

A new element theory of consonant mutation in Old Irish

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The historical development of consonant mutation in the Celtic languages has been a source of continuous debate for over a century. The main problem is that these processes were truly phonological before the advent of the manuscript tradition and thus must be reconstructed with the aid of the comparative method.

Recent accounts in the field within the framework of Government Phonology have made use of monovalent primes as base units of analysis, interpreting the various mutations as involving the addition (composition) and deletion (decomposition) of these basic elements. This approach has been very useful in understanding the phenomena in question but specific mutation patterns have been interpreted as entailing a combination of processes of composition and decomposition for what are perceived to be unitary phenomena.

This paper attempts to offer a unitary explanation of two processes of consonant mutation (traditionally known as lenition and eclipsis) in Old Irish. It argues that such an explanation is indeed possible and raises interesting theoretical questions about the formal relationship of primes in the construction of consonant sounds.