Variation in Manx lenition: a probe

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It is well known that initial consonant lenition in Manx is somewhat variable. Acknowledging this might lead one to suppose that variation, or deviation from the rules, is scattered randomly among the consonants subject to lenition, and among the contexts triggering lenition. In a small study, using a corpus that consists of over 1m words of Classical Manx (1700-1850), I show that this is not the case. Some consonants (specifically *s-* and *f-*) are markedly more variable than the rest. Leaving those consonants aside, there are contexts in which the 'correct' application of lenition is virtually categorical, such as after *dy chooilley* 'every' (which takes Lenition 1: that is,,*s-*, *sh-* → *h-*, and all other lenitable consonants affected). In another context, namely in the prepositional phrase *ayns y(n)/'sy(n)* 'in the' (followed by Lenition 2: that is, *s-* → *t-*, *sh-* → *çh-*, denti-alveolars *t-*, *çh-*, *d-*, *j-* not affected, other consonants as Lenition1), deviation from the rule, for consonants other than *s-* and *f-*, is rare but not negligible: 1.74% of lenition failure.

In both of these contexts, lenition failure for *s-* stands at around 15 per cent, while, for *f-*, non-lenition is around 13% after *dy chooilley* and around 8% after *ayns y(n)/'sy(n)*. One might have guessed that *sh-* would behave similarly to *s-*, but this proves not to be so. Lenition failure for *sh-* after *dy chooilley* runs at a lower rate than of *s-* and *f-*, though more than that of the other consonants; after *ayns y(n)/'sy(n)* it runs at about the same rate as for the consonants other than *s-* and *f-*.

In the corpus there are 1535 cases of *dy chooilley* before a lenitable consonant. In only 24 (1.56%) of these is the consonant not lenited according to the rule. Of these 'deviations' two involve *çheer* 'country', with *dy chooilley cheer* appearing instead of *dy chooilley heer* (a construction frequent elsewhere: 22 cases in the corpus). Both of the examples of *dy chooilley cheer* are in the Metrical version of a selection of Psalms included at the end of the Book of Common Prayer in Manx (1777). The remainder consists of 10 cases of unlenited *s-* (out of 75 —13.33%), two of unlenited *sh-* (out of 28 — 7.14%), and 10 of unlenited *f-* (out of 75 —13.33%). Of the cases of unlenited *s-* words after *dy chooilley*, three are of words that do not have a lenited variant attested anywhere in the corpus: *seiyr* 'carpenter', *synagogue* 'synagogue', and *slaa-laueeys* 'bribery'. The others, however, do display lenited variants, not only elsewhere in the corpus, but elsewhere in the *dy chooilley* context: *saase* 'method' (x3), *sorçh* 'sort', and *slieau* 'mountain'. Unlenited *sh-* appears once in *shiaght* 'seven' (elsewhere *dy chooilley hiaghtoo vleïn* 'every seventh year'), and once in *sharvaant* 'servant': lenited *harvaant* does not occur after *dy chooilley*, but there are over 400 cases of it in other contexts. Of the *f-* words unlenited after *dy chooilley*, two: *feeagh* 'raven', and *feoiltys* 'generosity' have no lenited variant elsewhere in the corpus; for the others, however, lenited variants are attested in other contexts: *fea* 'rest', *failleil* 'failing', *fyrrynagh* 'male', *fastyr* 'evening' and *foays* 'benefit'.

The corpus contains 1723 cases of *ayns y(n)/'sy(n)* 'in the' before a lenitable consonant, with 89 deviations —5.17%. The two main variants, the full form *ayns y(n)* and the reduced *'sy(n)* are of roughly comparable frequency (787 : 935), but interestingly the deviations from the lenition norm are predominantly found in the full form (10.42% deviation), sixteen times more often than after the reduced form, where deviation from the norm (at 0.64%) is negligible. This fact suggests that reduced *'sy(n)* is found in more familiar, well-established, collocations in which correct lenition is more firmly entrenched. Even so, as with *dy chooilley*, non-lenition is predominantly found with *s-* (including *sl-*) (15.3%), and with *f-* (8.13%), and these consonants account for all the non-lenitions after *'sy(n)* (6 out of 935 cases). For the velars and labials (/g, k, kʷ, b, m, p/) non-lenitions make up only 1.74% of the total. There are no deviations for /kʷ/ (33 cases), 0.09% for /k/ (410), 1.35% for /m/ (224), 2.4% for /b/ (125), 3.3% for /g/ (121), and 5.17% for /p/ (58). For /ʃ/, which might be expected to behave like /s/, the rate of non-lenition is in line with that of the velars and labials: 2.61% (of 153 cases). There are three cases only of hyper-lenition in the *ayns y(n)/'sy(n)* contexts, that is, application of Lenition 1 when Lenition 2 is required: one of /ʃ/ *ayns y hirveish e* 'in serving him' (*Coyrle Sodjeh*- Plain and Short

Directions, p.10), one of /d/ *Soilshey 'sy ghorraghys* 'light in the darkness' (Metrical Psalms 16.2.7), and one of /dʲ/ *Gys niurin agglagh, raad ta aggle reill /'Sy yalloo feer* 'to fearful hell, where fear reigns in the true image' (*Pargys Caillit* 2721, where Thomson's edition reads *'s e yalloo feer* 'in his true image', no doubt rightly).

Some of the examples of non-lenited *s-* after *ayns y(n)/'sy(n)* occur in words where the lenited variant *t-* occurs elsewhere in the corpus. This is the case for *sushtal* 'gospel' with 12 cases of *ayns y sushtal*, even though there are 27 instances of *tushtal* in the corpus, three of them in the phrase *ayns y tushtal*. There is one case of *ayns y soilshey* 'in the light' (John 5.35), though lenited *toilshey* has 47 occurrences in the corpus, four of them in the phrase *ayns y toilshey*. However, most of the examples of non-lenited *s-* are found in words that lack a *t*-initial allomorph anywhere in the corpus: *sacrament* 'sacrament' (x8), *sarey* 'order', *seaghyn* 'affliction', *sollysid* 'brightness', and *synagogue* 'synagogue' (x16). In the case of variable *f-* lenition, most of the examples of non-lenition occur in words whose lenited variant is to be found elsewhere in the corpus: *faarkey* 'sea' (169 examples of *aarkey*, including 23 of *ayns yn aarkey* or *'syn aarkey*), *fea* 'rest' (7 examples of *ea*, including two of *'syn ea*), *feedoo* 'twentieth' (x5; two examples only of *eedoo* in the corpus), *feme* 'need' (13 examples of *eme*), *firrinys* 'truth' (9 examples of *irrinys*), *fliaghey* 'rain' (4 examples of *liaghey*), *foayr* 'favour' (x4; 19 examples of *oayr*). But the following words not lenited after *ayns y(n)/'sy(n)* have no *f*-less variant in the corpus: *feh* 'sinew', *fine* 'scabbard', *fooillagh* 'scraps', *fraue* 'root', *freoagh* 'heather', and *frynepan* 'frying pan'.

To sum up, this probe indicates that while lenition in Classical Manx is, indeed, variable, the variability is not evenly spread around the possible lenition targets and contexts. Non-lenition of stops after *dy chooilley* is negligible, and after *ayns y(n)/'sy(n)* does not reach two per cent. Non-lenition is also negligible after the less formal (more entrenched) variant *'sy(n)*. In the two contexts investigated here, non-lenition substantially affects the fricatives (and even here /ʃ/ is less affected than /s/ —the significance of this distinction is a matter for further research). Why might this be so? One relevant consideration is that, for *f-*, its lenited variant, namely zero, is as different from the radical *f-* as could be: lenited *f*-words are not distinct phonologically from any vowel-initial word, and vowel-initial words are frequent in Manx. The lenited variants of the stops all remain consonantal, and all, except for /t/ and /tʲ/ (→ /h/), retain some oral place of articulation feature (though the contrast between /d/ and /g/, and between /b/ and /m/, is lost in lenition). For *s-*, the situation is rather that lenition involves two different variants, one, /h/, without oral place of articulation, and the other, /t/, which is an exceptional hardening in a lenition context, though retaining dental/alveolar place of articulation. (The words *slieau* 'mountain' and *straid* 'street', which are included in this study, display their own special anomalies, in that *slieau* has *lieau* in Lenition 1 and *clieau* in Lenition 2, while *straid* has *straid*, i.e. regular non-lenition, in Lenition 1 context, and *traid* in Lenition 2.) In the two cases, *f-* and *s-*, word-recognition of the forms with lenition is somewhat more compromised than in the case of the other consonants. Speakers seem to have reacted to this difficulty in two ways: one, by becoming more tolerant of failure of lenition of these two consonants than of others; and two, by adjusting the lexicon so that some *s-* and *f-* words lack a lenited allomorph altogether. More extensive research would be needed to see what other features, semantic or syntactic, might be shared by the words without a lenition allomorph.