to substitute for "genitive" the term "in attributive phrasal position." The preferred literary language resembles the conservative dialects in structure.

2. In the dialects showing case, the categories of both case and number are expressed within the same morpheme. These morphemes are suffixes, but their allomorphs often consist of very little phonemic substance in themselves. Very frequently they select allomorphs of the preceding stem which differ from the "basic" form by complicated morphophonemic rules affecting internal and final vowels and consonants; about half of their allomorphs cause elaborate morphophonemic replacement in the *initial* consonantism of a *following* attributive. Almost half of the case-number suffix allomorphs consist entirely of these morphophonemic properties that operate on the adjacent morphemes. There is no need here to go into the detail of these complex replacements. Suffice it to say that in essential stem-plus-suffix structure for the expression of case-number, a Scottish Gaelic noun shows the same broad lines, though in a bewilderingly strange and concealed garb, that many of us know from Latin and Greek nouns. We may now turn to the point of present interest.

3. In addition to the eight case-number suffix morphemes, with their many allomorphs, the inner-layer morphology of a Scottish Gaelic noun includes a *genitive* (or *attributive*) *prefix*. This prefix has a single allomorph which consists simply of a morphophonemic property of consonant replacement (a frequent grammatical mechanism in the language) that operates on the initial of the stem. We call this property *lenition* and symbolize it by ^{L}; the prefix in question, then, has the shape $\{^L\text{-}\}$.

The facts of distribution for this prefix in the dialect of Leurbost (Isle of Lewis)[2] are as follows: $\{^L\text{-}\}$ occurs with 1. all genitive plurals when neither the article nor possessive prefix is present, and 2. obligatorily with the genitive singular of a subclass of masculine nouns. We may aptly call this subclass *grammatical masculine names*.

An alternative analysis for Leurbost is to consider the occurrences of ^{L}- with the genitive plural as a discontinuous portion of the

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[2] See the excellent description by M. Oftedal, The Gaelic of Leurbost (A Linguistic Survey of the Gaelic Dialects of Scotland, Vol. III ≡ NTS Suppl. Bind IV), Oslo 1956, esp. pp. 181–2.

allomorphs of the genitive plural suffix. This analysis seems preferable on other grounds, too, since it enhances the symmetry and solidarity of an otherwise skewly distributed opposition for the genitive plural. The prefix $\{^{\text{L}}\text{-}\}$ now occurs only with the genitive singular of *grammatical masculine names*. We may call this the *masculine name prefix*.

In other dialects (e.g. parts of Mull, and generally in Islay, Jura, and Gigha) this prefix is applied to attributive feminines as well as masculines. For such dialects we may speak of *grammatical names* and a *name prefix*.

Thus, the subclass *grammatical (masculine) names* is defined by purely formal linguistic criteria: the occurrence of the genitive singular with the prefix $\{^{\text{L}}\text{-}\}$.

4. It is of interest to note that the semantic category of *proper name* in Scottish Gaelic does not coincide with that of *grammatical name*. Apart from the exclusion of feminine *proper names* from the subclass above described, there are further exclusions in Leurbost. Place names that consist of appellatives, i.e. grammatical nouns or noun-phrases which also occur with other semantic correlates, do not take $\{^{\text{L}}\text{-}\}$. In other words, just as with the English house-name of the type *The Lodge*, it is impossible to distinguish these instances from those where the same grammatical construct has a more general meaning, other than by reference to configurations outside the linguistic system.[3] Masculine proper names of places whose morphemes have no other semantic reference in Leurbost, on the other hand, take $\{^{\text{L}}\text{-}\}$, and hence are *grammatical masculine names*.

We need not here take close account of the fact that masculine names of modern English origin sometimes lack the prefix $\{^{\text{L}}\text{-}\}$. This may be regarded as a potential transition from one system to another, and later generations will more adequately describe the succeeding system.

Thus, even though Scottish Gaelic does not formally mark all proper names as such, a significant subgroup receives overt linguistic recognition through a unique and compact mechanism.

The University of Chicago

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[3] On such constructs, in relation to the totality of English nominals, see most recently Arthur Norman's discussion of the subclasses of the English nominal, *American Speech* 33.83–9 (1958).