

Preface

The more Pooh looked inside the more Piglet wasn't there.

A. A. Milne *The House at Pooh Corner*

This work seeks to describe the workings of the phonological system of Irish in and before the period of Old Irish. Such a study is a hazardous enterprise given that the knowledge of the Old Irish system is based on written materials and the word-forms from before that period are by and large reconstructed. It should be borne in mind, then, that the employment of non-attested forms only facilitates the formulation of hypotheses and possible solutions and lends a wider perspective to the tangible data. In other words, reconstructed forms must not be viewed as equally reliable. Nonetheless, provided that minor phonetic details are ignored and purely phonological patterns are focused upon, the ancient and mediaeval systems can be the subject of a coherent account.

In the analysis offered below, we adopt the main principles of the theoretical framework of Government Phonology (GP), a theory of representations whose main tenet is the concept of government. This model is based on the idea that universal principles and language-specific parameters are part of every linguistic system. In this work, we will focus on the changes in the melodic structures of segments which enter into governing relations with other segments both within words and within close syntactic groups. It will be argued that the lack of government between certain segments can result in the melodic changes of these expressions and the subsequent rise of so-called mutations. Moreover, we will see that many seemingly phonological phenomena in Old Irish, e.g. the alternations of short vowels, are in fact petrified reflections of prehistoric processes whose presence in the system cannot be phonologically justified once we assume that a phonological process occurs in a synchronically available context.

Chapter One presents the vital assumptions of Government Phonology in its basic and modified versions, with particular emphasis placed on the issues which are relevant to the ensuing analysis.

Chapter Two deals with word-initial consonant mutations whose role in the phonology of Irish from the very beginning to the present day has been immense. Although these consonant alternations in Old, Middle and Modern Irish are morphophonological in nature, their prehistoric phonological cause will be inspected. Taking the Old Irish initial mutations as a point of departure, we will go back in time and discuss the origins of these alterations as well as the consequences of morphological changes in the shape of close syntactic units in which these mutations took place. It will also be shown that the so-called no-mutation

contexts, whose function in the language development is too frequently underestimated, played an equally important role in the shaping of close syntactic groups in and before Old Irish.

Chapter Three is devoted to a diachronic inspection of governing relations between consonantal segments in all word positions. It will be argued that the break-up of government between certain consonants in word-medial and initial position at some point in prehistory led to the origin of the most conspicuous phenomenon in the Irish language, that is lenition. As regards word-final position, the gradually diminishing licensing power of nuclei will be held responsible for the development of vowel epenthesis and the simplification of certain consonant clusters.

In Chapter Four the inventory of short vowels and the vocalic alternations in Old Irish will be investigated. It will be shown that these alternations cannot be viewed as purely phonological because the context for phonological change is no longer present in that system. A close inspection of the pre-Old Irish vocalic alternations will reveal that the Old Irish vowel changes reflect the regular phonological patterns which were part of an earlier inventory of short vowels. Moreover, we will concentrate on the issue of consonant qualities, whose shape and number have constituted a problem for many earlier analyses of Old Irish.

As a result of the following analysis it will be claimed that the more we look inside Old Irish the more phonology is not there.

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