Indexing Irish grammars

M. Christine McLaughlin

Seven texts used by approximately 20 adults and teenagers in an informal Irish language class were indexed by a class member with intermediate-level proficiency in the language. One cumulative back-of-book index was chosen as the best format to provide access to information in each text while also gathering information on specific subjects scattered throughout the seven books. The special needs of the user group, as well as idiosyncrasies in the texts themselves, were considered. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to evaluate the final product.

Introduction

Ar dTeanga Féin (Our Own Language), the Worcester (Massachusetts) Irish Language Organisation, was founded in 1984 by a group of American and Irish residents of Worcester with varying levels of proficiency in the Irish (Gaelic) language. The half-dozen founder members started meeting weekly to provide informal lessons to interested students regardless of their level of expertise or ethnic background. Currently the organization numbers about 20 members meeting in two locations: Worcester, and Woodstock, Conn.

The group communicates occasionally with the Boston chapter of Cumann na Gaeilge, the official Irish language organization in the United States, but by general consensus has remained independent of formal programs. This decision has allowed the group to function autonomously and maintain the informal character of its classes. However, this independence has generated a curriculum based, at one time or another, on almost every Irish language textbook and learner’s aid available in the United States.

The ard-muinteoir (head teacher) of both chapters of Ar dTeanga Féin relies on three basic teaching tools: two volumes of Anseo Is Ansiúd, usually referred to by class members as ‘Picture Lessons’, and Progress in Irish by Mairead Ni Ghrada. The former is significantly enhanced by the ard-muinteoir, who prepares a companion background information sheet geared to each lesson. The Christian Brothers publication, New Irish Grammar, is generally accepted as the authority on grammar and syntax, and lately it has been supplemented by the smaller Irish Grammar: A Basic Handbook, which offers a less technical presentation. All beginners have a workbook on verbs, Briathra na Gaeilge: Regular and Irregular, for independent study.

Ar dTeanga Féin students clearly needed an index that would not only guide them to specific references in each of the texts, but would collocate references to the same subject in different texts. A single, portable, printed tool, serving as a back-of-book index to each text and as a guide to the entire collection, was obviously the best solution.

Preliminary considerations

Two primary considerations in planning this index were the widely varying characteristics of the user group and the idiosyncrasies of the texts themselves. As noted before, Ar dTeanga Féin is an informal group, and as such, has no entrance requirements. Since its inception, the group has seen a wide array of ages, educational levels and occupations; a nine-year-old boy and a woman in her eighties have been members at one time. Educational level is equally diverse. Public and private schools in four countries are represented. Two members of the group hold advanced degrees, while at the other end of the spectrum is a 14-year-old high school freshman and another member who never went beyond the grammar school level. Occupations of current members include school administrator, housewife, computer technician, janitor and student. Expertise in the Irish language varies widely.

Class members agreed the best index would collect related concepts under central terms, such as nouns, while providing cross references from other access points, such as irregular nouns. The students also asked that the index show where phonetics and other pronunciation guides could be found, since this information is not consistently provided in all texts.
Finally, they agreed access should be presented both by grammatical terms, i.e. 'irregular verbs,' and by actual words, i.e. clois, an irregular verb.

**Texts**

Of the seven texts currently used by the class, O'Dubhghall's *Anseo Is Ansiúd: Nua Cursa Gaeilge I* and *Anseo Is Ansiúd: Nua Cursa Gaeilge II* are the most important to beginning students. Together, these two volumes comprise the first 60 lessons in what is a 90-lesson curriculum used to teach Irish at the elementary grade level in Ireland. Because they are designed for children, there is little theoretical or abstract information in these lessons. Each consists of a line drawing illustration (hence the sobriquet 'Picture Lesson'), a short story in Irish, and a series of exercises ranging from 'fill in the blanks' in sentences drawn from the text to translations and grammatical exercises. Thus, concepts are presented globally throughout the lesson, and are reinforced by the guide sheets supplied by the *ard-miinteoir*, which also provide a phonetic key to all Irish words in the lesson. A specific topic, for example, the past tense of verbs, will be used throughout the introductory story, then reinforced through the exercises. Often though, one of the exercise sets is totally unrelated to the rest of the lesson, but is provided as a review of previously covered material or to preview a topic to be introduced more fully in a subsequent lesson, so several separate concepts are incorporated into each Picture Lesson.

Máiread Ni Ghrada's *Progress in Irish: A Graded Course for Beginners and Revision*, is designed for adults studying on their own, but is similar in structure to *Anseo Is Ansiúd*. Here too, very little theoretical or explanatory information is presented; the student is expected to learn by doing the exercises presented in each of the 72 lessons. While this approach is valuable, it does not teach grammatical terms. For example, the student is shown how to construct relative clauses in several lessons, but the term, 'relative clause,' is never used.

These two basic teaching tools provide little in the way of grammatical concepts, so they are supplemented by Christian Brothers' *New Irish Grammar* and McGonagle's *Irish Grammar: A Basic Handbook*. Both present the same material, but in decidedly different ways. The Christian Brothers book, generally accepted world-wide as the authority on Irish grammar, assumes a basic knowledge of the language, and thus offers little in the nature of explanation or examples. Of the examples that are provided, most are in Irish, without translations, so the student has to decipher the language as well as the instructions. McGonagle's text, specifically developed for novice students, contains much more basic material and is full of examples.

*Briathra Na Gaeilge: Regular and Irregular*, recently developed by Déaglán and Pádraig O'Murchú, is basically an exercise book setting down numerous examples of the two conjugations of Irish verbs as well as the complete conjugations of the 11 irregular verbs in the language. Explanation is by example, with one verb displayed on each page.

The newest acquisition, O'Donnchadha's *An Ráleabhar Gaeilge = The Irish Phrasebook*, met with mixed reviews from the class, with most of the negative comments directed at the inaccessibility of its contents. Although a rough table of contents is provided, headings such as 'Ninety Nouns' do little to guide to the potential user to relevant information. However, this book offers much to the intermediate students, especially in moving from the textbook language of the introductory material to the more fluid and natural speech of the gaelgeoir, or native Irish speaker. Because this tool assumes at least an intermediate level proficiency with the language, it does not explain the grammatical concepts underlying the phraseology.

**Sample indexes**

Ten back-of-book indexes in English and Spanish texts, in standard grammars as well as curriculum-related materials, were surveyed to provide a general overview. Of these, Quirk and Greenbaum's *A Concise Grammar of Contemporary English*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) best met the expectations formulated during background reading for the project. This tool provides 19 pages of indexing for 416 pages of text, a ratio of 4.56, by far one of the highest seen. Both 'See' and 'See Also' references can be found throughout this index, and while glosses are not used, almost every entry term is modified. In addition, the index contains a visible syndetic structure, which Rodberg maintains is essential to a textbook, and was the format overwhelmingly requested by the future users of the proposed index. Also impressive is its mix of plain and italic text to distinguish between abstract concepts and actual words from the language.

**Recommendations**

The assessment of the texts to be indexed and the needs of the potential users, in conjunction with the evaluation of the sample index, generated two preliminary recommendations.

Obviously, an index suitable for a user group as diverse as *Ar dTeanga Fèin* had to be detailed and structured enough to support the efforts of the beginning students, a concept stressed by Rodberg, while at the same time encompassing abstract concepts of interest to the more advanced students, as noted by Babu.2,3 The indexer also had to anticipate wide variations in the users' previous experience with indexes, not only in the construction of the tool, but in developing instructions for its use, a point repeatedly highlighted by Stirk, Raper and Simpkins.4,5,6

Secondly, the index had to accommodate the wide
aray of expertise required to use the seven texts, as well as the differences in terminology between them. On a practical level, some method had to be devised to allow locators to identify not only a specific page, but also to show in which text the reference could be found. At a more abstract level, the indexer had to decide how to handle concepts that were not explicitly spelled out in the text, but presented more globally through exercises.

Procedures

A ‘dry run’ indexing of approximately 50 pages of Christian Brothers New Irish Grammar and the first 15 lessons of Progress in Irish allowed the indexer to compare the levels of expertise needed to use the introductory level Progress in Irish with the more advanced Christian Brothers treatment. The indexer opted for the ‘least common denominator’—the simplest terms and the most basic concepts—as entry headings, so beginning students’ limited knowledge would not hinder their ability to use the index. Of course, plans were made to provide cross references to these simple terms from those that may be sought by more advanced students, for example ‘Interrogative Pronouns, See Question Words.’

Coupled with this notion was a decision to create an index in which all aspects of a major concept, such as verbs, would be grouped under the main heading, with cross references to differentiated aspects, such as ‘Irregular Verbs, See Verbs—Irregular.’ This decision was based on Crystal’s recommendation that the index to a grammar should not only provide access to the textual material, but illustrate relationships between the concepts as well.7

Borko and Bernier argue that using more than two levels of subheadings creates a confusing visual presentation.8 The indexer, familiar with intricate, multi-tiered presentation of Library of Congress subject headings, concurred. It was therefore decided that, in cases where more than two subdivisions would be required to specify a concept adequately, the second level would be a ‘See’ reference to a separate heading. Through this method, the syntetic outline of the index would be preserved while allowing for adequate display of all aspects of a multi-faceted concept.

In order to differentiate between texts, the indexer developed mnemonic abbreviations for each:

- A O’Dubhghall, A. Anseo Is Ansiúid: Nua Cursa Gaeilge I & II.
- br O’Murchú, Déaglán, and O’Murchú, Pádraig. Briathra Na Gaeilge

Texts dealing with concepts in a traditional textbook manner were indexed by page number, while the two lesson-oriented texts, Anseo Is Ansiúid and Progress In Irish, which present materials globally, were indexed by lesson number. For example, Christian Brothers defines the concept, ‘agreement of adjectives with nouns,’ then offers a list of rules for ensuring this agreement. Progress in Irish, on the other hand, demonstrates these rules through a series of examples and exercises, but never explicitly uses any grammatical term to describe the constructs. The concept is the same, ‘agreement of adjectives with nouns’, but the presentation is entirely different; in one text the concept is explained, but in the other must be ferreted out by indexer and user alike. An uppercase-lowercase differentiation alerts users that the concept they seek may be illustrated, but not discussed, by a specific text.

The indexer accommodated the users’ expressed desire for locating phonetic material, pronunciation guides and the like, by putting an asterisk before the abbreviation for the text. This and all decisions were recorded for inclusion in the index instructions, as was the table of text abbreviations and a small chart showing the heading terms chosen to designate diacritical marks and similar components of the Irish language.

As many facets of each concept as possible were made directly available to the user. Thus the concept of ‘eclipsis,’ a process central to the inflected Irish language, receives a heading both as a system—‘eclipsis of nouns’—and as an agent—‘eclipsis caused by adjectives.’

Indexing the text

The indexer started with Christian Brothers New Irish Grammar, since this text gives the most comprehensive overview of the Irish language. Several possible syntetic relationships for the final index surfaced during the indexing of Christian Brothers, and while it was impossible to make firm decisions on the final organization of the index while still occupied with abstracting concepts and producing cards, the indexer did jot down these ideas in a separate notebook kept close at hand.

Progress in Irish and McGonagle’s Irish Grammar: A Basic Handbook were indexed next, with little difficulty. However, extracting concepts from the next text, An Ráleabhar Gaeilge proved a formidable challenge, especially in determining the appropriate depth of indexing. While the phrases in the book were grouped into categories, the category headings proved too broad. On the other hand, many of the individual phrases potentially held multiple concepts. In the end, two passes through An Ráleabhar Gaeilge ensured that the depth of indexing provided was roughly equal throughout the text and the rest of the collection.

Generating suitable entry headings for the material
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in An Ráleabhar Gaeilge also proved challenging, because many of the phrases were examples of uniquely Irish grammar and usage, and did not translate well into abstract English terms. After some experimentation, the indexer found these troublesome phrases could be entered in at least one of three ways—as Idioms, Conversational Phrases or Keywords.

Phrases that represented uniquely Irish methods of expression, such as ‘go maith leithscéal,’ literally, ‘good my half-story,’ for ‘excuse me,’ and ‘ag cuir baiste,’ literally ‘putting rain’ for ‘raining,’ were entered under the heading of Idioms and assigned modifiers based on their applicability, such as the weather.

The heading Conversational Phrases was applied to phrases for the most part specific to social situations, such as ‘Dia dhuit,’ literally ‘God to you,’ a common way of saying hello, and ‘Dia linn,’ literally, ‘God with us,’ the Irish equivalent of the English ‘God bless you’ used when someone sneezes. Once these phrases were identified as conversational, it was simple to sort them into situation-specific categories such as greetings, introductions, and so on, and assign the appropriate modifiers to the locators.

Finally, there were the phrases that had to be identified by a keyword because it was the word itself that made the phrase significant enough to be indexed. For example, the Irish word, ceann, literally translates to ‘head,’ but it can take on a variety of unrelated meanings when used in specific constructs such as ina geceann, which means one by one. Phrases containing these types of words, then, were indexed by the words themselves, to be listed in the final index in italic type.

With Anseo is Ansiúd, exhaustivity became a problem. Since these texts are designed for children, they show a great deal of repetition; the same material, for example, the prepositional pronoun forms of the preposition, le, appears in the exercises of five or six consecutive lessons. Obviously, indexing each one of these almost identical occurrences would clutter the final index with repetitive locators. The indexer made the arbitrary decision to index only the last occurring case of each repeated exercise, since a survey of the material showed that the exercises following the later, more advanced lessons usually provided more complete information.

The stories in the two volumes of Anseo is Ansiúd presented the same difficulties with depth experienced with An Ráleabhar Gaeilge. On one hand, it was simple to identify the two or three main concepts—for example, the habitual tense and the various uses of the preposition, do, that each story stressed—but the conversational nature of the narration included many examples of idiomatic speech and the ‘chameleon’ words discussed earlier. The decision was made not to index those words or phrases defined and explained by a dictionary unless the exercises following the story stressed the word or phrase. For example, one lesson in Anseo is Ansiúd incorporates the various forms of suas and sios, the Irish words for ‘up’ and ‘down’, which can be identified using a dictionary. However, the exercises that followed the story also demonstrated the various forms of speech used with suas and sios, so this lesson was indexed for the concepts of ‘up’ and ‘down’. A subsequent lesson which also used variations suas and sios in the story, but did not repeat the concepts in the exercises, was not indexed for the concept. In order to avoid frustrating the users of the completed tool, the instructions included a caveat that the index could not substitute for a dictionary.

Qualitative evaluation

The qualitative assessment, measuring user reactions, was broken down into two procedures:

1. Individual Method: The ard-muinteoir and two Ar dTeanga Féin members—an intermediate student and a beginner—were provided with copies of the index and asked to experiment with the tool on their own, using it to locate information of which they were not sure as well as references they knew existed. Their help was also recruited to locate misspellings and typographical errors the indexer had missed during the editing process. At a meeting held a week later, the three evaluators explained what they liked and did not like about the index and suggested changes they felt would improve it.

2. Group Method: The three class members who had acted as evaluators during the first phase of the assessment—the ard muinteoir, the intermediate student and the beginning student—were subjects for the second phase as well. For this session, the indexer selected a total of ten pages from the seven texts by having an uninvolved colleague open each text at random, thus eliminating any bias. All potential location information—page numbers, lesson headings, running titles etc.—were removed from these pages.

Working independently, the three evaluators tried to identify the page number and text for each sheet by using the index. In this way, they not only spot-checked locators and abbreviations, but showed the indexer how closely her entry headings and modifiers matched the concepts as conceived by the user group. The students’ success rates were recorded, and the problems they encountered are discussed below.

Results of qualitative assessment

The evaluators’ comments were not only positive, but included many concrete constructive suggestions for enhancing the final product. Overall, the evaluators appeared quite pleased with the format and layout of the index, and the ard muinteoir, who had previously been only lukewarm about the project, admitted the collocation abilities of the index would make it much easier for him to prepare lessons on specific topics, a factor he had not considered before.
In the second half of the qualitative assessment, both the *ard muinteoir* and the beginning student successfully located the number and text of all ten test pages. During the process, the *ard muinteoir* had only one false lookup, and the beginning student six, three of them for the same page. A typographical error in a crucial reference proved to be the culprit.

The *ard muinteoir* pointed out he had found the location task quite easy since he had 'almost memorized' *Anseo is Ansiud* and *Progress in Irish* in the seven years he had been using them to prepare lessons. However, that he located the pages in *Irish Grammar* and *An Ráleabhar Gaeilge*, both relatively new texts, with equal ease shows the index did serve the purpose for which it was intended, as did the performance of the beginner, who had been working with the indexed texts for only about a year, and had never seen two of them — *An Ráleabhar Gaeilge* and Christian Brothers.

The performance of the intermediate student, however, was problematic. He expected the index to act as a concordance to the text, and he was quite confused by the 'See' and 'See Also' references. Obviously, the intermediate student's inexperience with indexes accounted for some of the difficulties he encountered, and so illustrated the wide variance in education among the members of *Ar dTeanga Fiin*. His difficulties led to the creation of a 'Sample Entry' page, included in the final product, to serve as a supplementary set of instructions for future users. Also, in the final revision, many 'See' references were eliminated by making duplicate entries to avoid confusing users, although this step meant surrendering some of the links between concepts that 'See' references can reveal.

### Quantitative evaluation

The final index averaged 105 locators per page. By dividing the number of locators provided for each text by 105, the indexer calculated a figure, the page equivalent, showing how many pages of the final index were devoted to each individual text. For example, the indexer calculated a page equivalent of 4.46 for the Christian Brothers text, indicating just about four and a half pages of the final 15-page index devoted to this text.

The indexer then divided each page equivalent by the number of pages of indexed material in each text. This operation yielded a ratio, expressed as a percent-age, that shows the depth of indexing for each text. The depth of indexing given the Christian Brothers book, for example, was determined by dividing its page equivalent, 4.46, by 152, the number of pages of indexed material in the book. The result was 2.9%, so the depth of indexing for Christian Brothers *New Irish Grammar* is 2.9%. These calculations were carried out for each text, and the results are shown below:

**Results of quantitative evaluation**

All texts but one received roughly the same number of locators per page of text, and so were proportionately represented in the final index. It is not surprising Christian Brothers *New Irish Grammar* (cb) and *Progress in Irish* (PG), the two texts for adults, produced the most locators per page of text, since the information they provide is 'denser' than the materials designed for children, *Anseo is Ansiud*, (A) and beginners, *Irish Grammar: A Basic Handbook* (ig).

The only glaring variation to this pattern is the number of locators derived from *Briathra Na Gaeilge: Regular and Irregular*, which did not average even one locator per page for its 39 pages. However, this variance is very likely due to the nature of the text itself. With the exception of a few pages of prefatory material, *Briathra Na Gaeilge: Regular and Irregular*, is basically a collection of tables outlining the full conjugations of a number of verbs. It is quite repetitive; the same concept, and only that concept, is repeated through several consecutive pages. In the text itself, verbs of the first conjugation cover 14 pages, verbs of the second conjugation fill nine pages, and the last 12 pages are the conjugations of irregular verbs. Although it was appropriate to index each of the irregular verbs individually, since their conjugations are unique, the indexer saw no need to create separate entries for the regular verbs of either conjugation, since they had no intrinsic significance and merely served as examples.

*Irish Grammar: A Basic Handbook* (ig) also seems underrepresented in the final tally of locators, but this can be explained by the format of the text itself. The pages of this text are small; four of them barely cover a standard 8 by 11½-inch sheet of paper. Obviously, expecting to meet the same depth per page as the other, standard-sized texts would be difficult given the relatively small amount of information the small pages

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The completed index still shows a less than ideal depth of indexing. It is possible that disallowing some entries because they were listed in the dictionary reduced the potential pool of entries to an extent far greater than anticipated. There is also the possibility that the indexer’s skill level in the Irish language, while higher than that of a beginner’s, limited her ability to derive the more complex concepts and ideas a gaeilgeoir would have seen.

**Conclusion**

This index will, in simplest terms, do what it is supposed to do—help students of varying skill levels locate information scattered throughout the seven texts used by *Ar dTeanga Féin*. Its usefulness was confirmed by a report from the ard muinteoir, who notified the indexer that a revised copy of the index had been used successfully at two subsequent meetings of the Worcester chapter of *Ar dTeanga Féin* and at a session of the Woodstock, Conn., beginners’ group. Plans are now under way to incorporate additional materials, including the third volume of *Anseo Is Ansiúd*, the 20-page appendix of *Foclóir Póca: English-Irish/Irish-English Dictionary* (Baile Atha Cliath: Rialtas na hÉireann, 1986), the dictionary used by most members of both the Worcester and Woodstock classes, and a collection of the various single informational sheets handed out to class members off and on since 1984.

**Appendix: books indexed**


**References**


**Prizes for medical books**

The 1994 BUPA Prizes for Medical Writing and Illustration were presented by Dr Hugh Thelwall-Jones, BUPA Group Medical Officer, at the Medical Society of London on 2 March 1994. In each of three categories—atlas, textbook, and illustrated text—the author(s) of the winning book received certificates of merit and a cheque for £1,000, while other books that had been short-listed received Highly Commended certificates.

The criteria for these prizes are ‘originality, content and presentation, scholarship, a clear and lucid prose style, relevance, quality and clarity of illustrations, and standard of indexing’. It is gratifying for our Societies to see this last included, and indeed much reference was made to the indexes of the books praised on this occasion.

Professor James Calnan, Chairman of the Medical Writers Group of the Society of Authors, introduced the short-listed books. His observations included: of the winner of the £1,000 prize in the textbook category, *Molecular medicine* by R. J. Trent (Churchill Livingstone), ‘A good index completes the structure of this single-author book’; of *Food and food additive intolerance in childhood* by T. J. David (Blackwell Scientific Publications), ‘pleasing prose and with a good index’; of *Prenatal diagnosis and screening*, edited by D. J. H. Brock *et al.* (Churchill Livingstone), ‘an excellent work of reference with a detailed index’; of *Forensic psychiatry*, edited by J. Gunn and P. Taylor (Butterworth Heinemann), ‘27 pages of a good index’; and of *Forensic medicine* by J. K. Mason (Chapman & Hall), ‘good binding and indexing’.

The indexers of the books were not named, but they were, in order as above: Brian Armitage; Karin Woodruff; John Sampson; SI Vice-President John Gibson; and June Morrison.