

Using a Scottish-Gaelic to English Dictionary
by Sue Hendrix

Since Scottish Gaelic uses many changes within words as grammatical markers, using a dictionary for translation from the Gaelic can pose some interesting problems. Imagine that you know little English and you are trying to find the meaning of “geese” in a dictionary. You won’t find that word, and you don’t know to look for “goose”. Frustration may result. This is the sort of thing you will encounter in Gaelic, with even more frequency. But with a few rules, and a bit of practice you can get over the hurdles.

Here are some rules to follow and examples of their use. In the examples, “mhath → math” means, “if you see ‘mhath’, look up ‘math’”.

1. If the word begins with a consonant + “h” (lenition), remove the “h”. There are some exceptions to this rule, like “fhathast”, “dhi” or “cho”, but in 99% of the cases this will get you the right word, so try it without the “h” first.
Examples: mhath → math, chù → cù, bheag → beag
2. Remove anything tacked onto the front of the word with an apostrophe, and remove some things on the front with a hyphen. So remove: dh’, a’, m’, t’, b’, h-, n-, t-. In general, don’t remove a-, an-, mi-, co-, or any other prefix that is more than one letter and attached with a hyphen, although this may depend on how your dictionary handles prefixes.
Examples: dh’fhàg → fàg, m’athair → athair, t-sùil → sùil
(The first example uses both rules 1 and 2.)
3. Slenderization changes a word from using a broad vowel (a, o, u) as the last vowel in the last syllable to using a slender vowel (i, e). It appears in several grammatical constructions so you will encounter it a lot. The most common way a word is slenderized is to add an “i” before the final consonant. If you think this may be the case, try removing that final “i”.

Examples: cait → cat, balaich → balach, sròin → sròn

There are some other ways in which words might be slenderized, too, so if you see one of these vowel combinations at the end of a word, try changing it.

ei → ea
èi → ia, eu
eòì → eu
i → io, ìo, ea, a
iùì → eò
oi → a
ui → a, o
ùì → ò

Examples: ciùil → ceòl, eich → each, cnuic → cnoc, beòil → beul

Sometimes a final –e is added to a slenderized word. In this case, remove the -e as well as removing the slenderization.

Examples: caileige → caileag, coise → cas, cluaise → cluas

4. There are also some endings used in Gaelic. You may want to remove some endings from words if you can't find the word as written. Here are some endings used for noun plurals:

- (e)an, -t(e)an, -(e)achan, -(a)ichean, -(e)annan

And here are some endings placed on verbs:

-(a)idh, -(e)as, -(a)ibh, -(a)inn, -(e)amaid, -(e)adh, -t(e)ar

Examples: gabhas → gabh, càraichean → càr, gillean → gille

5. There are two basic forms of a verb. The root is the form that is used to make the simple tenses like the future and the past and is the form used to place the verb in the dictionary. The verbal noun is the “ing” form in English. If what you have is a verbal noun, you will need to look it up under the root. It is not usually hard to guess the root given the verbal noun, but it will help to know the most common ways a verbal noun is made. A good dictionary will give the verbal noun after the root, so you can check your guess very quickly.

- a. The root and the verbal noun may be the same. (You are in luck!)

Examples: seinn → seinn, òl → òl, ruith → ruith

- b. The root may be a slenderized form of the verbal noun. (Use rule 33 backwards!)

Examples: cur → cuir, fuireach → fuirich

- c. An ending may be added to the root. Here are the most common endings:

-adh, -(a)inn, -sinn, -tinn, -ail, -tail, -achadh, -e, -amh, -eam, -(a)idh

Examples: tuigsinn → tuig, pòsadh → pòs, ithe → ith, seasamh → seas

- d. A combination of b and c above can be found.

Examples: faireachdainn → fairich

- e. The verb may be irregular. See rule 6 below.

6. Irregular verbs are always a challenge. There are 10 irregular verbs plus the two forms of “to be”. Hopefully your dictionary has a table of irregular verbs, but here's a list of some of the forms of each so you can look up the root. Some of these forms may have endings (see rule 4) or lenition (see rule 1) as well.

tha, eil, bheil, bha, robh, bith, bith, bi → bi (be)

is, 's, bu, b' → is (be)

their, abair, ràdh, thuir, thubhairt, tuirt → abair (say)

beir, rug, breith → beir (bear, catch)

cluinn, cluinntinn, cuala → cluinn (hear)

dean, dèanamh, nì, rinn → dean (do, make)

faic, faicinn, chì, chunnaic, faca → faic (see)

faigh, faighinn, faotainn, gheibh, fhuair → faigh (get, find)

rach, dol, tèid, chaidh, deach → rach (go)

ruig, ruigsinn, ràinig → ruig (reach, arrive at)

tig, tighinn, tàinig → thig (come)

toir, tabhairt, toirt, tug, bheir → thoir (give, take, bring)

7. Sometimes words are abbreviated. This is similar to the English abbreviations like “I’m” for “I am”. This happens when the words are likely to be slurred together—it is quite common in songs for instance. This can be rather eccentric and hard to guess. The most common ones are probably:

th’ → tha bh’ → bha ‘s → is sa/san → anns a/anns an ‘ille → gille

8. Some forms of nouns and adjectives are irregular. This can make the root word hard to find in a dictionary. Here are a few of the most common to help you look them up.

athar, athraichean → athair

bà → bò

beanntan → beinn

bidhe → biadh

bràthar, bràithrean → bràthair

caoraich → caora

coin → cù

daoine → duine

duilghe → duilich

faide → fada

fasa → furasda

feàrr → math

giorra → gearr, goirid

leapa, leapannan → leabaidh

lugha → beag

mara → muir

màthar, màthraichean → màthair

mic → mac

miosa → dona

mnà, mnathan → bean

motha → mòr

peathar, peathraichean → piuthar

sgeinean → sgian

treasa → làidir

9. Sometimes words have alternate spellings in different dialects or the spelling has changed over time. If you are reading history or old song lyrics you will probably encounter this. You might try a different dictionary. Dwelly’s is an old dictionary which has a lot of alternate spellings and is available online at <http://www.cairnwater.co.uk/gaelicdictionary>. Dwelly’s is also good about showing irregular forms of words under their own headings.