Definite and generic nouns in Irish

As a learner of Irish, I have sought an explanation of use (or non-use) of the definite article in Irish. A neat explanation seems hard to find. The preponderance of academic interest seems to be in Old Irish, or in linguistic theories that relate Irish (often in the form of An Caighdeán Oifigiúil, the CO, a form of the language, if it even be held to be a legitimate form of the language, that has no genuine native speakers) to theories of universal grammar. Although there remains a degree of academic interest in the Irish of the Gaeltacht—the Cainnt na nDaoine that the early Irish revivalists pinned their hopes on—learners of Irish generally have few good reference works to turn to, relying heavily on Graiméar Gaeilge na mBráithe Criostai (GGBC), the most comprehensive Irish-language reference work of Irish.

In the case of study of the definite article—a rather fundamental aspect of Irish grammar that learners have to tackle at an early stage—GGBC appears poorly grounded in a thorough survey of Cainnt na nDaoine, which is ultimately the only valid source for any statements on aspects of Irish grammar made by reference works. GGBC has a section on use of the definite article, but one that focuses on a discussion of instances where use of the article is prescribed in Irish, but not found in English. Only a few lines in §§7.15 and 7.16 are given to omission of the article where it would be found in English. Similarly, studies of Irish English, presumed to be influenced by a legacy from the Irish language, frequently mention overuse of the definite article.

One is left with the impression that learners are made aware of the need to insert the article in Irish in instances where a corresponding sentence in English would not use one, but that omission of the article is a grossly underanalysed and undertaught aspect of Irish grammar. A particularly difficult to understand aspect of Irish is the numerous instances where the article may or may not be used. The purpose of this article is to describe the usage of good speakers of Muskerry Irish as regards use and omission of the definite article, and prescribe that to learners of Irish.

I will draw on some of the comments of Peadar Ua Laoghaire on use of the article; the grammatical explanations of Gerald O’Nolan and Cormac Ó Cadhlaigh, who both substantially based their presentations of Irish grammar on Ua Laoghaire’s Irish; an essay by Séamus Ó Searcaigh published in the 1950s on the use of the article; and the more recent discussion by Séamus Mac Mathúna.

Usage with names of languages

We can demonstrate the existence of a problematic area of grammar by looking at usage of the article with names of languages. (Underlining of nouns under discussion has been added in citations here.)

1.  I dtaobh an fhocail sin, “a bhean,” do labhair an Slánuightheóir leis an Maighdin an uair sin, ar ndó’ tá fhos ag gach aoinne atá ag labhart Gaeilinne, agus a thuigean Gaeluinn, gur focal urama agus onóra agus ceana an focal san. Focal urama agus ceana iseadh é sa Ghréigis leis. Agus focal urama agus ceana ab eadh é sa teangain a bhí d’a labhart i nGaillí an uair sin. Ní raibh aon bhliure d’aon bhri gumhthain i riamh sa chaint go dtí gur tugadh amach sa Bhéarló do chuir an tarcaisne sa chaint. (Seanmón is Trí Fichid, Vol 1, pp62-63)

GGBC §7.14 (“ligtar an t-alt ar látr mur bhuil an bhri forleathan”) notes that when language names are used in a broad sense, the article is used, and that otherwise the article is omitted. This understanding would broadly fit the paragraph quoted above where examples of Gaelainn without the article and Gréigis and Béarla with the article are given a number of times. As a rule of thumb,
it may approximate to how Irish is used. Yet there are many stylistic usages that seem hard to fit into the rule set out in GGBC. Compare the following two sentences.

2. *Dheineamair caint ansan agus do deineadh caint linn, agus bhí ionghadh ar gcreoidhe orainn aroaon a fheabhas do labhair na buachaillí óga an Ghaeluinn linn.* (Mo Sgéal Féin, p219)

3. *An amhlaidh a mhasfá a chur ’n-a luighe orm, dá labharadh Dómnhall Ua Conaill Gaeilimh leis na daoine in sna cómhthionólaíb by mbóra, nó taithnfadh san leis na daoine!* (Cómhairle Ar Leasa, p164)

It would be forced to argue that *do labhair na buachaillí óga an Ghaeluinn linn* was a broad reference to Irish, whereas *dá labharadh Dómnhall Ua Conaill Gaeilimh leis na daoine* was not. The rule given in GGBC seems to give learners a starting point, without showing any awareness of how the article is really used. It seems rather that, although there are contexts where the article might be preferred, or otherwise, use of the article is often facultative in Irish and used to create minor stylistic distinctions.

It is hard to explain what such stylistic distinctions might be, possibly explaining the rudimentary nature of the rule laid out in GGBC. One temptation that ought to be resisted is to provide a neat explanation that claims to explain all uses. It seems clear that the same speaker will use the article with language names in different ways, even in the same context, defeating attempts at summary in an overarching universal rule.

4. ’*Ghá cur i gcomparáid dom le teangthachaibh eile, le Laidion nó le Gréigis nó le Frainncis, fé mar a dh’fhoghlumaigh raint diobh ’n-a dhiaigh san, téighean sé ’n-a luighe ar m’aigne, gur bh’fhéarr r’arm aigne i ’ná aon teanga acu. B’fhéaidir go raibh an Gréigis nib fhéarr ’ná ní nusair a bhí an Gréigis beó agus muíntir na Gréige ’ghá labhairt ...* (Mo Sgéal Féin, p31)

Gliding over Peadar Ua Laoghaire’s mistaken presumption that Greek was not spoken in 19th-century Greece (!), we see Laidion, Frainncis and Gréigis all used in broad reference without the article here, each being an expansion of the indefinite noun phrase *teangthachaibh eile*.

5. *Nuair a chuaidh sí ag triall ar a dritháir agus bhí sí ag cabhrughadh leis sa sgoil, is ag múineadh Béarla agus Frainnce a bhiodh sisi, agus eisean ag múineadh na Laidne agus na Gréigise.* (Mo Sgéal Féin, p33)

Here Béarla, Frainnce, na Laidne and na Gréigise are all used in the same context. We could possibly try to argue that Ua Laoghaire’s reference to the languages taught by his mother in school was in the forefront of his mind (and thus more specific in sense), and that the reference to the Latin and Greek being taught by his uncle was an aside or supplementary information (and thus broader in sense). However, the argument would be forced.

6. *Na daoine atá ’na gcómhnuidhe i mBaile Mhac Códa agus i n-áiteanaibh mar étá an Ghaeluinn chomh breágh, chomh snuidhte, chomh blasta san acu nach féidir d’aoinne dul eatartha ach do dhuin go mbeadh an Ghaeluinn aige chomh math díreach agus ’tá si acu féin. Dá mbeadh duine ansan go mbeadh Gaeilimh aige math go leor d’fhéadfadh sé dul isteach i n-áit ná headh aon fhocal Gaeilimh ann agus ba dhóich le gach aoinne gur bh’ fháig é.* (Sgothbhualadh, pp46-47)

7. *I ndiaigh chéile do mhaoluigh an diogras ionam agus thugas aghaidh ar na gnóthaibh a bhain le h-obair an Choláisde i mBéarla agus i Laidin agus sa bhFrainncis.* (Mo Sgéal Féin, p101)
Here we have *do dhuine go mbeadh an Ghaeluinn aige* followed up immediately by *dá mbeadh duine ansan go mbeadh Gaeilge aige math go leor*. There is little difference in the context, although *math go leor* seems to have some influence here. We are left with an awkward impression that the more immediate the reference to a language feels, the less likely it is to require the article; the more academic or discursive the reference, the less likely it is to require the article. However, this is only a slight tendency, and not a “rule” of any type, and we see from *i mBéarla agus i Laidin agus sa bhFrainnisc* that there is little to be gained from trying to squeeze a rule into such usages.

**Concrete nouns**

Usage with language names is just one striking example of variation in Irish usage of the article. I turned to Cormac Ó Cadhlaigh’s *Gnas na Gaedhilge*, which was based on Ua Laoghaire’s Irish. If we bear in mind that English, the language most Irishmen approach Irish from, has a three-way distinction between, say, “death”, “a death” and “the death”, we note that Irish has only one article. The choice will only ever be between *bás* and *an bás*. It is unsurprising that Irish usage does not map across to English usage in a simple fashion. Ó Cadhlaigh’s discussion shows that article usage in Irish is considerably more complex than GGBC’s two-way distinction between definite and indefinite nouns, even when supplemented by considerations relating to usage of the article with abstract nouns and language names where they seem be of “broad meaning”.

Ó Cadhlaigh begins his presentation with what he calls *an t-ainm aicme*, countable concrete nouns, as opposed to *an t-ainm toirte* (uncountable mass nouns; *toirt* is pronounced /ˈturt/ in the dialect under discussion) and *an t-ainm teibidhe* (abstract nouns). All nouns fall into one of these classes. *An t-ainm aicme* (discussed by Ó Cadhlaigh in §§222-237 of *Gnás na Gaedhilge*) shows the following uses:

i) *león*: indefinite (“a lion”)

ii) *an león*: definite (“the lion”)

iii) *an león*: collective or general (“lions in general, as a class”)

Among examples of usage iii) are the following:

8. *Deirtear ná fuil aon rud is lugha ar an león ‘ná glaodh coiligh.* (Aesop a Tháinig go h-Éirinn, p122)

9. *Isé Dia a chruthuigh an duine*. It was God that created man. (Mion-Chaint, Cuid a III, p26)

10. *Isé Dia a chruthuigh an solus*. It was God that created light. (Mion-Chaint, Cuid a III, p26)

11. *Mheasamhair go léir go raibh sè chomh simplidhe chomh h-osgaiteach leis an leanbh.* (Niamh, p 174)

12. *Chitear sa tsaoighal an dealbh agus an saidhbhir, an lag agus an láidir, an duine gan sláinte agus an duine deagh-shláinteach, an duine go mbion a dhá dhóithin an tsaoighal i gcomhguighe aige agus an duine ná bion aige choidhche ach an dealbhhas.* (Seanmóin is Trí Fichid, Vol 1, p214, 215)

13. *Tháinig an t-am chun dul isteach i halla an rince.* (Niamh, p48)

This usage can be reconciled quite easily with GGBC’s term *bri fhorleathan*. However, we note an immediate problem in that collective/general reference does not always require use iii) with the article. In his discussion of use of the definite article, Séamus Mac Mathúna (“On the definite article and definite descriptions in Irish”, pp176-177) showed that sentences like *is iasc bradán* and *is miotal òr*, where the subject of the copula is an indefinite noun (i.e. general usage is not marked by the article), were accepted by a native speaker in Donegal, although called into question by Micheál...
Ó Siadhail (Modern Irish, p225), who preferred intrusion of the article (is iasc é an bradán). We can examine these usages with respect to Ua Laoghaire’s Irish:


The syntax of the copula and the disputes over its parsing are beyond the scope of this article. To disgress briefly, however, in Gerald O’Nolan’s presentation (Studies in Modern Irish: Part 1, pp12-15), the fundamental purpose of third-person pronouns in copula sentences is to prevent the copula from pointing to the subject of the sentence; pronouns so used would be subpredicates. The general form of the copula of classification is VPS, where \( V \) is the verb (the copula), \( P \) the predicate and \( S \) the subject. A pronoun is not generally required, although Ó Siadhail’s construction seems to be VPsS (where \( S \) would be a subsubject).

Classification sentences of a similar type are found in Ua Laoghaire’s Irish:

17. Is grána é an t-óraing-útaing, agus is grána é an meisgeóir, ach tá an donus ar fad ar óraing-útaing meisgeóra! (Cómhairle Ár Leasa, p137)

In his New Era Grammar (§200), O’Nolan shows that proleptic use of a subsubject pronoun in such sentences may be used or omitted in Ua Laoghaire’s Irish, citing is lionmar iad a mór-bhuídhne and is gléineach taithneamh a n-éidí, found in the same context in Táin Bó Cuailgne (p148). However, all copulas of classification with the structure VPsS found in Ua Laoghaire’s works have adjectival predicates (is grána é an meisgeóir, is lionmar iad a mór-bhuídhne, etc). When it comes to classification of a noun in terms of another noun, the forms of the copula of classification (VPS) are shown in (14) and (15) above. As we see in (15), the fact that the subject is a definite noun does not occasion the use of a subsubject pronoun.

There is little in the way of context but is aimhighe an bhó in (15) appears to refer to a specific cow. Bean is eadh an duine sin in (16) shows an additional way in which a copula of classification can be formed in Munster with a definite subject (PVPs, where \( p \) is the subpredicate, used to separate the verb from the subject in copula sentences). These definite usages contrast with sentence (14), which shows that copula of classification sentences need not call for general usage, that is, usage iii) with the article, even where the classification appears to refer to a broad class of nouns (as with bó). The consideration that usage with the article may have a general or collective reference therefore appears to relate to non-copula sentences only, as exemplified in sentences (8) to (13) above, other than where a copula of classification has an adjectival predicate (17).

Ó Cadhlaigh also mentions in passing in §221 the omission of an expected article (expected, that is, by an English-speaking learner of Irish), although there is no extended discussion. The following examples are similar to the ones adduced by Ó Cadhlaigh.

18. Chuaidh sí anonn go dorus. (Séaladna, p57)
20. Chuaig sé go doras agus d’fhéach sa treo ’nar airig sé an ceol... (Scéalaíocht Amhlaoibh, p89)
Doras belongs to the class of ainmneacha aicme. Usage of doras without the article is found repeatedly in Ua Laoghaire’s works. I think of this usage as that of genericised concrete nouns. Such usage seems to be employed where the specific and definite quality of a concrete noun doesn’t need to be spelt out. In the contexts adduced above, go doras appears stylistically superior to the clunkier go dí an doras. With isteach doras, we can even find an English equivalent that is similarly genericised. It is as if isteach doras meant, not “in a/the door”, but “indoors”, an English phrase in which “door” has lost its independent quality as a noun and is used generically as one of the elements of an adverb. “Indoors” in English generally refers to entering the doorway of a residential home, but the Irish isteach doras need not have this restriction.

Ó Searcaigh points out that certain prepositions, including go, are used more often without the article, citing go tairsigh, go geata and go doras (“Some Uses and Omissions of the Article in Irish”, p244). Mac Mathúna cites the phrase lán go béal, “full to the brim” (see “On the definite article and definite descriptions in Irish”, p165) to show that adverbial phrases often avoid the article; we could think of the English word brimful in this context. Lán go béal doesn’t appear to be attested in Ua Laoghaire’s works, but lán go bar(r)a is regularly encountered:

21. Thugadar dhom, le cur i gcoimeád, bosca mór iarainn agus é lán go bara d’ór bhuidhe. (Séadna, p136)

The tendency to drop the article with certain prepositions in adverbial phrases, as pointed out by Ó Searcaigh, thus reinforces the generic usage. Not all concrete nouns have collective usages, and not all concrete nouns have genericised usages. The paradigm of concrete nouns is then as follows.

i) león, doras: indefinite specific noun (“a lion”; “a door”); may be used with a generic sense in copula of classification sentences

ii) an león, an doras: definite specific noun (“the lion”; “the door”)

iii) an leó: general or collective (“lións in general, the class of lions”); there is no call for collective usage of doras

iv) go doras, isteach doras, etc: generic or genericised (“to the door”; “in through a doorway”, “indoors”); there is rarely a need for genericised usage of león

There seems justification for a four-way distinction in Irish. I do not believe all learners of Standardised Irish, relying on GGBC, will have noticed that concrete nouns may become genericised in Irish. The terminology is a little confusing, as “general” and “generic” can be easily confused. In Irish the difference in terminology would be more helpful: ginearáltha for usage iii) and aicmeach for usage iv). I will thus refer to these usages in brief as indefinite, definite, general and generic (cínnte, éigínnte, ginearáltha, aicmeach).

The concept of genericity

Connected with the choice of article usage seems to be the important distinction in Irish between generic and specific usages of nouns. If we look at the English phrase “on top” (or “atop”), the noun “top” is being used in a generic sense. The sense is quite different to either “a top” or “the top”. In “on top”, “top” doesn’t refer to the noun in either a definite or indefinite sense, but uses the generic meaning of the noun “top” to make an adverbial phrase. The meaning is not too different from “above”. We may also refer to the English phrases “I’m going to school”, where “school” is genericised, although anyone uttering this phrase is heading towards a specific school; “to come to order”, where “order” appears generic; the American phrase “stateside”, which refers to the USA generically; and “the court was in session” as opposed to “in a session”.

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The difficult point to understand is that nouns that are used generically will not have the article in Irish, and yet may appear to correspond to a phrase with the article in English. Let us look at this paragraph:


Ar bárr uisce and ar bhárr an uisce are used side by side. One explanation is that {ar bárr} is a prepositional phrase, whereas ar {bhárr an uisce} has bárr as part of a noun phrase that is governed by the preposition ar. Notionally, one is “on top of water” and the other is “on the top of the water”, generic and specific usages of bárr respectively. Ua Laoghaire translated ar bara uisge as “floating” in his Mion-Chaint (Cuid a III, p38), a translation that may be justified in a specific context and brings out the generic meaning clearly. In (22), the definite body of water that St. Peter was to walk on may be understood as more immediate and thus definite in the first sentence and less immediate (as already referred to) and thus genericised two sentences later. The context is the same: it seems clear that the same body of water is being referred to. Traditional Gaeltacht speakers of Irish frequently mixed generic and specific usages in the same discussion, much as Gaelainn and an Ghaelainn are found in close proximity. Ar bárr uisce, notionally “on water”, can in context mean “on the water” with no real distinction from ar bhárr an uisce. We frequently find sentences where the first mention (as with ar bhárr an uisce) defines the noun, which becomes generic thereafter in the same discussion.

The distinction between “on top” and “on a/the top” was replicable in English. Other distinctions become harder to perceive through the filter of English. Let us look at these:

23. Bhi an obair ar siúbhal ins gach aon pháirt de’n mhachaire, agus ins na h-áiteanaibh ’n-a raibh na cuirp ’n-a gruachaitbh anáirde ar a chéile b’éigean trísní móra leathana doimhne dhéanamh, agus na cuirp a chur ’n-a gruachaitbh fé thalamh, direach mar a bhiodar ’n-a gruachaitbh os cionn tailimh. (Niamh, p338)
24. Do thuít na fallaí chun tailimh. (Sgéalaidheachta as an mBíobla Naomhtha, Vol 2, p114)
25. … b’éigean d’Aodh teacht ar a ghlúinibh agus cromadh sios chun an tailimh chun na bpóg do ghlacadh ó’n righ ... (Eisirt, p28)

The phrases fé thalamh, os cionn tailimh and chun tailimh (Muskerry Irish has a slender l in the genitive of talamh) are very frequently found without the article, although rare counterexamples such as in (25) can be found too. In English, these phrases would generally need to be translated using “the ground”, although we find a variation between “under the ground” and “below ground”, English phrases that don’t appear to differ much in meaning. There is also a generic usage of “ground” in English in “to go to ground”, as of a criminal fleeing justice. We may conclude that in Irish the article tends to be dropped—particularly in certain phrases and particularly after certain prepositions—where the definite quality of the noun does not need to be brought out. Usages of nouns that appear to refer to concrete, specific objects may therefore be rendered generic in Irish if specific identification is not seen as important. Dr Seán Ua Súilleabháin of University College Cork has suggested to me that whereas chun tailimh and go talamh would mean “to the ground”, chun an tailimh, as in (25), would mean “right down to the ground, all the way to the ground”, placing more emphasis on an talamh as a specific noun.

In this context, we may refer to the pattern of lenition after thar.
26. Síos liom chun na glaise agus anonn thar glaise, agus suas, ar an dtaoib [sic] theas de’n ghlaise agus de’n bhóthar, chun tíghe muíntir Thuama. (Mo Sgéal Féin, p79)

_Thar glaise_ follows hard on the heels of _chun na glaise_. Once again, Seán Ua Súilleabháin has suggested that, following the definite mention of the stream, its specificity loses significance and _anonn thar glaise_ can be translated simply as “crossed over”. _Thar drotchaid, thar farraige, thar geata, thar táirsigh_ and _thar doras_ are all frequently found in traditional Muskerry Irish. With _thar farraige_, we can point to the English generic phrase “overseas”. “Over the sea” and “over a sea” use specific nouns, whereas “overseas” doesn’t refer to a specific sea or seas. Irish rarely draws a distinction between “over the sea” and “overseas”; I can’t find any instances of _thar an bhfarraige_ in Ua Laoghaire’s works.

A similar problem arises with _thar doras_. As far as I can tell, _thar dhoras_ is not attested in traditional Muskerry Irish, confirming the view that _thar aon doras_ can be translated simply as “crossed over”. _Thar drotchaid, thar farraige, thar geata, thar táirsigh_ and _thar doras_ are all frequently found in traditional Muskerry Irish. With _thar farraige_, we can point to the English generic phrase “overseas”. “Over the sea” and “over a sea” use specific nouns, whereas “overseas” doesn’t refer to a specific sea or seas. Irish rarely draws a distinction between “over the sea” and “overseas”; I can’t find any instances of _thar an bhfarraige_ in Ua Laoghaire’s works.

27. Bhíodar ag feuchaint an doras amach. Cia gheabhadh thar an ndorus ach Séadna! (Séadna, p89)

Sentence (27) shows that _thar an ndorus_ can be found where the door itself is being focused on. Interestingly, under _tar in Cnósach Focal ó Bhaile Bhúirne_ (p249), we find _th~ doras acu (nú, th~ an ndoras acu). The two phrases, _thar doras_ and _thar an ndoras_, are not fully interchangeable; the latter version places more emphasis on the physical door.

28. Chómh luath agus tháinig ar an dtaoibh istigh de dhoras. (Séadna, p84)

29. Fé dheire tháinig glaodhach uirthi ó’n dtaobh eile pharóiste agus b’eigin di ghluaiseacht. (Séadna, p169)

These examples are interesting, as we might expect _an dtaobh istigh den doras_ and _ón dtaobh eile den pharóiste_. An intervening _dhe_ appears to have been elided in sentence (29). In both cases, identification of the noun is of minimal interest to the reader of the sentence, accounting for their becoming genericised.

30. Thar. Do lean G. an namhaid chómh fada leis an abhainn agus thar abhainn soir (Sg. III. 280). Thar an abhainn soir would weaken the expression very much. (Notes on Irish Words and Usages, p103)

Here Ua Laoghaire comments on a sentence in his _Sgéalaidheachta as an mBíobla Naomhtha_, clarifying the fact that omission of the article is for stylistic effect. The overwhelming majority usage of Ua Laoghaire’s works is to say _thar abhainn soir_ and _thar abhainn siar_. In the instance given above, the reference of the noun _abha_ has already been clarified by the preceding phrase _chómh fada leis an abhainn_.

31. Seasaimh amach anso i lár baill. (Na Cheithre Soisgéil, 93)
32. ... 'sé sin tor luachra i lár abhann agus uisge na h-abhann 'gá [sic] chasadh agus 'gá [sic] shniomh agus 'ghá shuathadh. (Brícritiu, p44)
33. ... do lean sé ar an dteagasg go meadhon oidheche. (Gníomhartha na n-Aspol, p346)

Here we find examples of the very frequent use of _i lár_ with a generic noun in Ua Laoghaire’s Irish. _I lár páirce, i lár machaire, i lár catha, i lár coille_ are all found in his works. We may refer here to
the English sentence “he stopped mid-sentence”: here, “sentence” is genericised (compare the clunkier “he stopped in the middle of a/the sentence”). *I lár abhann* here could be seen as “mid-river”. *Meadhon oidhche* is also a genericised time reference, much as “midnight” is in English too, contrasting in the case of both languages with *i lár na hoíche*, “in the middle of the night”.

34. *Agus thug sé isteach ‘n-a thig féin iad agus chuir sé ‘n-a suidhe chun búird iad, agus bhí gáirdeachas air féin agus ar a theaghlach agus a gcroideamh i nDia.* (Gníomhartha na n-Aspol, p336)

35. *Ag ceann an bhúird a bheadh fear a ‘tí, agus ba mhinic a chuirceadh fear a ‘tí an stróinséir ar ceann bűírd.* (Seanachas Amhlaioibh, p36)

*Suidhe chun bűírd* is interesting as the English would be “sit up at the table”. An example from Amhlaioibh Ó Loingsigh shows both *ceann an bhúird* and *ceann bűírd* in the same sentence. Once again, the more definite reference comes first.

36. *Ach beidh a lán d’a bhfuil ar tusach ar deire, agus d’á bhfuil ar deire ar tusach.* (Na Cheithre Soisgél, p55)

37. *Téigheann atharú ar dhaoine go tiugh, agus caillid siad orainn; ach fanann Criost ann do shior, ‘n-a thaca láidir againn go deire.* (Aithris ar Chríost, p61)

The passage of the Gospels given in (36), Matthew 19:30, is translated in the Douay Bible as “And many that are first, shall be last: and the last shall be first”. Both *ar tusach* and *ar deire* (<deireadh>) are genericised in this sentence. *Fé dheireadh, go deireadh* and *i ndeireadh bára* are other frequently found phrases that exhibit genericisation.

38. *Nuair a tháinig an mhaidean do bhí ba crúite.* (Scéalaiocht Amhlaioibh, p8)

Here Amhlaioibh Ó Loingsigh refers generically to cows that have previously been mentioned. Donncha Ó Cróinín gives a fairly lengthy analysis of Ó Loingsigh’s Irish in the notes section at the end of *Scéalaiocht Amhlaioibh*, noting in particular Ó Loingsigh’s frequent omission of the article with the relevant page numbers:

>Tá maiseanna stíle a ghnáthaíodh Fruí Chanaí agus nár mhiste a lua le chéile anso. Ceann acu san, agus ceann a dheineann fuineadh agus faiseadh neamhgháthach ar an insint, is ea an t-alt a fhágaint ar lár, mar seo [footnote: ní gá aon trácht a dhéanamh anso ar ócáidí eile go mbíonn an t-alt ar lár, e.g. go doras/tig/tine, ag triúr agaibh, ‘dir bheirt agaibh, etc]: Do bhí ba crúite 8, B’éigint geataí oscailt 69, Nuair a tháinig liathróid chun tailimh 123, D’oscabal cearta don fheirmeoir 211, Nuair a scaip buairt 193. I scéal a 44 is fearr a gheofar samplaí den tsaghas seo, e.g. Nuair a theasnaigh pàidireacha airis, agus leabhair 248, Nuair a tháinig báithre 250, Tógag amach à turcaill é 250, T’réis teacht abhaile ó shochraid 252, etc. (Scéalaiocht Amhlaioibh, p322)

Ó Cróinín also notes examples where the article is unexpectedly given (as in *an dá lapa na hursalach*, “the two ends of the fire-tongs”, p74), but this may relate to the manner of oral narration of a story, where a narrator had not determined in full what he was about to say before he said it (*dhá lapa na hursalach* would be expected, but *an dá lapa* [pause] *na hursalach* would be acceptable too in disfluent delivery).

39. *... gur eirigh ár Slánuightheoir an treas lát ó mharbhaibh, agus gur chuaidh sé suas ar neamh, agus go bhfuil sé ‘n-a shuidhe ar deus-láimh Dé, agus go dtiofaidh sé as an chun breithaimhntais a thabhairt ar bheóibh agus ar mharbhaibh ...* (Seanmóin agus Tri Fichid, Vol 1, p238)
40. Bhí an lasair ó fheirg Dé 'ghá marbhú. Tháinig sé idir na beóibh agus na mairbh agus bhi sé ag ofráil na túsé agus ag guidhe Dé. Do stad an marbhú. (Sgéalaíadheachta as an mBiobla Naomhtha, Vol 2, p72)

Ó mharbhaibh and ós na mairbh are both found in Ua Laoghaire’s works. We note ar bheóibh agus ar mharbhaibh in a generic sense, contrasting with idir na beóibh agus na mairbh in a more specific sense (where Aaron came between specific living people and a divine flame).

Genericity may also help us out with usage of the noun Aifreann, which can be either countable or generic in English (“to say a Mass” or “to say Mass”). Ó Cadhlaigh tries to argue in §§225 that Aifreann is “a Mass”, but an tAifreann either a specific saying of the Mass or a reference to iodhbairt an Aifrinn (“the sacrifice of the Mass”), but the examples given are not fully persuasive, leading us to conclude that usage here is highly variable. The final sentence of the following passage could mean “to say a Mass the same day” or, generically, “to say Mass the same day”.

41. Chomáin sé teachtaire soir um thráthnóna Dé Satharainn 'ghá iaraidh ar shagart Bhaile na Móna teacht, dá mb’ fhéidir é, agus an t-Aifreann do rádh thar a cheann i gCill Chóirme. Bhi capall ana mhaith ag sagart Bhaile na Móna agus “Griosach” an ainin a bhi aige ar an gcapall. D'eirigh sé go moch ar maidin Dé Domhnaigh agus siúd siar é, siar Ath [sic] an Dalláin, siar Beinn na Miol, siar Gleann na h-Aithrighe, siar go Nead an Fhiolair agus go dtí séipéal Chill Chóirme. Dúbhchairt sé an t-Aifreann direach ar an uair a bhí ceapaithe, gan aon neomrat ríghnis. Is dócha go mb’ fhéidir go raibh taithigh cheang ceangal aige den aifreann a bheith tamall beag deirineach. Pé sgéal é, bhi a lán acu deánach chun an Aifrinn an mhaidean san. Bhi an sagart ag dul soir a bhaile airis tar éis an Aifrinn do rádh, agus bhuaill cuid de’n phobul uime ar an mbóthar. Iadsan ag teacht go dtí an t-Aifreann agus an t-Aifreann ráidhte aige-sean. Bhi air bheith i n-am chun Aifrinn do rádh an lá céadna i mBaile na Móna tar éis dul abhaile dhó. (Mo Sgéal Féin, pp123, 124)

Just as with Aifreann, usage with days of the week/months of the year may be indefinite/definite or generic. Ó Cadhlaigh argues in §§228 and 229 that Domhnach means “a Sunday”; an Domhnach refers to a particular Sunday, or in Séadna (p54), where we read um an dtuca go dtáinig an Domhnach, an Domhnach is simply the name of the day. However, the following example adduced by Ó Cadhlaigh shows that after prepositions (especially ó, go, um and idir) we tend to find generic usages with days of the week and names of months. (I wonder in the case of go if this is influenced by the fact that go was once gos/gus and not go dtí when combined with the article.)

42. Isé an t-ólachán ó Shamhuin go Bealtaine é ag an muintir ná taithneann ar geainnt leó. (Cómhairle Ár Leasa, p94)

Ó Searcaigh also argued that certain prepositions tended to call for the generic use (“Some Uses and Omissions of the Article in Irish”, p244), citing fa Cháisc, um Nodlaig. Do requires the article: Ó Searcaigh cites onóir do’n domnach, “honour/respect for Sunday”, from Leabhar Breac.

It is unsurprising that adverbial phrases such as um thráthnóna are universally found without the article. Such usages are often calculated in languages. (Compare the variation among native speakers of English in the use of forms such as “in the winter” and “in winter”.) Nevertheless, um thráthnóna is also a generic usage.

43. Agus siné an gnó ba cheart a bheith againne ’á dhéanamh, ag buachtaint orainn féin agus ag fágadh lámh-uachtair orainn féin i n-aighaidh an lae, agus ag cur breise ar ár bhfeabhas. (Aithris ar Chriost, p6)
Occasional instances of a genericised *lámh uachtair* without the article are found.

44. *Ní raibh aon bhluire bídh fé dhion *tighe*! (Mo Sgéal Féin, p181)

*Fé dhion *tighe* is another unusual example. Brian Ó Cuív indicates in *Cnósach Focal ó Bhaile Bhúirne* (p135) that this is pronounced /feː jiənˈ tːiː/, where the diphthong supports the view this derives from *fē ia an tighe*; *ia* (=*iadhadh* as it is given in Patrick S. Dinneen’s dictionary) is the same word meaning “enclosing, enclosure” that is found in *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* as *iamh*. However, the apostrophe in Ua Laoghaire’s spelling indicated that he (or his editor, Norma Borthwick) was not *au fait* with this etymological theory and accepted *tighe* as a genericised reference.

**Mass nouns**

*An t-ainm toirte* is Ó Cadhlaigh’s second category of nouns (see §238 in *Gnás na Gaedhilge*). *Ainmneacha toirte* are nouns of an uncountable type and so there is generally no use with the indefinite article in English. We can think of *arán* and *uisce*. Here there is a three-way distinction:

i) *mil*: indefinite mass noun (“honey” or “some honey”)
ii) *an mhil*: definite mass noun (“the honey”)
iii) *an mhil*: a general reference to a mass noun (normally just “honey” in English)

Usage iii) is harder for an English speaker to understand. Ó Cadhlaigh cites the phrase *blas na meala*, “the taste of honey”, where “honey” is being referred to in a collective sense.

Ó Siadhail’s rejection of *is iasc bradán* also applies to mass nouns: in *is miotal ór*, *ór* is a mass noun. Note the following examples, taken from dozens of similar examples of this construction in Ua Laoghaire’s *Mion-Chaint*:

45. *Ní cloch iarán*. Iron is not stone. *Ní h-adhmad cloch*. Stone is not wood. (*Mion-Chaint, Cuid a I*, p5)

This indicates that a general reference to a mass noun (i.e. use with the article) is not required to form the copula of classification.

Language names are also mass nouns (although Ó Cadhlaigh in §224 includes them under concrete nouns), and, as we saw above, GGBC agrees that a “broad” reference to a language name would take the article. The examples of usage with language names show, however, that general and indefinite uses of *ainmneacha toirte* can often be found in similar contexts.

**Abstract nouns**

*An t-ainm teibidhe* (§239 in *Gnás na Gaedhilge*) poses difficulties for English-speaking learners of Irish, as once again there is a three-way distinction that can be hard to grasp or infer in context.

i) *úmhlaíocht*: an indefinite abstract noun (“humility, submission, etc”)
ii) *an úmhlaíocht*: a definite abstract noun (“the humility”, e.g. shown at a certain time)
iii) *an úmhlaíocht*: a general reference to an abstract noun (“humility in general as a concept”)

What is the difference between uses i) and iii)? Compare the usages in (46) and (47) below with the succeeding sentences. Usage iii), with the article, is a reference to an abstract quality as a whole: the general sense of the abstract noun is enhanced by use of the article.
In (49), we find an aithrighe and aithrighe used side by side. Mac Mathúna (“On the definite article and definite descriptions in Irish”, p179) cites this example and explains the variation in usage:

Ó Cadhlaigh is correct in taking the two uses of aithrighe here to refer to repentance in its totality. However, in the example with the article, reference is made to the familiar state of repentance and the article seems to have the effect of concretising or de-abstracting the noun. In the latter instance without the article, reference is made to some general, incidental, and undefined abstract concept.

I would argue, however, that classificatory sentences with the copula generally require the indefinite, not the general usage. This applies both to cad é an nídh aithrighe and to cad is firinne ann in (47). The general usage is found with abstract nouns that are classified in terms of an adjectival predicate, as in (50) above, where we note the intervention of a proleptic subsubject.

Nevertheless, Ó Cadhlaigh points out in §239 that indefinite and general usages are mixed up, and even in a general sense abstract nouns are often found without the article, suggesting once again that the “rules” governing article use are not as hard and fast in Irish as in some other languages. See the following example cited therein.

51. Caradas agus muíntearthas agus grádh agus ionmhuine isidad a tharaingean chun aímhleasa leath an tsaoghail, ní h-eadh, ach formhór an tsaoghail. (Séadna, p275)

Here we read four abstract nouns used in their most general sense, but without the article. They are all referred back to by isidad, in a copula of identification.

Let us look at bás as an abstract noun. Bás appears to be one of a group of nouns that may be countable and concrete (ainm aicme) or may be abstract (ainm teibidhe).

52. Tagann an bás go h-obann agus a gan fhios ar a lán daoine. (Aithris ar Chriost, p47)
53. “Tá mo mháthair i n-uacht bháis,” arsa Aristóbulus ... (Sgéalaidheacht na Macabéach, Vol 1, p47)
54. Tá an bhean san i n-uacht bháis ... (Scéalaitheacht Amhlaoibh, p293)

Sentence (52) is found in a chapter of Ua Laoghaire’s translation of Thomas à Kempis’ Imitatio Christi entitled Cuimhnigh an mbás (p46). Cuimhnigh an bháis wouldn’t be appropriate in this context, as bás is used in a general sense. The common phrase do fuair sé bás refers to an individual death and so is explicable, as is go bás, “to/until death”, regularly found without the article, which usage is reinforced by the tendency not to use the article after go. Duine ’chur chun bás may also be justified as a non-general use of the abstract noun. Yet we note that de Bhaldraithe has in uacht an bháis, a phrase not found in Ua Laoghaire’s works or in the Irish of Amhlaoibh Ó Loingsigh. It is difficult to explain the common phrase do tháinig an bás air (why is it fuair sé bás but tháinig an bás air?) without accepting that idioms are to a large extent collocational, and no single “rule” can explain all such usages.
Iomad and iomarca are also abstract nouns. Although GBC states in §7.14 that these nouns take
the article, I find that, as with other abstract nouns, usage with the article is variable. The examples
given above show usage without the article; an iomad and an iomarca are attested in Ua
Laoghaire’s Irish elsewhere. My search of Amhlaoibh Ó Loingsigh’s Irish shows frequent use with
the article.

Detailed notes on definite and indefinite usage

It may be as well to look at other reasons for using or omitting the article. These may be looked
upon as refinements of definite usage. Ó Cadhlaigh notes in §240 “úsáidthean t-alt leis roimh
fhoclaibh áirithe, nuair is iad na prímhneithe d’á n-acmibh iad ag an t-é labhrann”. Examples given
include the first two of the following sentences from non-Muskerry authors; I believe the other two
sentences added here can be brought under the same rule.

57. Lá breagh Domhnaigh do ghuais bád isteach ó’n dtir. (An t-Oileánach, p69)
58. “Tá casachtach air le fada ... agus d’iarr a’ t-athair a’ dochtúir a thabhairt chuige”. (Cloth
is Dealán, p20)
59. Tá an diminú olamh. Dinner is ready. (Mion-Chaint, Cuid a III, p27)
60. Tá an suipéür olamh. Supper is ready. (Mion-Chaint, Cuid a III, p27)

Here the point being made—one that GBC fails to mention—is that where something is a prime
instance of its class to the speaker, such as the land or someone’s father, the article tends to be
found. This suggests that the speaker’s attitude toward the object (or person) being discussed is of
key importance when it comes to usage of the article in Irish. Many such usages, such as in (58)
above, reflect the principle that Irish often uses the article where a possessive adjective would be
used in English (see Ó Searcaigh, “Some Uses and Omissions of the Article in Irish”, pp242-243).

In §243 Ó Cadhlaigh states the article is used “d’fhonn iongna an radhairc nó an fhothraim obainn
do lériú”. This is covered briefly in GBC in §7.14. This principle appears to have been first set
out by Ua Laoghaire, who commented thus on a sentence in his Sgéalaidheachta as an mBiobla
Naomhtha:

61. An. Chonaic sé an duine agá chosaibh (Sg. III. 321). This use of the definite article is
peculiar to Irish speech. Its effect here is to intensify the idea of the presence of a person in
the place. It makes for vividness of description, as if to express that the person, at that
moment, was a very “definite” thing for him. (Note on Irish Words and Usages, p5)
62. Do chonac an rud dubh sa chúinne. I saw the black object in the corner; i.e., I saw some
black object in the corner. (Mion-Chaint, Cuid a III, p27)

An duine and an rud in the sentences above mean “someone” and “something” respectively.

Numerous noun phrases using the genitive also contain an unexpected definite article:

63. Clann na beirte driféar ab eadh Ó Neill agus Conchobhar; lit., children of the two sisters.
The English would be “of two sisters,” without the definite article. This use of the definite
article is common. For instance “thou son of a king” becomes in Irish A mhic an rí, “Thou
child of a stainless woman,” A leanbh na mná gan tímheal. (Notes on Irish Words and
Usages, p143)
Distributive uses also contain the definite article (see GGBC, §7.11).

64. Tháinig an mhuintir a thusnuigh an obair ar uair a h-aondéag, agus do tugadh pingin an duine dhóibh. (Na Cheithre Soisgéil, p55)

Fractions tend to have the article too; the natural English translation of (65) below would be “an eighth of an ounce”.

65. An t-ochtmhadh cuid d’únsa a bhí sa phingin Rómhanach ... (Na Cheithre Soisgéil, p52)

The following example appears confusing: the English is “that is a nice rule”. The Irish appears to contain an ellipsis, suppressing a relative clause (“the rule that that is is nice”; an riail (a is) i sin and not just i sin is the predicate):

66. Is deas an riail i sin, a Thaidhg. (Papers on Irish Idiom, p73)

Ó Searcaigh points out: “If any word or phrase is brought forward emphatically with the copula, an indefinite noun in a following relative clause is preceded by the article: Is orainn a bhí an lúthgháir, ‘We were very glad’” (“Some Uses and Omissions of the Article in Irish”, pp239-240).

There are also instances where an expected article is not given, but not for reasons of genericity. Dr Seán Ua Súilleabháin has pointed me to Osborn Bergin’s notes on the Irish of Geoffrey Keating: “the art. is regularly omitted before a noun defined by a rel. clause” (Sgéalaigheacht Chéitinn, pxiii), with examples then listed therein from Keating’s Irish. The point may be illustrated with the following citations from Ua Laoghaire.

67. B’i céad bhean í a tháinig chun an doruis. (Bricriu, p20)

68. Isé biadh is deise d’ár bhlastas riamh é. (Séadna, p257)

69. Here are a few examples in which the definite article may or may not be used in Irish, but must be used in English: Do b’ é {céad/an chéad duine} a tháinig é, ‘He was the first person that arrived.’ Isé {fear/an fear} is fearr ortha é, ‘He is the best man of them.’ Both these forms are common, but I prefer the form which has not the article. Here, again are some further constructions in which the definite article cannot be used in Irish, but must be used in English: Isé duine a bhí ann ná Tadhg, ‘The person who was there was Tim.’ Isé rud a bhí ’na láimh aige ná slat, ‘The thing he had in his hand was a rod.’ (Papers on Irish Idiom, p53)

70. D’á olcas an chóir éadaigh atá air. The cóir éadaigh here is defined by the phrase atá air; and hence the definite article has no place. Write, d’á olcas cóir éadaigh, etc. (Notes on Irish Words and Usages, p148)

71. Agus isé méid daoine a d’fhéadh bia ann, chúig mhile fear, gan bac do mhánáibh agus do mhion-daoine. (Na Cheithre Soisgéil, p39)

The examples above show that where a noun is contextually defined, the article need not be given. My focus is on Muskerry Irish, but it is worth nothing that Ó Searcaigh states that “in the spoken language of the North and West the omission of the article is found only before rud, ‘a thing’” (“Some Uses and Omissions of the Article in Irish”, p242). Ua Laoghaire was particularly insistent that where ná later introduced a definition, the article couldn’t be used. However, in grammatical terms, there seems no difference between the latter two sentences he cites in (69) and the earlier sentences he cites therein where Ua Laoghaire accepted that the article could be used. T. F. O’Rahilly adds a footnote clarifying that other good speakers of Muskerry Irish did insert the
definite article in such instances. In (71), we see that *an méid* loses the article where it is subsequently defined by a relative clause.

72. *An é sin grádh atá agat do chara?* Why is the definite article omitted before *grádh*? There are two reasons. In the first place the word *grádh* is defined by the phrase *atá agat*, and need not be defined by the definite article. In the second place, the word *grádh* here is used in a generic sense; “is that the sort of love?” To use the definite article would destroy that generic sense. Similarly, *an é sin éolás atá agat ar an slíghthe?* Is that the sort of knowledge you have of the road? (Notes on Irish Words and Usages, p124)

This is an interesting example. It seems clear that *grádh* has no article because it is part of a noun phrase that is defined contextually by a relative clause. However, Ua Laoghaire rides two horses at once in his explanation, pointing out that it could be parsed as what he refers to as a generic abstract noun. In line with the terminology I outline above, it might be better to argue that this is *grádh* being used in the non-generic sense, usage i) of abstract nouns. Ó Searcaigh argues, however, that abstract nouns are often found with the article even where contextually defined, citing the following examples from Ua Laoghaire (“Some Uses and Omissions of the Article in Irish”, p242).

73. *Is é an bás a dh’innsean an fhírinne i neithibh de’n tsaghas san.* (Bricriu, p55)

74. *Isé an trosgadh is fearr d’ollamhóchaidh sinn i gcóir na Nodlag.* (Seanmóin is Tri Fícheid, Vol 1, p3)

This use tends to be found where the subject is emphasised by the copula. Ó Searcaigh doesn’t give a detailed analysis of the three-way distinction in the use of abstract nouns, but it seems these are usage iii), the general use of abstract nouns in Ó Cadhlaigh’s presentation. The example of the use of *grádh* in (72) above shows that it would not be correct to draw the conclusion that abstract nouns are always used with the article even where contextually defined.

Copular phrases with *sin é, sin i*, etc, often see omission of the article. This can be see as contextual definition.

75. *Bhi aithne mhaith ag na Lochlanaigh air agus siní aithne a bhí acu air, go raibh sé chómh tapaidh agus chómh marbhucútheach leis an león.* (Niamh, p55)

The *X is ainm dom* idiom also seems to have *ainm* as a definite noun with the article dropped owing to contextual definition.

76. “*Lughaidh is ainm dom gan amhras,*” arsa Mac Con. (Lughaidh Mac Con, p40)

The following may also be seen as further examples of contextual reference.

77. *Rún a dhéanamh,* to keep a secret, or to keep the secret; i.e. the definite article is not prefixed in the Irish phrase. (Notes on Irish Words and Usages, p90)

78. *Ní fheaca riamh ag dul chun gnóthar é le h-oireadh binibe.* (Séadna, p141)

In (77), Ua Laoghaire explains that “to keep the secret” has no article in Irish. However, it is likely that in many contexts where this phrase is found *rún* is contextually defined. Noun phrases with *le h-oireadh* appear definite in sense too, but in all cases the context will give a definition, as in (78), “with as much venom as this”.

79. *Do chair Dia an briathar chun clainne Israéil, ag fógairt síothchána tré Íosa Críost,* (siné is Tighearna ar gach uile nídh) ... (Gníomhartha na n-Aspol, p318)
Sentence (79) is a little unusual, as Tighearna is definite in terms of its sense. This sentence is similar to examples cited by Gerald O’Nolan in Studies in Modern Irish: Part 1 (p45) of definite predicates placed next to the copula, which confirmed, to his satisfaction at any rate, that there was no rule that a definite noun cannot be placed next to the copula without intervention of a pronoun. However, it is likely that cross-influence from other types of copular sentences where a subpredicate pronoun intervenes between the copula and a definite subject would mean that definite predicates such as Tighearna placed next to the copula could not show the definite article.

Usage with placenames

Usage with placenames is generally fixed, but Éire is without the article while na hÉireann and Éireann are both found in the genitive. Similarly Alba is without the article, but both na hAlban and Alban are found in the genitive.

In sentence (80) we find both uaisle na h-Éireann and uaisle Alban in the same context. Ó Searcaigh (“Some Uses and Omissions of the Article in Irish”, p248) points out that the use of the article in the genitive of nouns such as Éire and Alba was a later development in Irish; in earlier Irish the article tended to be omitted. In (81) we read tuaisceart Éireann, although GGBC in §7.7 claims “ní hionann an bhrí a bhaintear as an teideal polaitiúil Tuaisceart Éireann agus as an gnáthabháirt tuaisceart na hÉireann”. Ua Laoghaire was, of course, writing before the creation of Northern Ireland, and such a distinction might make sense in the present day. But in terms of the meaning of the phrase tuaisceart Éireann in the language itself, there is no reason why this should not refer to the north of Ireland as a general term. An Mhúmhain is generally with the article in the genitive, but rígh Múmhan shows that the article may also be dropped. A letter of Ua Laoghaire’s to Diarmaid Ó Murchú dated May 14th 1894 also refers to Munster Irish as Gaedhaelg Mumhan (“An tAthair Peadair”, p7).

It seems that references to incidental features of such nouns generally require the article; references to more fundamental or quintessential aspects may see the article omitted. However, muíntir na hÉireann tends to be found with the article, but fir Éireann is usually found without it in Ua Laoghaire’s works. We are left wrestling with variable usage, and probably with the need the accept such collocational noun phrases as they are given in the idiom.

The phrase ar Uitbh and similar phrases such as i gConnachttaibh and even i Sasana (<i Sagsanaibh) also require explanation. These are placenames derived from the names of population
groups (the Ulstermen/Ulaid people, the Connachtmen, the Saxons). Once the population groups have given their names to defined territories, it may seem logical that no article intervenes; we do not read *ar na hUltaibh*. *Ar Ghaedhlaibh* is also frequently found in Ua Laoghaire’s works (alongside rare instances of *ar na Gaedhlaibh*), making it likely that Gaedhlaibh may also be treated in a similar fashion to Ualtaibh, that is, as a placename derived from the name of a population group. *Ar Ghaedhlaibh* thus means “over the Gaels—over Ireland”. Such usages are probably also stylistic, being seen by Ua Laoghaire as superior to fussier, but clunkier, phrases such as *ar na Gaedhlaibh*. *Ó mharbhaibh* above could also be seen in this context: when Jesus descended into Hell, he was among the dead: the inhabitants of the place (*na mairbh*) could possibly be seen as having given their name to the place they were in.

**Definiteness and genericity elsewhere in Irish grammar**

The interplay between the genericity and specificity of nouns in Irish has left many marks on Irish grammar in terms of weak marking of definiteness. The lack of a definite article with the first noun in noun phrases of the type *bean a’ tí* is one.

Ua Laoghaire tussled with Robert Atkinson, an “expert” on Irish, over the meaning of *apstal geinte*: Atkinson believed it meant “an apostle of Gentiles”; Ua Laoghaire pointed out it meant “the apostle of the Gentiles”. (See the discussion in *Papers on Irish Idiom*, pp52-53 in reference to piii of the Appendix to Atkinson’s edition of Keating’s *Trí Bíor-ghaoithe an Bháis*.) As geinte is a definite noun in terms of its meaning, *apstal* (a word found in Ua Laoghaire’s Irish as *aspal*) is also definite in meaning. In his discussion, Ua Laoghaire gave numerous examples including *fear an tí* and *tosach na bliana* of definite noun phrases where the first noun does not give the article. Ua Laoghaire insisted that in such noun phrases, both nouns must be definite:

86. “*A Fhir Dé,* ars’ an taoiseach, “seo mar adeir an rí leat…” “Má’s fear le Dia mise,” arsa Elias, “tagadh teine anuas…” Why not má’s fear Dé mé? — Because in the phrase “If I am a man of God” the word “man” is indefinite, whereas in the phrase má’s fear Dé me the word *fear* is definite, being defined by the genitive Dé. Consequently the word *fear* must be rendered indefinite by saying má’s fear le *Dia* me. Then why is *a fir Dé* correct? Because in the phrase *a fir Dé* and in the phrase “thou man of God” the words *fir* and “man” are both definite. (Notes on Irish Words and Usages, p136)

Yet in his *New Era Grammar*, O’Nolan argues that some of these phrases may (rarely) have an indefinite first noun (see p93 therein). He compares the following sentences, the first of which appears to have an indefinite first noun in the noun phrase under discussion:

87. * Pé rud a iarrfair orm tabharfad duit é, dá mba leath mo righeachta é* (Na Cheithre Soisgéil, p103)
88. “*Cad tá agat le h-iarraidh orm? Dá mb’é leath mo righeachta é, tá sé le fághail agat.*” (Sgéalaidheacha as an mBíobla Naomhtha, Vol 6, p624)

The use of *dá mba* in (87) and *dá mb’ é* in (88) supports O’Nolan’s argument, which conflicts with Ua Laoghaire’s insistence that both nouns must be definite in such phrases. However, it is worth considering whether *dá mba leath mo righeachta é* was an error in Ua Laoghaire’s manuscript, edited by O’Nolan in *Na Cheithre Soisgéil*, as the sense of sentences (87) and (88) is the same.

We may note in passing that an important exception that Ó Searcaigh pointed out is that “if, however, a demonstrative adjective qualifies the governing noun, the article is retained” (“Some Uses and Omissions of the Article in Irish”, p240). Mac Mathúna (“On the definite article and definite descriptions in Irish”, p168) noted the existence of a double article construction, even
89. Do dhin sé an Fiolar an Chinn Léith dhe féin airís agus do dhin an tseanabhean seabhac di féin. (Scéalaíocht Amhlaoibh, p31)

Use of lenition on nouns in the genitive governed by feminine singular nouns may also be influenced by considerations of genericity. Both Focloir Gaeilge-Béarla and de Bhaldraithe’s English-Irish dictionary concur that the Irish word for “homework” is obair bhaile. I can’t claim to have conducted grassroots research in all the Gaeltachtaí, but it seems obair baile is the preferred form in the Gaeltacht (and thus the form that should be recommended to learners too). Why would this be? Obair bhaile reflects the principle that lenition confers an adjectival flavour on the qualifying word. There is only a hair’s breadth of distinction between adjectival usage and qualification by a generic noun. Consequently, there is great variation in native Irish usage in such patterns of lenition. In Cnósach Focal ó Bhaile Bhúirne we read (p3) that some speakers had aghaig bhél (<aghaidh bhéil) and others aghai bél. We may also refer to glao(dh) coilmigh in (8) above: glao(dh) is feminine in Muskerry Irish, but we note that coilmigh is used here, as a generic noun, and not choilmigh, which would be an adjectival usage (compare the English “a cock’s crow” and “a cock-crow”). Ua Laoghaire’s use of roinnt, a feminine noun, without lenition on the succeeding word is also justifiable in these terms, although Ó Loingsigh and other speakers of Muskerry Irish have lenition in such case (roinnt bhlianta, etc).

In the following passage, Ua Laoghaire highlighted the way in which failure to lenite a noun could bring out its generic nature:

90. Chuadar abhaile gan creach gan cath, they went home without battle or spoils. In this form the words creach and cath are taken in a generic sense, and the English is “without spoil, without battle.” Aspiration of the words would signify that they were used in an individual manner, and the English would be “without a spoil, without a battle.” The use of the initial aspiration in the Irish has the effect which the use of the indefinite article has in English. It turns “battle” in general to an individual “battle.” (Notes on Irish Words and Usages, pp140-141)

In conclusion, it seems that it is difficult to draw up precise rules on the use of the article—or the omission of the article—in Irish. The choice is often a stylistic one, albeit influenced by nuances of genericity and the speaker’s own subjective attitude toward the noun in question. Certain prepositions are more frequently used with generic than with definite nouns. Even once all of these considerations are taken into account, an individual speaker or writer of traditional Irish will use the same noun phrase in different manners. However, there is a broad logic to the workings of the language in Ua Laoghaire’s Irish, which repays attention by learners of Irish.

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