



Fuaimanna na Gaeilge **The sounds of Irish**

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Cover: *Killiney Sands* (1894) by Richard Thomas Moynan (1856-1906)

Fuaimanna na Gaeilge

The sounds of Irish

Introduction

This guide provides an introduction to Irish phonetics, especially designed for speakers of Australian English. Understanding how the sounds of the Irish language work together can help beginners learning the language understand the various dialects of Irish and how Irish spelling works. This guide uses the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to link the sounds with the spelling.

The pronunciation guide does not attempt to describe all the ways that Irish is spoken, nor does it attempt to describe the Irish spoken in one particular community or region. Instead, it provides an overview for the beginner of how Irish is spoken in most communities.

The pronunciation guide also offers techniques that beginners can learn to pronounce their own Irish in such a way as to be understood in a conversation, and as well as remember how to spell the word, getting clues from the pronunciation. This works *vice versa*, too: beginners coming across a new word in a story or article can often estimate its pronunciation from the spelling.

Dialect and accent

Dialects involve word differences

Put simply, a *dialect* refers to the word-forms, and particular words or phrases characteristic or unique to a community.

For example, in English, an *apartment* in North America, is called a *flat* in Britain and Ireland, and a *unit* in Australia and New Zealand. In Britain and India, you might hear *I shan't*, where elsewhere, you'd hear *I won't*.

In Irish, in the Gaeltacht areas of Munster, the most common greeting is: **Conas atá tú?** In Connaught, you are likely to hear: **Cén chaoi a bhfuil tú?** In Ulster, you'll hear: **Cad é mar atá tú?** But all of them mean: *How are you?* Non-native speakers most commonly use the Munster version, probably because it is the simplest.

There are as many dialects of the Irish language as there are communities using it. Generally, though, the native dialects of Irish are grouped into three major varieties sharing common characteristics, representing the Gaeltacht areas in each of the provinces of Munster, Connaught and Ulster respectively. However, dialects don't change at the border like currency. You'll notice the language patterns used in Clare gradually adopt patterns associated with the Connaught dialects as you go north. And, travelling further north through Mayo and into Donegal, you'll hear the language gradually shift into patterns associated with the Ulster dialects.

Added to these three dialect groups, there is a fourth dialect. This is *Official Standard Irish (OSI)*, which was drawn during the twentieth century from a simplified form of the Munster dialect. In some ways, it is similar to the Irish spoken in parts of Connaught as well. This is the Irish taught in schools in the Republic, spoken in the Dáil (the Irish parliament) and used by most speakers of Irish as a second language - especially by young people in the cities, where many tourists these days can hear the language spoken.

The examples of phrases in this guide are chiefly drawn from the Official Standard Irish used in Dublin and understood throughout the country. Variations from the three Gaeltacht dialect groups are added, where they are in common use.

Accents involve sound differences

A speaker's *accent* refers to the way a speaker creates the sounds used in a language. That is, positioning the lips and tongue and putting them into contact with the teeth, hard palate and soft palate in particular ways to form the many vowels and consonants to create words and phrases.

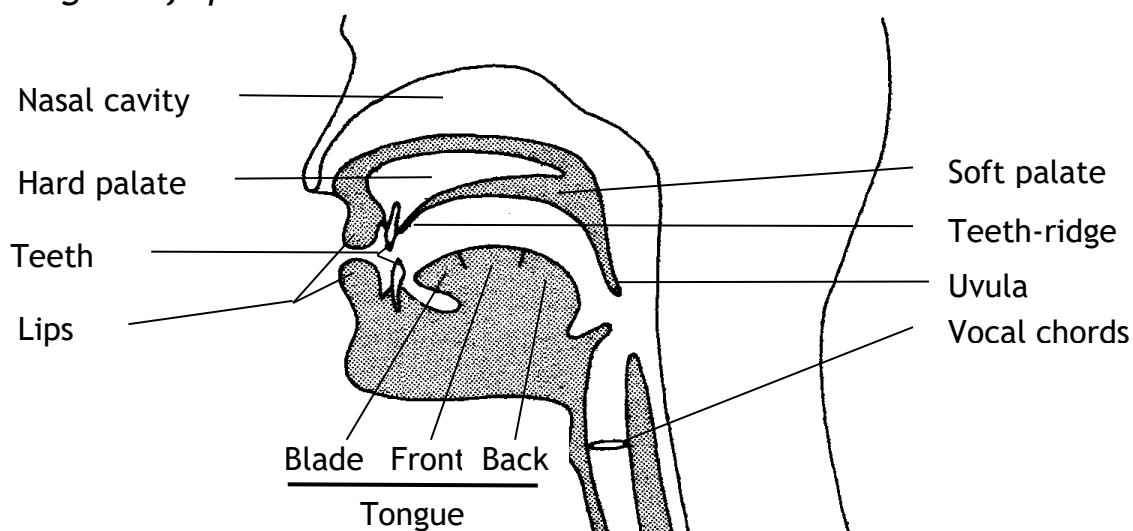
The pronunciation guide in this chapter includes sounds heard in the Gaeltacht areas of West Galway and Donegal. This is most obvious in the pronunciation of vowel sounds written as **a** and **ao**. Some of the sounds described in this guide are not included in OSI, which was loosely based on the Irish spoken in Munster.

The main reasons for introducing the full set of Irish sounds to beginners are because understanding these sounds helps to:

- Understand the make-up and the spelling of the language
- Recognise and adapt easily to different accents throughout Ireland
- Understand and be understood by other Irish speakers

Describing sounds

The organs of speech



Where in the mouth the sound is produced ...

Bilabial	Using both lips
Labio-dental	Using the lower lip against the upper teeth
Dental	The tip of the tongue against the upper teeth
Alveolar	The tip of the tongue against the teeth-ridge
Palato-alveolar	The blade of the tongue against the teeth-ridge with the front of the tongue raised towards the palate
Palatal	The front of the tongue against the hard palate
Velar	The back of the tongue against the soft palate
Glottal	Contracting the glottis (behind the uvula)

How the sound is produced...

Plosive	Air is released after complete closure of the air passage
Fricative	Narrowing the air passage so air escaping produces audible friction
Affricate	A plosive consonant-sound followed by a fricative
Voiceless	Without vibrating the vocal cords
Voiced	While vibrating the vocal chords
Nasal	Closing the air passage so that air flows through the nasal cavity
Lateral	Tongue placed in the air passage with air flowing either side
Flapped/rolled	A single tap/succession of taps of the tongue
Sibilant	A fricative hissing sound
Aspirate	An audible puff of breath
Semi-vowel	Voiced, gliding, weakly-articulated vowel-sound immediately moving to or from another sound

The International Phonetic Alphabet

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is an alphabet developed to help students and linguists learn and record the pronunciation of languages accurately, thereby avoiding the confusion of inconsistent, conventional spellings. The IPA attempts to provide a unique symbol for each sound.

Consonant-sounds (IPA)

The following table contains all the major consonant-sounds found in Irish and English. It shows roughly where in the mouth and how each consonant-sound is produced.

The tables below show the IPA letters commonly used to describe the consonant-sounds that make up Modern Irish and English. The consonant-sounds unique to Irish are shown in **green**, those unique to English are shown in **violet**. Sounds common to both languages are shown in **black**.

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive – voiceless	p, p'		t	t̪	tʃ	k'	k	(?)
Plosive – voiced	b, b'		d	d̪	dʃ	g'	g	
Fricative – voiceless	ɸ, ɸ'*	f	θ			ç*	x	h
Fricative – voiced	β, β'*	v	ð				ɣ	
Affricate – voiceless					tʃ			
Affricate – voiced					dʒ			
Sibilant – voiceless					s, ʃ*			
Sibilant – voiced					z, ʒ			
Nasal	m, m'		ɳ	n̪	n'	ɲ'	ŋ', ŋ	
Lateral			ɭ	l̪	l'	ɭ'		
Flapped/ rolled				r	r'			
Semi-vowels	w			ɹ		j		

* In this guide, /ɸ/, /ɸ'/, /ç/, /j/ and /ʃ/ are written /f/, /f'/, /x'/, /ɣ'/ and /s'/ respectively (as with most guides), however most other guides also represent /β/ and /β'/ as /w/ and /w'/ respectively.

Irish consonant-sounds

In Irish, consonant-sounds are grouped into two *qualities*: *slender* (**caol**) and *broad* (**leathan**), corresponding to the amount of space between blade of the tongue and the roof of the mouth (palate) when pronouncing them.

Slender consonant-sounds are pronounced with a narrow or *slender* distance between the tongue and (often touching) the hard palate, as in: **Cé?** *Who?*

Broad consonant-sounds are pronounced with a wider or *broad* distance between the tongue and (often touching) the soft palate: **Cá?** *Where?*

Table of consonants

The following tables show roughly where in the mouth and how each Irish consonant-sound is produced. They are shown first using the IPA, then in some of their most common forms in the Irish alphabet.

Irish consonant-sounds (IPA)

	Labial		Dental/Alveolar		Palatal/Velar		Aspirate
	Plosive	Fricative	Plosive	Fricative	Plosive	Fricative	
Voiceless	p, p'	f, f'	t, t'		k, k'	x, x'	h
Voiced	b, b'	β, β'	d, d'		g, g'	ɣ, ɣ'	
Nasal	m, m'		n, n', n'		ŋ, ŋ'		
Liquid			l, l', l', r, r'				
Sibilant			s, s'				

Irish consonant-letters (Irish alphabet)

	Labial		Dental/Alveolar		Palatal/Velar		Aspirate
	Plosive	Fricative	Plosive	Fricative	Plosive	Fricative	
Voiceless	p	ph/f (fh) ⁴	t		c	ch ¹	h/sh/th ³
Voiced	b	bh ⁵	d		g	dh/gh ²	
Nasal	m	mh ^{5/6}	n		ng		
Liquid			l, r				
Sibilant			s				

1. **ch** is pronounced as in Scots or German: when broad, it is pronounced against the soft palate, as in *loch* or *Bach*; when slender, it is pronounced against the hard palate, as in *ich*.
2. **dh** and **gh** represent the same sounds. When slender, it is pronounced against the hard palate, like *y* in *yellow*; when broad it is pronounced with friction against the soft palate, like *gh* in *ugh*!
3. **sh** and **th** are the same sound as **h**. 
4. **fh** is **ALWAYS** silent!
5. **bh** and **mh** are pronounced *bilabially* (with both lips); try to pronounce *b* or *m* without the lips meeting:
 - Broad **bh/mh** often sounds like English *w* without rounded lips.
 - Slender **bh/mh** often sounds like English *v* using *both lips* rather than lips and teeth.

Similarly, in the Gaeltacht, **f/ph** is usually pronounced *bilabially*, that is, with both lips
6. **bh** and **mh** are pronounced similarly, except that **mh** is nasalised; when pronouncing it and the vowel-sounds that come into contact with it, release most of the air through the nose—similar to French or Portuguese.

Spelling

In spelling, vowel-letters have two functions: Besides indicating a vowel-sound, the vowel-letter next to a consonant also shows the *quality* of the consonant-sound.

The letter, **e** or **i** is written between a back vowel and a consonant to show that the consonant (or consonant group) is *slender*.

Similarly, **a**, **o**, or **u** is written between a front vowel and a consonant to show that the consonant (or consonant group) is *broad*.

Caol le caol agus leathan le leathan.
Slender with slender and broad with broad.

Labial consonant-sounds

Broad labial consonant-sounds are made with relaxed lips. Before lip-spread vowel-sounds, you can hear a slight w-glide as the lips are spread to make the vowel-sound similar to English: *de**p** well, lab will, dim**w**it, saf**e**way*, hav**e** we**.

/p/ **P**óg an **p**rásaí ach **p**ós an **p**luiméir!

Kiss the brazier but marry the plumber.

/b/ Is **b**rónach le **b**ó a thugann **b**raon **b**ainne **b**uí.

'Tis sad for a cow that gives a drop of yellow milk.

/m/ **M**araíonn **M**uiris **m**uc gach **M**áirt ar **m**aidin i **M**árta.

Maurice kills a pig every Tuesday morning in March.

/f/ **F**ág na **f**ataí **f**uara sa **ph**ota go **f**óill!

Leave the cold potatoes in the pot until later.

/β/ **B**hain an **b**hanaltra **b**hodhar do **b**hlaosc an **b**huachalla lena **b**hróg.

The deaf nurse touched the boy's skull with his shoe.

Slender labial consonant-sounds are made with pursed lips and the tongue raised towards the hard palate. Before back vowel-sounds, you can hear a slight y-glide as the tongue moves away from the palate, similar to English: ***p**ure, **b**eauty, **m**ew, **f**ew*, **v**iew**.

/p'/ **P**iocfaidh **p**earóidí **p**ingine, **p**éacóga **p**éarlaí.

Parrots will pick pennies, peacocks pearls.

/b'/ **B**éarfaidh na **b**eacha ar na **b**éir chun an **b**pinic.

The bees will beat the bears to the picnic.

/m'/ Is **m**easa ná **m**í na **m**eala i **M**elbourne.

It's worse than a honeymoon in Melbourne.

/f'/ Is **f**éasta **f**eiliúnach **f**eoil agus **f**íon d'fhear **f**íuntach.

Meat and wine is a fitting feast for a worthy man.

/β'/ **B**hris an **b**hean **b**hreoite dhá **m**héar an **b**hliain sin sa **B**heilg.

The sick woman broke two fingers that year in Belgium.

***bh/mh** are pronounced *bilabially*; try to pronounce b without the lips meeting:

- Broad /β/ often sounds like English w without rounded lips
- Slender /β'/ often sounds like English v using both lips rather than lips and teeth

Similarly, in the Gaeltacht, **f/ph** is usually pronounced *bilabially*, too.

Dental consonant-sounds

Broad dental consonant-sounds are made with the tip of the tongue touching the point where the top teeth and gums meet.

/t/ **Tabhair don tsagart torthaí, tobac agus tae.**

Give the priest fruit, tobacco and tea.

/d/ **Damhsaíonn an daol dall i dtalamh go domhain.**

The blind worm dances deep in the ground.

/N/ **Ná náirigh an násiún i Nua-Eabhrac um Nollaig!**

Don't shame the nation in New York at Christmas!

Slender dental consonant-sounds are made with the tip or the front of the tongue touching the hard palate—just behind the alveolar ridge. Before back vowel-sounds, you can hear a slight y-glide as the tongue moves away from the palate.

/t'/ **Tiocfaidh an tríú tíogar timpeall an teampaill.**

The third tiger will come around the temple.

/d'/ **Déanfaidh an diabhall dearmad ar an déirceach go deo.**

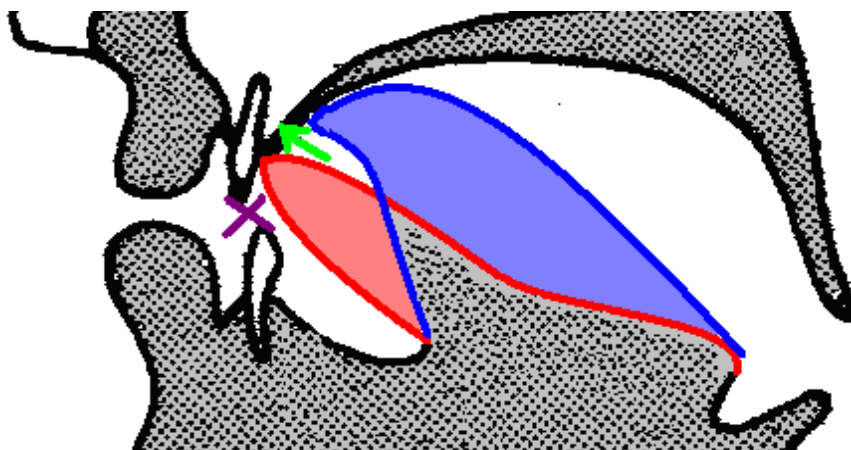
The devil will forget the charitable person forever.

/n'/ **Ní neamhní i neart neimhe níos niamhrach.***

There is nothing in the power of heaven more lustrous.

/N'/ **Is sinne bainne a bhain ón cruinniú in Éirinn inné.**

'Tis we who took milk from the meeting in Ireland yesterday.



The diagram above shows the position of the tongue for broad (in red) and slender (in blue) dental consonant-sounds.

The position of the English 'th' is shown by the purple cross.

The position of the English (alveolar) 't', 'd' or 'n' is shown by the green arrow.

Velar consonant-sounds

Broad velar consonant-sounds are made with the back of the tongue touching the soft palate. Before lip-spread vowel-sounds, you can hear a slight 'w'-glide as the lips are spread to make the vowel-sound.

- /k/ **Cuir na caora lena cnónna agus na caoirigh lena capaill.**
Put the berries with the nuts and the sheep with the horses.
- /g/ **Dá gcuirfí glasraí ar a gcaoireoil, ach gabhar i gcónaí é.**
One could put vegetables on their mutton, but it's still goat.
- /ŋ/ **An ngaireann a nglórtha ón ngluaisteán i ngaráiste?**
Do their voices call from the car in (the) garage?
- /x/ **Chuir do chóta isteach sa chófra is do chorp síos ar chathaoir.**
Put your coat in(to) the cupboard and your body down on a chair.
- /ɣ/ **Ghoin a dhá ghlúin ghortaithe nuair a ghluais sé an ghloine.**
His two injured knees hurt when he moved the glass.

Slender velar consonant-sounds are made with the back of the tongue raised to touch the hard palate. Before back vowel-sounds, you can hear a slight 'y'-glide as the tongue moves away from the palate.

- /k'/ **Ceannóidh ceannaí ceithre cinn dé Céadaoin.**
The merchant will buy four on Wednesday.
- /g'/ **Gearrann gile na gréine gníomhaíocht na girsí.**
The sun's brightness shortens the girl's activity.
- /ŋ'/ **An ngeitfidh ár ngleadhradh ón ngléasra ar an ngeata iad?**
Will our clamour from the equipment on the gate frighten them?
- /x'/ **Ar cheannaigh tú an chéad cheapaire sa chis?**
Did you buy the first sandwich in the basket?
- /ɣ'/ **Gheobhaidh tú do dheoch ghéar, a Ghéaróid!**
Will you get your sour drink, Gerald?

Liquid and sibilant consonant-sounds

Liquid and sibilant consonant-sounds are made in roughly the same place as dental consonant-sounds, only without stopping the flow of air through the mouth.

- /l/ Tá an **l**uch is **l**áidre níos **l**ú ná an **l**acha is **l**aige.
The strongest mouse is smaller than the weakest duck.
- /l' / **L**éigh **L**iam **l**eathanach óna **l**eabhar sa **l**eaba.*
Liam read a page from his book in bed.
- /l' / Ná **c**aill **f**aill **á**ille na **c**oille a **g**héill**l**eadh
Don't miss an opportunity surrender to the beauty of the wood.
- /r/ **R**achaidh an **r**í **r**amhar ar turas **r**áithiúl go **R**óimh.⁺
The fat king will go on a quarterly journey to Rome.
- /r' / Tabhair **a**ire agus éireoidh do chuid oibre leat **a**ris.
Take care and your work will be a success again.
- /s/ Tá **s**úil acu a bheith ina **s**uí 'gu **s** ag **s**úgradh an **S**atharn i **S**amhain.
They hope to be sitting and playing on Saturdays in November.
- /s' / **S**eo í **S**iobhán ina **s**eamh anseo 'gus í ag **s**íneadh.
This is Siobhán standing here while stretching.

Aspirate sounds

- /h/ **Th**ó! **Sh**ó! **H**ó!
Ho! Ho! Ho!

Pronunciation of 'l' and 'n'

* Some speakers pronounce slender 'l' and 'n' at the beginning of a word as /l' / and /n' /, (with the blade of the tongue touching the alveolar ridge instead of the tip) except when they would be lenited. There is no difference in writing. For example:

a leabhar /ə l'aur/ *her/their book*; **a leabhar** /ə l'aur/ *his book*
an nia /ə n'ia/ *the nephew*; **an neacht** /ə n'æxt/ *the niece*

Pronunciation of 'r'

⁺ r at the beginning of a word is always pronounced *broad*.
ar (on) is pronounced /er' /. Slender 'r' is similar to the Czech ř in *Dvořak*.

Initial mutation

In Irish, a word is often affects the first sound of the following word. Initial sound mutation is a feature common to all Celtic languages.

Lenition (**séimhiú**) and eclipsis (**urú**)

Séimhiú (lenition) causes a following consonant to become fricative (that is, pronounced with a constant stream of air). It is written as a dot (**ponc**) above (Irish script) or an **h** after (Roman script) the consonant-letter.

Urú (eclipsis):

Causes a following *voiceless* consonant to become *voiced*

Causes a following *voiced* consonant to become *nasal*

Prefixes **n-** to a following vowel

The new consonant is written before the original consonant-letter.

The effect of **séimhiú** → and **urú** → on Irish consonants:

	Labial		Dental/Alveolar	Palatal/Velar		Aspirate
	Plosive	Fricative	Plosive	Plosive	Fricative	
Voiceless	p → ↓	ph/f → (fh) ↓	t ↓	c → ↓	ch	→ h/sh/th
Voiced	b → ↓	bh	d ↓	g → ↓	dh/gh	
Nasal	m → mh		n	ng		
Liquid	l, r					
Sibilant	s					

Elision (**bá**) and aspiration (**análú**)

When a word ending in an unstressed vowel comes before a word beginning with a vowel-sound, it usually either:

Drops the final vowel (often written as an apostrophe) (**bá**) —

m'iníon *my daughter*, **d'fháinne** *your ring*

Prefixes **h** to the following vowel (**análú**) —

na hoifigí *the offices*, **go holc** *badly*

Prefixes **n-** to the following vowel (**urú**) —

trí n-éan *of three birds*, **Go n-éirí** *leat! May you succeed!*

a^s (causing **seimhiú**) means *his*— **a t**each *his house*, **a aintín**, **'aintín** *his aunt*
a^h (prefixing **h** to vowels) means *her*— **a t**each *her house*, **a haintín** *her aunt*
a^ú (causing **urú**) means *their*— **a d**teach *their house*, **a n-aintín** *their aunt*

Irish vowel-sounds

Vowel-sounds (IPA)

The following table contains the major vowel-sounds produced in the mouth—including five sounds found in neither Irish nor English). It shows roughly where in the mouth and how each vowel-sound is produced.

Vowel-sounds pronounced with *spread* lips are shown in **blue**.

Vowel-sounds pronounced with *unrounded* lips are shown in **gold**.

Vowel-sounds pronounced with *rounded* lips are shown in **red**.

	Front	Central	Back
close	i (y)	(i) (ɨ)	u ʊ
half-close	e (ø)	ə	ɤ o
half-open	ɛ ɜ (œ)		ʌ ɔ
open	æ	a	ɑ ɒ

Table of Irish vowel-sounds

The following tables show roughly how open the mouth is and how far back in the mouth to produce each Irish vowel-sound. They are shown first using the IPA, then in some of their most common forms in the Irish alphabet.

Irish vowels (IPA)

	front	central	Back
close	i	ɯ	u
middle	e	(ə, ə)	o
open	æ	a	ɑ

Irish vowels (Irish alphabet)

	front	central	back
close	(i, í, aoi)	ao	(u, ú)
middle	(e, é, ae)	(-e, oi,	(o, ó)
open	ea	a	á

Position of lips for pronouncing vowel-sounds

Close, front and central-back vowel-sounds, shown in the blue, are pronounced with *spread* lips.

Open and middle, central vowel-sounds, shown in yellow, are pronounced with *unrounded* lips

Close, back vowel-sounds, shown in red, are pronounced with *rounded* lips.

The **phoneme** /o/, in most dialects, is only pronounced with *rounded* lips when it is **long**, /o:/, spelt **ó** or **eo**. When it is **short**, /o/, spelt **o**, it is pronounced with *unrounded* lips and, before a slender consonant, it is spelt **oi** and is pronounced towards the front of the mouth, approaching /e/.

Pure vowel-sounds

Most Irish vowel-sounds are pure. That means that the lips and tongue do not move throughout the pronunciation of the vowel-sound. Long vowel-sounds are simply pronounced twice as long as short vowel-sounds. In the IPA, a long vowel is indicated with a colon (:).

Long vowel-sounds

Following are the long vowel-sounds found in Irish, although not every Irish-speaking community uses all of them:

Written	Pronounced	Description	Example	Pronounced
í	/i:/	Front vowel: lips spread, very close Similar to <i>i</i> in <i>machine</i>	níl	/n'i:l/
ao	/u:/ (Ulster)	Central-back vowel: lips spread, very close A longer version of a Scottish or New Zealander's <i>i</i> when ordering <i>fish 'n' chips</i>	saol	/su:l/
é	/e:/	Front vowel: lips spread, fairly close Similar to Scottish <i>a(y)</i> in <i>day</i>	sé	/s'e:/
ea	/æ:/ (Ulster & Connaught)	Front vowel: lips unrounded, fairly open Similar to Southern English <i>a</i> in <i>lad</i>	bean	/b'æ:n/
a	/a:/	Central vowel: lips unrounded, mouth open Similar to Southern English <i>a</i> in <i>father</i>	maith	/ma:/
á	/ɑ:/ (Munster & Connaught)	Back vowel: lips unrounded, mouth open Similar to South African <i>aa</i> in <i>Afrikaans</i> or North American <i>o</i> in <i>hot</i>	lá	/Lɑ:/
ó	/o:/	Back vowel: lips rounded, fairly close Similar to Hiberno-English <i>o</i> in <i>no</i>	beo	/b'o:/
ú	/u:/	Back vowel: lips rounded, close Similar to Northern English <i>oo</i> in <i>loot</i>	cú	/ku:/

Lips-spread vowel-sounds

There are two vowel-sounds used in every dialect that are produced with the lips spread: /i/ and /e/, and a third, not in common use, /u:/.

/i/ **min** **mi**on **mu**in
 /m'ín' / /m'íN/ /m^uín' /
 meal (flour) detailed back (horse)

When pronounced *short*, /i/ is spelt **i**.

Following a broad consonant it is usually written **ui** as in **cuid**. (See /u/.)

Before a broad consonant it is usually written **io**, as in **Siobhán**

It does not occur between broad consonants

/i:/ **mín** **mbí**onn **mbuí**on **mbuí**nn
 /m'í:n' / /m'í:N/ /m^uí:N/ /m^uí:N' /
 smooth (that usually) is (in a work) gang (that) I'd tanned

When pronounced *long*, /i:/ is usually spelt **í**.

Following a broad consonant it is usually written **uí** as in **buí**

Before a broad consonant it is usually written **ío**, as in **síos**

/e/ **an Bheilg** **bhu**el
 /ə β'el'g' / /β^uel' /
 Belgium well!

When pronounced *short*, /e/ is spelt **e** and occurs after or between slender consonants, as in **te**

Before a slender consonant it is usually written **ei** as in **leitir**

It never follows a broad consonant except in one or two loan words.

See /o/ before a slender consonant.

It does not occur between broad consonants

/e:/ **géin** **gé**anna **Gae**l **Gae**ilge
 /g'e:n' / /g'e:Nə/ /g^ue:L/ /g^ue:l'g'ə/
 gene/jean(s) geese Gael (people) Irish (language)

When pronounced *long*, /e:/ is usually spelt **é**.

Before a broad consonant, it is usually written **éa**

Before a slender consonant, it is usually written **éi**

Following a broad consonant, it is usually written:

ae if the following consonant is broad

aei if the following consonant is slender

/u:/ **maol** **maoil**
 /m^uu:l/ /m^ui:l'/
bald, blunt *hillock*

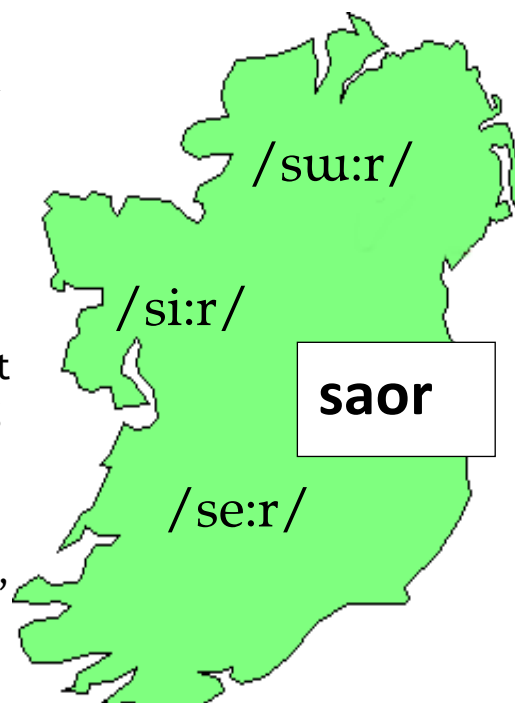
This sound is a remnant of an ancient vowel-sound, and has been replaced by other sounds in most dialects of Modern Irish. (Like y as a vowel in English, which originally sounded like 'ee' with rounded lips, has been replaced with the same sounds as modern *i*.) The Irish sound /u:/ spelt **ao**, sounds like 'oo' with spread lips - a little like a longer version of the Scottish or New Zealand short vowel *i*, as in *fifty-six*.

However, most dialects in Munster pronounce this sound as /e:/, although it can sometimes sound like /əi/ West Cork or /i:/ in Kerry, or even occasionally like /u:/ or /o:/ in places like Ring. Many dialects in Connaught and Ulster, as well as OSI, pronounce it as /i:/.

Compare the word, **faoi** /f^ui:/ in Standard Irish and in Connaught and Ulster but is usually pronounced and written **fé** /f'e:/ in Munster.

A few communities in Mayo and Donegal, like Rannafast, still use the old central-back vowel /u:/ reflected in the spelling. It is pronounced long /u:/ and occurs between broad consonants. It is written **ao**, as in **braon**. If you learn to use this sound, you'll be able to remember the spelling, and be understood by the speakers of all the variant pronunciations of this sound, without having to remember the pronunciation is used in each locality.

Before a slender consonant, it is written **aoi**, as in **Aoife**. Almost all dialects usually pronounce **aoi** as /i:/.



Examples

/i:/ **Bhí Síle 'na suí go díreach a' síneadh.**

Síle was sitting straight stretching.

Bígí buíoch agus guimis go bhfana na hispíní thíos!

Be grateful and let us pray that the sausages stay down!

/e:/ **Téann an traein trí na sléibhte ar feadh laethanta.**

The train goes through the mountains for days.

/u:/ **Chomh saor le gaorth ag craoladh an chaonaigh faoin caora craosach!**

How freely the wind is broadcasting the moss under the ravenous sheep!

Unrounded vowel-sounds

There are three vowel-sounds that are produced with the lips left unrounded, although most dialects use only one or two of them, usually always pronounced long: /æ:/, /a:/ and /ɑ:/.

/æ:/ **ceast** **ceaist**
/k'æ:st/ /k'æ:s't'/
caste (plaster)cast

This sound is found in the west and the north, and only pronounced long. In many dialects of Connaught, it occurs only after a slender vowel, spelt **ea**, as in **fear**.

In Ulster, every stressed **a** tends to be pronounced /æ:/, or /a:/ next to a nasal consonant: **n**, **m** or **mh**.

/a:/ **caslóir** **caisleoir**
/ka:s'lɔ:r'/ /ka:s'l'o:r'/
landlubber *fort builder*

/a/ is spelt **a**, and **ai** before a slender consonant, as in **am**, **maith**.

This is the only sound of this group recognised by OSI.

In most dialects of Munster, this is the sound of a short, stressed **a**, even after a slender consonant, spelt **ea**.

In many dialects of Connaught, it is found only after a broad consonant, and always pronounced long, /a:/.

/ɑ:/ **leáinn** **leánn** **gránna** **gráinne**
/l'ɑ:n'/ /l'ɑ:n/ /grɑ:nə/ /grɑ:n'ə/
I used to melt *melt(s)* *ugliness* *grace*

In most dialects of Munster and Connaught, this is the sound of long **á**, /ɑ:/, and is spelt **á**, as in **mná**, **breá**, **áille**.

Long **a** also occurs in the combinations: **-all** and in **feall**, **-ann** as in **ceann**, **-arr** as in **carr**.

Examples

/æ:/ **Tá an bhean ag teacht isteach.**
The woman is coming inside.

/a:/ **Go raibh maith agat, a Mhamaí!**
Thank you, Mummy.

/ɑ:/ **Is fearr liom tráidire lán, a Sheáin!**
I prefer a full tray, John!

Rounded vowel-sounds

There are two vowel-sounds produced with the rounded lips: /o/ and /u/.

/o/ **coll** **coill**
/koL/ /keL'/
hazel forest

When pronounced short, /o/ is usually pronounced with *unrounded* lips. It generally only occurs after a broad consonant and is spelt **o**, as in **poc**. In many dialects, when it precedes a slender consonant, it is spelt **oi** as in **troid**, and moves to the centre of the mouth and sounds more like /ə/ or even /e/.

/o:/ **leoin** **leon** **lón** **lóin**
/l'o:n'/ /l'o:n/ /lo:n/ /lo:n'/
lions lion lunch lunches

When pronounced long, /o:/ is spelt **ó** after a broad consonant and pronounced with rounded lips.

As it is almost always pronounced long after a slender consonant, there is no need to write the fada sign for **eo**, as in **ceo**.

/u/ **tu** **tiu**
/tuL/ /t'uL/
forehead bang!

When pronounced short, /u/ is spelt **u**, and **iu**, after a slender consonant, as in **rud**, **sult**. It does not usually occur before a slender consonant. Most speakers pronounce **ui** as in **buidéal** as /i/ (See /i/), however, many speakers of OSI and in the Gaeltacht sometimes pronounce **ui** as /u/.

/u:/ **siúil** **siúl** **mún** **múin**
/s'u:l'/ /s'u:L/ /mu:n/ /mu:n'/
walk walking urinate teach

When pronounced long, /u:/ is usually spelt **ú**, as in **ciúin**. In many dialects, **omh**, **umh**, **ubh**, and **onn**, are also pronounced /u:/.

Examples

/o:/: **Bhí bainseo** ag **Joe** is bhí bainseo ag bean **Joe**. Ach ní raibh **Joe** níos mó ar an bainseo chomh bean **Joe** go deo.

Joe had and banjo and Joe's wife had a banjo. But Joe never was better on the banjo than his wife.

Ceol brónach agus **deoir dhóite**.

Sorrowful music and a bitter tear.

/u:/: **Domhnach ciúin** in **Iúil**

a quiet Sunday in July

Dún do shúile agus ag siúl go ciúin!

Close your eyes while walking quietly!

The neutral vowel-sound

/ə/: **canta** **cainte**

/ka:ntə/

pretty

/ka:n't'ə/

of speech

The neutral, unstressed vowel-sound is a middle, central vowel-sound, /ə/ produced with unrounded lips, like the *e* in *wooden*. After a broad consonant, it is written **a**, after a slender consonant, it is written **e**.

After a slender consonant, it is often pronounced further forward in the mouth: /ə̃/.

Often the neutral vowel-sound is not written at all, but occurs in consonant combinations after **l**, **m** and **r**, such as in:

rc in **cearc** /k'æ:rək/ (*hen*)

rm in **gorm** /gorəm/ (*blue*)

lbh in **dealbh** /d'æ:ləβ/ (*statue*)

lc in **cailc** /ka:l'ək'/ (*chalk*)

lm in **Colm** /koLəm/ (*dove*)

nm in **ainm** /a:n'əm'/ (*name*)

nbh in **leanbh** /l'æ:nəβ/ (*child*)

This unwritten neutral vowel-sound is also known as an *epenthetic* vowel.

Diphthongs

Diphthongs are vowel-sound combinations, where one vowel slides into another.

/iə/ **bliain** **bliana**
/b'liən' / / b'liənə /
year *of a year*

/iə/ sounds something like the Australian pronunciation of the word *ear*.
It is spelt **ia** as in **mian**.

/uə/ **luas** **luais**
/luəs / /luəs' /
speed *of/in speed*

/uə/ sounds something like 'ooh-ah!', like the Southern English pronunciation of the vowel-sound in *poor*.
It is spelt **ua** as in **fuair**.

/ai/ **gadh****ar** **gadh****air** **leighe****as** **leigh****is**
/gair / /gair' / /l'ais / / l'ais' /
hound *hounds* *cure* *of a cure*

/ai/ sounds like the American pronunciation of the vowel-sound in *night*.
It is spelt **adh**, **aidh**, **agh** or **aigh**, as in **adhmaid**, **aghaidh**, **staighre**.
Some (Munster) dialects also pronounce **éi**, **eidh**, **eigh** or **oigh** as /ai/, as in **éirí**, **feidhm**, **soighe**.

/au/ **Samh****ain** **Samh****na**
/saun' / /saunə /
November *of November*

/au/ sounds like the American pronunciation of the vowel-sound in *now*.
It is spelt **abh**, **amh**, **odh** or **ogh**, as in **abhainn**, **samhradh**, **bodhar**, **ogham**.

In Conamara, a short **o** before a doubled liquid consonant (**l**, **r** or **n**) or a liquid and another consonant is often pronounced /au/.

For example: **poll** /pauL/ *whole*; **bord** /baurd/ *table*; **fonn** /faun/ *tune*.

Australian English

English vowel-sounds

The range of English vowels is well illustrated by two mnemonic phrases -

Who would know aught of art must learn, act, and then take his ease.

and

Fear the poor outside the door; beware of power, avoid desire.

The first contains the fourteen English vowels; the second displays the English diphthongs and triphthongs - not exactly multiple vowels, more the journey the tongue makes from one vowel position to another, with an extra lap added in 'power' and 'desire'. The total number of vowels and composite vowels in most varieties of English is twenty-three.

Who would know aught of art must learn, act, and then take his ease.

/hu: wʊd nou ɔ:t ɒv ɑ:t mɑ:st lɜ:n ækt ænd ðen teɪk hɪz i:z/

Fear the poor outside the door; beware of power, avoid desire.

/fiə ðə puə aʊtsaɪd ðə dɔə biwɛə ɒv paʊə əvɔɪd dəzaɪə/

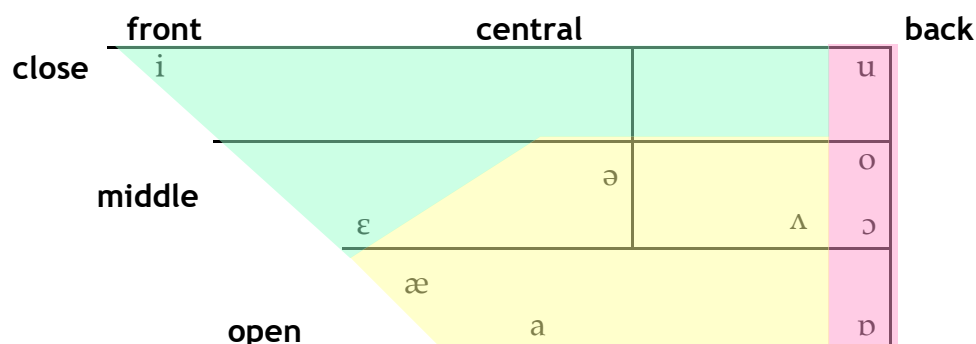
In English, most long vowels started becoming diphthongs around 400 years ago. In some varieties of Australian English, shown in the table below, vowel-sounds tend to be pronounced a little more open or central, or less rounded than in Irish, British and North American varieties:

Written	Pronounced	Example	Australian	Other dialects
e	/i:/	<i>meet</i>	/mi:t/	
a	/æɪ/	<i>mate</i>	/mæɪt/	/meɪt/
i or y	/aɪ/	<i>mite</i>	/maɪt/	/maɪt/
o	/ʌʊ/	<i>moat</i>	/mʌʊt/	/mout/
oo	/ʊʊ/	<i>moot</i>	/mʊʊt/	/mu:t/
u	/jʊʊ/	<i>mute</i>	/mjʊʊt/	/mju:t/

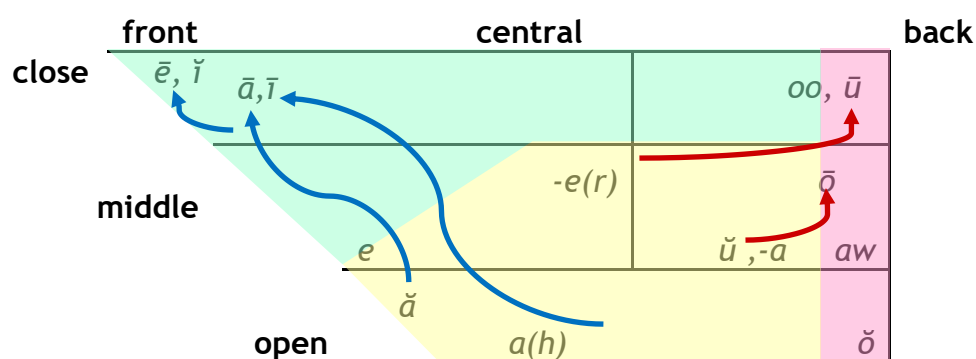
Australian English vowel-sounds

The following tables show roughly how open the mouth is and how far back in the mouth to produce each Australian English vowel-sound. They are shown first using the IPA, then in some of their most common forms in the Roman alphabet.

Australian English vowels (IPA)



Australian English vowels (Roman alphabet)



* The arrows indicate the journey of an Australian English long vowel (diphthong) from one part of the mouth to another.

Australian-English half-open vowel-sounds (e and o) are more open than their Irish-language counterparts.

Compare:

mé /m'e:/	<i>met</i> /mɛt/	<i>mate</i> /mæit/
nó /NO:/	<i>not</i> /nɒt/	<i>note</i> /nΛʊt/

For Australians learning Irish

Australians learning Irish must pay attention to the vowels sounds, which are mainly pure (a fixed position in the mouth) and generally pronounced closer in the mouth than equivalent Australian-English vowel sounds.

Also, pay special attention to avoid the intervocalic /ɪ/sound, which can creep into Australian English, especially between two open vowel sounds, for example: Pamela(r)Anderson, "Do ya think he saw(r)us?"