

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 Críostaí* (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 fhios ag gach aoinne atá ag labhairt Gaeluinne, 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’á labhairt i nGaililí an uair sin. Ní raibh aon bhlúire d’aon bhrígh tharcaisneamhail riamh sa chaint go dtí gur tugadh amach sa Béarla í, “Woman, what is that to me or to thee?” Isé an Béarla do chuir an tarcaisne sa chaint. (Seanmón is Trí Fichid, Vol 1, pp62-63)*

GGBC §7.14 (“ligtear an t-alt ar lár mura bhfuil an bhrí 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 iongnadh ár gcroidhe orainn araon a fheabhas do labhair na buachaillí óga an Ghaeluinn linn. (Mo Sgéal Féin, p219)*
3. *An amhlaidh a mheasfá a chur 'n-a luighe orm, dá labharadh Dómnhall Ua Conaill Gaeluinn leis na daoine in sna cómhthionólaibh móra, ná taithnfadh san leis na daoine! (Cómhairle Ár 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 Gaeluinn 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'fhoghlumúigheas raint díobh 'n-a dhiaigh san, téighean sé 'n-a luighe ar m'aigne, gur bh'fhearr d'arm aigne í 'ná aon teanga acu. B'fhéidir go raibh an Ghréigis nib'fhearr 'ná í nuair a bhí an Ghréigis beó agus muintir 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 Frainncise a bhíodh sisi, agus eisean ag múineadh na Laidne agus na Gréigise. (Mo Sgéal Féin, p33)*

Here *Béarla*, *Frainncise*, *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 Coda agus i n-áiteanaibh mar é, tá an Ghaeluinn chómh breágh, chómh snuidhte, chómh blasta san acu nách féidir d'aoinne dul eatartha ach do dhuine go mbeadh an Ghaeluinn aige chómh maith díreach agus 'tá sí acu féin. Dá mbeadh duine ansan go mbeadh Gaeluinn aige maith go leór d'fhéadfadh sé dul isteach i n-áit ná beadh aon fhocal Gaeluinne ann agus ba dhóich le gach aoinne gur bh'fháig é. (Sgothbhualadh, pp46-47)*
7. *I ndiaigh chéile do mhaoluigh an díogras 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 Gaeluinn aige maith go leór*. There is little difference in the context, although *maith go leór* 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 bhFrainncis* 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 to 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 /turt/ 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 sé chómh simplidhe chómh h-osgailte leis an leanbh. (Niamh, p 174)*
12. *Chítear sa tsaoghal an dealbh agus an saidhbhir, an lag agus an láidir, an duine gan sláinte agus an duine deagh-shláinteach, an duine go mbíon a dhá dhóithin an tsaoghal i gcómhnuighe aige agus an duine ná bíon aige choídhche ach an dealbhas. (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 bradáin* and *is miotal ór*, 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 Mícheál

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:

14. *C: Túir solaoid ar an mbuint. F: Is ainmhi bó .i. buinean an ní dá ngoirtear "bó" leis na nithibh dá ngoirtear "ainmhithe."* (*Papers on Irish Idiom*, p54)
15. "*Is ainmhighe an bhó,*" two substantive ideas. "*Is 'n-a seasamh atá an bhó,*" two modal ideas. (*Notes on Irish Words and Usages*, p67)
16. "*Bean is eadh an duine sin a bhí ar an gcarraig,*" ar seisean. "*Banliaigh iseadh í, agus bíonn sí gach re mbliadhan 'n-a banliaigh agus ag déanamh salainn.*" (*Guaire*, Vol 2, p193)

The syntax of the copula and the disputes over its parsing are beyond the scope of this article. To digress 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 VP*S* (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 lionmhar iad a mór-bhuidhne* and *is gléineach taitheamh a n-éidí*, found in the same context in *Táin Bó Cuailgne* (p148). However, all copulas of classification with the structure VP*S* found in Ua Laoghaire's works have adjectival predicates (*is grána é an meisgeóir*, *is lionmhar iad a mór-bhuidhne*, etc). When it comes to classification of a noun in terms of another noun, the forms of the copula of classification (VP*S*) 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 ainmhighe 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 (PV*P**S*, 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 dorús.* (*Séadna*, p57)
19. *Um eadarthra lar na mháireach bhí an bheirt ag dorús tíghe an rígh. Tháinig an ceann amach. Chonaic sé Cormac. "Cá bhfuil sí?" ar seisean. "Sidí í," arsa Cormac go réidh. "Téanam, a 'nghean ó," arsa 'n ceann. Do ghluas sí i n-aonfheacht leis. Chuadar isteach dorús.* (*Séadna*, p193)
20. *Chuaig sé go dorús 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 dtí 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 león**: general or collective ("lions 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, éiginnte, 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".

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:

22. *Agus d'fhreagair Peadar: A Thighearna, ar seisean: má's tusa atá ann, órduigh dómh-sa teacht ag triall ort ar bhárr an uisge. Agus dubhairt seisean: Tar chúgham. Agus tháinig Peadar anuas as an luing, agus bhí sé ag siúbhal ar bárr uisge, ag teacht chun Íosa. (Na Cheithre Soisgéil, p40)*

Ar bárr uisge and *ar bhárr an uisge* are used side by side. One explanation is that {*ar bárr*} is a prepositional phrase, whereas *ar {bhárr an uisge}* 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. *Bhí an obair ar siúbhal ins gach aon pháirt de'n mhachaire, agus ins na h-áiteanaibh 'n-a raibh na cuirp 'n-a gcruachaibh anáirde ar a chéile b' éigean trinsí móra leathana doimhne dhéanamh, agus na cuirp a chur 'n-a gcruachaibh fé thalamh, díreach mar a bhíodar 'n-a gcruachaibh os cionn tailimh. (Niamh, p338)*

24. *Do thuit na fallaí chun tailimh. (Sgéalaidheachta as an mBíobla Naomhtha, Vol 2, p114)*

25. *... b' éigean d' Aodh teacht ar a ghlúinibh agus cromadh síos chun an tailimh chun na bpóg do ghlacadh ó'n rígh ... (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 dtaob [sic] theas de'n ghlaise agus de'n bhóthar, chun tíghe mhuintir 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 droichead, 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 genericised nouns are not lenited after *thar*. If we wished to rationalise use of a generic *thar doras* with reference to English, we could point out that “indoors” in English too often, in context, appears to refer to a specific doorway. (“He had a smoke by the doorway, and then went indoors.”)

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 dtaobh istigh de dhorus. (Séadna, p84)*

29. *Fé dheire tháinig glaothach uirthi ó'n dtaobh eile pharóiste agus b'eigin di gluaiseacht. (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] shníomh agus 'ghá shuathadh. (Bricriu, p44)

33. ... do lean sé ar an dteagasg go meadhon oidhche. (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 thigh féin iad agus chuir sé 'n-a suidhe chun búird iad, agus bhí gáirdeachas air féin agus ar a theaghlach agus a gcreideamh i nDia. (Gníomhartha na n-Aspol, p336)*
35. *Ag ceann an bhúird a bheadh fear a' tí, agus ba mhinic a chuireadh fear a' tí an stróinséir ar ceann búird. (Seanachas Amhlaoibh, p36)*

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

36. *Ach beidh a lán d'á bhfuil ar tusach ar deire, agus d'á bhfuil ar deire ar tusach. (Na Cheithre Soisgéil, p55)*
37. *Téigheann atharú ar dhaoine go tiugh, agus caillid siad orainn; ach fanann Críost ann do shíor; '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. (Scéalaíocht Amhlaoibh, p8)*

Here Amhlaoibh 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 *Scéalaíocht Amhlaoibh*, 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 fáscadh 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'oscalag ceárta don fheirmeoir* 211, *Nuair a scaip buairt* 193. I scéal a 44 is fearr a gheofar samplaí den tsaghas seo, e.g. *Nuair a thosnaig paidireacha airís, agus leabhair* 248, *Nuair a tháinig bráithre isteach* 250, *Tógag amach à turcail é* 250, *T'réis teacht abhaile ó shochraid* 252, etc. (*Scéalaíocht Amhlaoibh*, 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 Slánuightheóir an treas lá ó mharbhaibh, agus gur chuaidh sé suas ar neamh, agus go bhfuil sé 'n-a shuidhe ar deas-láimh Dé, agus go dtiocfaidh sé as san chun breitheamhantais a thabhairt ar bheóibh agus ar mharbhaibh ... (Seanmóin agus Trí Fichid, Vol 1, p238)*

40. *Bhí an lasair ó fheirg De 'ghá marbhú. Tháinig sé idir na beóibh agus na mairbh agus bhí sé ag ofráil na túise agus ag guidhe Dé. Do stad an marbhú. (Sgéalaidheachta as an mBíobla Naomhtha, Vol 2, p72)*

Ó mharbhaibh and *ós na mairbh* are both found in Ua Laoghair'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 *íodhbairt 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-Aifrean do rádh thar a cheann i gCill Chóirne. Bhí capall ana mhaith ag sagart Bhaile na Móna agus “Gríosach” an ainim a bhí 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 Míol, siar Gleann na h-Aithrige, siar go Nead an Fhiolair agus go dtí séipéal Chill Chóirne. Dúbhairt sé an t-Aifrean díreach ar an uair a bhí ceapaithe, gan aon neómat righnis. Is dócha go mb'fhéidir go raibh taithighe ag cuid de'n phobul ar an Aifrean a bheith tamall beag deirineach. Pé sgéal é, bhí a lán acu déanach chun an Aifrinn an mhaidean san. Bhí an sagart ag dul soir a bhaile airís tar éis an Aifrinn do rádh, agus bhuaíl cuid de'n phobul uime ar an mbóthar. Iadsan ag teacht go dtí an t-Aifrean agus an t-Aifrean ráidhte aige-sean. Bhí 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 dtaca 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 muinntir ná taithnean ár gcainnt 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 calcified 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 fagháil lámh-uachtair orainn féin i n-aghaidh an lae, agus ag cur breise ar ár bhfeabhas. (Aithris ar Chríost, p6)*

Occasional instances of a genericised *lámh uachtair* without the article are found.

44. *Ní raibh aon bhlúire bídh fé dhíon ‘tighe! (Mo Sgéal Féin, p181)*

Fé dhíon ‘tighe is another unusual example. Brian Ó Cuív indicates in *Cnósach Focal ó Bhaile Bhúirne* (p135) that this is pronounced /f'e: jìən' t'i:/, where the diphthong supports the view this derives from *fé ia an tíghe*; *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 iaran. 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) **úmhláíocht**: an indefinite abstract noun ("humility, submission, etc")
- ii) **an úmhláíocht**: a definite abstract noun ("the humility", e.g. shown at a certain time)
- iii) **an úmhláíocht**: 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.

46. *Múinean san úmhlúigheacht do'n duine.* (*Seanmóin is Trí Fichid*, Vol 1, p93)
 47. *Cad is fírinne ann?* (*Na Cheithre Soisgéil*, p279)
 48. *Is galar cráidhte an grádh.* (No citation given in *Gnás na Gaedhilge*.)
 49. *B'fhearr liom an aithrige bheith am' chroidhe 'ná mé bheith ábalta ar a dh'innsint cad é an nídh aithrige.* (*Aithris ar Chríost*, p2)
 50. *Is maith í an fhoidhne.* Patience is a good thing. (*Mion-Chaint, Cuid a III*, p27)

In (49), we find *an aithrige* and *aithrige* 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 *aithrige* 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 aithrige* and to *cad is fírinne 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 isiad a tharaingean chun aimhleasa 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 *isiad*, 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 Chríost*, 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 ...* (*Scéalaíocht Amhlaoibh*, p293)

Sentence (52) is found in a chapter of Ua Laoghaire’s translation of Thomas à Kempis’ *Imitatio Christi* entitled *Cuimhnigh ar an mbás* (p46). *Cuimhnigh ar bhás* 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 báis* 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.

55. Tá orainn carthanacht a thabhairt do chách uile, ach ní rud fóganta iomad muintearthais. (Aithris ar Chríost, p13)
56. Ní bhfuair Séadna aon tsult ann. Bhí iomarca iongnadh air. (Séadna, p135)

Iomad and *iomarca* are also abstract nouns. Although GGBC 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 an t-alt leis roimh fhoclaibh áirithe, nuair is iad na prímhneithe d’á n-aicmíbh iad ag an té 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 ghluais bád isteach ó'n dtír. (An t-Oileánach, p69)
58. “Tá casachtach air le fada ... agus d’iarr a’ t-athair a’ dochtúir a thabhairt chuige”. (Cioth is Dealán, p20)
59. Tá an dinnéur olamh. Dinner is ready. (Mion-Chaint, Cuid a III, p27)
60. Tá an suipéur olamh. Supper is ready. (Mion-Chaint, Cuid a III, p27)

Here the point being made—one that GGBC 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 léiriú”. This is covered briefly in GGBC 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 mBíobla 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 nice”; *an riail (a is) í sin* and not just *í sin* is the predicate):

66. *Is deas an riail í 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’í céad bhean í a tháinig chun an doruis.* (*Bricriu*, p20)

68. *Isé biadh is deise d’ár bhlaiseas 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 lámh 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 dh’ith bia ann, chúig mhíle fear, gan bac do mhnáibh 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 noting 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 dod' 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 eólas atá agat ar an slighe?* 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-general 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 fhirinne i neithibh de'n tsaghas san.* (*Bricriu*, p55)

74. *Isé an trosgadh is fearr d'ollamhóchaidh sinn i gcóir na Nodlag.* (*Seanmóin is Trí Fichid*, 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 í*, etc, often see omission of the article. This can be seen as contextual definition.

75. *Bhí aithne mhaith ag na Lochlanaigh air agus siní aithne a bhí acu air, go raibh sé chómh tapaidh agus chómh marbhuightheach 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 gnótha é le h-oiread 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-oiread* 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 chuir 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.

80. *Tabharfaid ríghthe agus uaisle na h-Éireann bhúr ndóithin le n-ithe agus le n-ól daoibh, chómh maith agus thug ríghthe agus uaisle Alban; níos fearr dar liom-sa.* (Guaire, Vol 2, p198)
81. ... *bhí Aodh Ó Domhnaill ’n-a rígh ar Thír Chonaill i dtuaisceart Éireann.* (*An Cleasaidhe*, p1)
82. ... *do réir gach deabhráimh tá an chloch san ’n-a seasamh ar uaigh Mhathúna mhic Cinéide, rígh Múmhan.* (*Niamh*, p19)
83. *Admhuighid fir Éireann go léir go bhfuilir-se ós a gcionn, gan chomórtas, ins gach tréith a bhaineann le gaisge.* (*Bricriu*, p56)

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 ngnáthabairt 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 Mhúmhan* 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, *muintir 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 to accept such collocational noun phrases as they are given in the idiom.

84. *Sin é an fear a thug fuasgailt ar Ultaibh i gcruadhtan an lae ’ndiu!* (*Táin Bó Cuailnge ’na Dhráma*, p240)
85. *Sa bhliain d’aois an Tighearna míle sé chéad a dó do briseadh cath ar Ghaedhlaibh agus ar an dá Aodh, Aodh ua Néill agus Aodh Ruadh ua Dómhnaill, i n-aice Chionntsáile.* (*Mo Sgéal Féin*, p1)

The phrase *ar Ultaibh* and similar phrases such as *i gConnachtaibh* 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 *Ultaibh*, 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 fhir Dé* correct? Because in the phrase *a fhir 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 rígeachta é* (*Na Cheithre Soisgél*, p103)
 88. "*Cad tá agat le h-iarraidh orm? Dá mb'é leath mo rígeachta é, tá sé le fághail agat.*" (*Sgéalaidheachta 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 rígeachta é* was an error in Ua Laoghaire's manuscript, edited by O'Nolan in *Na Cheithre Soisgél*, 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

where there is no demonstrative, in storytelling and set phrases, citing this example from Amhlaóibh Ó Loingsigh:

89. *Do dhin sé an Fiolar an Chinn Léith dhe féin airís agus do dhin an tseanabhean seabhac di féin. (Scéalaíocht Amhlaóibh, p31)*

Use of lenition on nouns in the genitive governed by feminine singular nouns may also be influenced by considerations of genericity. Both *Foclóir 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 *aghaig bél*. We may also refer to *glaodh coiligh* in (8) above: *glaodh* is feminine in Muskerry Irish, but we note that *coiligh* is used here, as a generic noun, and not *choiligh*, 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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