
Starting from Scratch – The Creation of an Irish-language Idiom Database

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Abstract

This paper presents a database of Irish-language idioms along with a description of its internal schema. This is a dialect-specific synchronic study of idioms in the Irish of West Munster from the published work of Canon Peadar Ó Laoghaire (1839–1920). Firstly, a brief overview is given of previous research undertaken on Irish-language idioms in the area of phraseology. The database schema is outlined in the latter section of the paper. Each of the individual categories in which idioms are recorded, categorized, explained and cross-referenced in the database are described in detail. A selection of sample entries is provided in the Appendix to this paper. This research provides an innovative approach to the collection and categorization of Irish-language idioms and also a foundation for further analysis of idioms in other dialects and languages and for future studies in this area.

Keywords: lexicography; language technology; phraseology; collocation; database schema

1 Introduction

This paper focuses on the creation of an idiom database from the published work of the primary Irish-language author of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Canon Peadar Ó Laoghaire (1839–1920). Following the description of idioms as laid down in the literature (e.g. Abdou 2012; Hanks 2004; Howarth 1998; Fernando 1996; etc.), an idiom is defined in this paper as a type of phraseme which has a figurative meaning in terms of its whole, or a unitary meaning that cannot be derived from the meanings of its individual components and whose components can only be varied within restricted definable limits.

Firstly, a general overview is given on previous research undertaken on Irish-language idioms. A brief background of Peadar Ó Laoghaire will be provided along with a synopsis of his work. A corpus of 1,864,015 tokens was compiled as part of this research but an account of the compilation and the search methodology is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a detailed description of this aspect of the project is available in Ní Loingsigh and Ó Raghallaigh (2016). The primary focus of this paper is the creation of a database in which idioms are recorded, classified, explained and cross-referenced. The database schema is described in detail and a select number of sample entries from the database are available in the Appendix to this paper. The database will be made publicly available at the following link: <http://www.gaois.ie/en/>.

2 Background

The Irish language belongs to the Celtic Indo-European language group. There are three main dialect varieties in use today which correspond primarily with the most northerly, westerly and southerly geographic regions in Ireland in the coastal counties of Ulster, Connaught and Munster. Ó Corráin's (1989) work on the Ulster dialect of Irish and idiomatic expressions identified in the work of the author Séamus Ó Grianna (1889-1969) is the only other academic study undertaken on Irish-language idioms in literary works to date. This concordance of idiomatic expressions was undertaken before the widespread availability of large-scale corpora and followed a different methodology to the corpus

approach followed in this project. Despite the limited amount of academic research on Irish-language phraseology, idioms have been collected and analysed by individual scholars and in various lexicographic works from the late nineteenth century onwards.

This paper builds on the foundations established in Ó Corráin’s (1989) initial work on Irish-language idioms and specifically focuses on idioms in the work of Peadar Ó Laoghaire and on the southern dialect of Irish, specifically the *Múscraí* region in County Cork. Ó Laoghaire is recognised as a seminal writer of the Irish-language revival period in Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century and his work left an indelible mark on generations of writers and students. Ó Laoghaire produced over five hundred individual pieces of work, including extensive prose compositions, translations, newspaper and journal articles (Ó Cuív 1954). Additionally, hundreds of unpublished letters, articles and notes relating to his work are currently held in various libraries throughout Ireland (Ó Dúshláine 2015). It was this volume of work, but also the undisputed authority of his work, that gained him praise and respect both nationally and internationally as a writer (e.g. Ó Macháin 2015; Ó Cearúil 1999; Mac Mathúna 1987; Keane 1970; Maol Muire 1939; Zimmer 1911.) His self-proclaimed writing style became known as ‘*caint na ndaoine*’ (the people’s speech) which focused on the spoken language as a base for literature rather than building on the remnants of a more archaic classical literary tradition.

Ó Laoghaire’s primary and most renowned work *Séadna* (Ua Laoghaire 1904) received widespread acclaim upon its release. For these reasons Peadar Ó Laoghaire’s published works were selected for this project, not only as a comprehensive source of native idiomatic expressions, as a basis of phraseological work and linguistic studies “but also towards the general understanding of language and of texts as cultural products” (Biber, Breiteneder and Dobrovolskij 2002). An annotated corpus was used to search for idioms following a mixed-methods approach, i.e. both corpus-based and corpus-driven methods were followed in the idiom search. Following the collection of idioms, a database schema was set out specifying which categories of information needed to be recorded. The classification and categorization of idioms in the database will be described in detail in the following section.

3 Methodology

The database was created using *Léacslann* (Měchura 2012), a web-based platform used for building dictionary writing systems and terminological management systems and is currently used in a number of Irish-language based projects in *Fiontar*, Dublin City University, e.g. the National Terminology Database for Irish (www.tearma.ie); the project to digitize the National Folklore Collection of Ireland (www.dúchas.ie) and others. Moon (1998: 45) lists several databases of fixed expressions and idioms in various languages and suggests that each database “records and prioritizes only certain kinds of information”. The database schema in this project was created to record, classify and cross-reference the collected Irish-language idioms. *Léacslann* holds various XML-based stocks which cater to the needs of several research projects in *Fiontar* (Měchura 2012) and a discreet stock with a specific schema was created to cater for the needs of this project. The idiom database is stored in this stock in *Léacslann* under the title *An tAthair Peadar* and each category within this stock is described in detail below.

There are seven main categories in the database, each of which are displayed by *Léacslann* alphabetically: *aicme comhréire* (syntactic class), *aicme séimeantaice* (semantic class), *aicme úsáide* (usage class), *faisnéiseoir* (informant), *foinse bhreise* (extra source), *foinse chorpais* (corpus source) and *nath* (idiom)¹ (see Figure 1). Entries of each category, when created in *Léacslann*, are stored as XML and comprise of their root element and a set of precomposed child-elements. Entries can be

¹ While labels in *Léacslann* are in Irish, the title of each label will be translated into English for the purposes of this paper. All translations are the authors’ own unless stated otherwise.

edited and saved (*sábháil*) or deleted (*scrios*). The user can revert to a previous version of the entry using the history (*stair*) option.

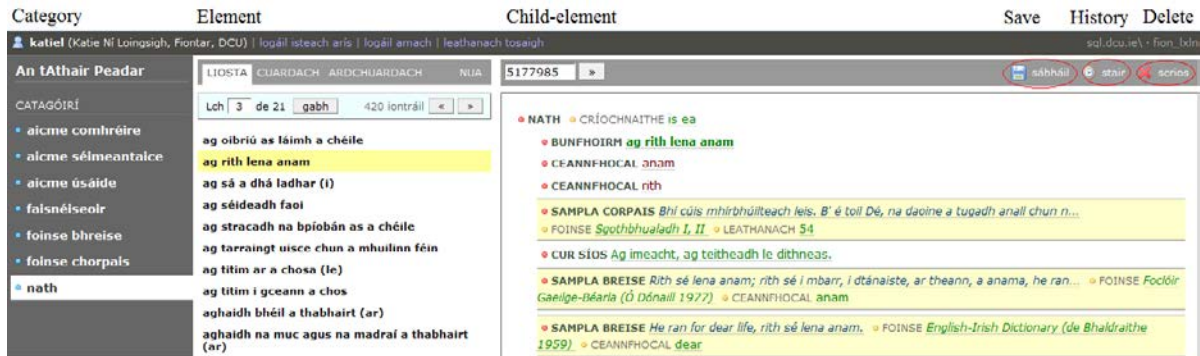


Figure 1: Database schema.

The data captured in each of the seven categories of the database are described in the following section with particular focus on the most important entry category of the database, i.e. *nath* (idiom).

3.1 Database categories

Aicme comhréire (syntactic class): Eleven primary syntactic classes of idioms were recorded as entries of type *aicme comhréire* following an analysis of the idioms collected. This is a broad syntactic classification as a detailed classification of the various syntactic structures of Irish-language idioms has yet to be undertaken, i.e. idioms containing a verbal noun are recorded as *verbal noun idioms* (e.g. *ag imeacht le gaoth*²), idioms containing an irreversible binominal are recorded as *irreversible binominal idioms* (e.g. *ó mhaidin go hoíche*³) and so forth.

Aicme séimeantaice (semantic class): Four main semantic classes were set out in the database as entries of type *aicme séimeantaice*. This follows the semantic classification as developed and reported in the literature (e.g. Howarth 1998; Fernando 1996; Cowie, Mackin and McCaig 1983; etc.) and as summarised by Mulhall (2008: 1358). Idioms are classified as pure idioms, figurative idioms, semi-idioms and non-word idioms.

Aicme úsáide (usage class): Several usage classes which related to the use of certain idioms were recorded as entries of type *aicme úsáide*, i.e. common intensifiers (e.g. numerics, colours, etc. in idioms (*ó chúig cúigí na hÉireann*⁴)); negative usage of idioms (e.g. idioms which are not used in their positive sense or meaning (*níl leathphingin rua aige*⁵)); restrictions on lexical variation, etc.

Faisnéiseoir (informant): Due to the dialectal and synchronic nature of the idioms recorded in the database, certain idioms were discussed with native Irish-speakers from *Múscraí* to clarify their underlying meanings. This primarily concerned idioms of which there was little or no evidence in other sources regarding their meaning and description. The respondents name, address, profession and age were recorded as entries of type *faisnéiseoir*.

² *Ag imeacht le gaoth*: literal meaning: ‘going with wind’; idiomatic meaning: ‘in decline’.

³ *Ó mhaidin go hoíche*: literal meaning: ‘from morning until night’; idiomatic meaning: ‘all day long, continually’.

⁴ *Ó chúig cúigí na hÉireann*: literal meaning: ‘from the five provinces of Ireland’ (which historically had five provinces); idiomatic meaning: ‘from the whole of Ireland, from everywhere’.

⁵ *Níl leathphingin rua aige*: literal meaning: ‘he does not have half a red penny’; idiomatic meaning: ‘he is penniless, he has little or no money’.

Foinse bhreise (extra source): A complete list of additional resources examined during the analysis of each idiom was recorded. Each source was stored as an entry of type *foinse bhreise*. The title, author and year of publication of each resource was recorded. These extra sources are primarily lexicographic and dialectal sources used as aids to explain the collected idioms.

Foinse chorpais (corpus source): A complete list of corpus sources, which recorded the title, author and year of publication of each source, was compiled and the items on the list were stored as entries of type *foinse chorpais*.

Nath (idiom): Each idiom was recorded in its baseform or canonical form. Idioms were stored as entries of type *nath*. The structure of this entry category is described in the following section of this paper. Example entries of this type are provided in the Appendix to this paper.

3.2 Internal structure and contents of entries of the category *Nath* in the database

Bunfhoirm (baseform): Each idiom consists of a baseform or canonical form, “the simplest morfo-syntactic form that an expression can take” to activate its specific idiomatic meaning and function (Barkema 1996: 141). Due to the dialectal nature of this study, each idiom was recorded in its baseform in standard orthography, as established by *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil* (Rannóg an Aistriúcháin 1958). However, a small number of entries contain some non-standard components. These exceptions to the general rule were included when strong evidence from the corpus suggested that the idioms collected contained certain fossilized components, e.g. *ag stracadh na bpiobán*,⁶ *do ló agus d’oíche*,⁷ etc. Priority is given to the non-standardized forms of idioms due to the prevalence of their use in the spoken language. Prioritizing and recording the standardized form of these idioms would be of minimal benefit to those who wish to use these idioms as they predominantly occur in non-standardized form. However, both a standardized and a non-standardized version of the idiom could be recorded in the database in the future as a basis for comparison. In instances such as these, the idioms concerned were discussed with language respondents in the *Múscraí* region and left in non-standardized form.

In cases where an idiom contained a verb and a noun as part of its baseform, these idioms were recorded in the third person, singular form with the representative verbal noun, e.g. *fuil a dhoirteadh*; *anáil a tharraingt*; *bob a bhualadh (ar)*; *carbhat caol a chur (ar)*; *sciot scot a dhéanamh (de)*; etc. Additionally, when evidence from the corpus suggested that certain verbs and prepositions formed an integral part of the idiom concerned, these were included in the baseform. This reflects the importance of certain prepositions and verbs in Irish-language syntax (Ó Baoill and Ó Domhnalláin 1975). The relative preposition was recorded in brackets as shown in the previous examples.

Ceannfhocal (headword): In each idiom the primary nouns, adjectives and adverbs, in singular form, along with the infinitive form of each verb were recorded. This is a benefit of using a digital database over a printed dictionary of idioms as the researcher/user is not limited to selecting one headword. These headwords can be further utilized as a cross-referencing tool to search for idioms containing similar headwords.

Sampla corpais (corpus example): Up to three contextual examples of each idiom from the corpus were recorded as *sampla corpais* child elements within entries of type *nath* (idiom) in the database. Each contextual example was transcribed directly from the source text and recorded in non-standardized form.

⁶ Non-standardized form: *ag stracadh na bpiobán*; standardized form: *ag sracadh na bpiobán*.

⁷ Non-standardized form: *do ló agus d’oíche*; standardized form: *de lá agus d’oíche*.

Cur síos (description): Each idiom was paraphrased and explained in clear and concise language. These explanations were based on information found in various lexicographic works, in specific dialectal resources and from fieldwork with Irish-language informants in *Múscraí*.

Sampla breise (additional example): Any additional information obtained regarding the meaning of idioms was recorded under this element. This included information from both published and unpublished lexicographic works, specific dialectal resources, lexicographic manuscripts, private notes and correspondence from Peadar Ó Laoghaire, etc. The examples recorded were directly transcribed from the relevant sources. The source of each additional example, as well as the headword of each example, were stored as part of these elements.

Aicme úsáide (usage class): One or more usage classes were selected (if necessary) which related to the correct use of the idiom concerned. These elements contained a reference to an entry of type *aicme úsáide* (see 3.1).

Aicme séimeantaice (semantic classification): One semantic class was selected for each idiom. These elements contained a reference to an entry of type *aicme séimeantaice* (see 3.1).

Aicme comhréire (syntactic classification): One or more syntactic classes were selected for each idiom. These elements contained a reference to an entry of type *aicme comhréire* (see 3.1).

Crostagairt (cross-reference): Zero or more cross-references to memyomic idioms were selected for each idiom. This option allows the user to connect idioms with a similar meaning together. These elements contained a reference to an entry of type *nath* (idiom).

Eolas breise (additional information): Any additional information received from the dialectal respondents in *Múscraí* was recorded under this element.

4 Results and Conclusion

A total number of 420 idioms in their baseform and in standard orthography were recorded in the database. Additionally, over 1,000 corpus examples of the idioms were recorded in which the variation and use of each idiom are available in contexts. Each idiom is classified both semantically and syntactically and cross-referenced with similar idioms in several instances through a specific cross-reference and also through similar headwords.

This research presents an overview of an indepth dialectal analysis of Irish-language idioms found in the published work of Peadar Ó Laoghaire. The collection of idioms is recorded, classified and cross-referenced in a digital database. This research builds on the foundations laid down by Ó Corráin (1989) and presents native dialectal idioms from the early twentieth century in a new light. The idioms collected provide an insight into the interrelationship between the Irish language and culture, which could be contrasted and compared with other dialects and also with other languages in the future research. The database schema can be used and adapted to cater for other languages and idiom-related projects and can also be expanded to cater for future phraseological-based research in the area.

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Appendix

Example A

ID	4588205
BUNFHOIRM	ag imeacht le craobhacha
CEANNFHOCAL	craobh
CEANNFHOCAL	imigh
SAMPLA CORPAIS	<i>"Is é crích an sgéil é," ar seisean, "go bhfuil eagal orm go n-eirgheóchaidh a chroídhe ar Dhiarmuid mura bhfuil eirighthe cheana aige air, agus go n-imtheóchaidh Sadhbh bhocht le craobhachaibh."</i>
FOINSE	Séadna
LEATHANACH	145
CUR SÍOS	Ag dul le báiní; bheith ar buile.
SAMPLA BREISE	<i>1. (e) Dul, imeacht, le craobhacha, to go wild, mad. Tá sé ar, le, craobhacha, he is raging mad.</i>
FOINSE	Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla (Ó Dónaill)
CEANNFHOCAL	craobh
SAMPLA BREISE	<i>To rampage (about), bheith ag imeacht le craobhacha.</i>
FOINSE	English-Irish Dictionary (de Bhaldraithe)
CEANNFHOCAL	rampage
SAMPLA BREISE	<i>Dul le craobhachaibh, to go mad; lit. to go on the bushes, i.e. to go wildly about, catching the clothes upon the bushes.</i>
FOINSE	Foclóir do Shéadna (Borthwick)
CEANNFHOCAL	craobhachaibh
AICME SÉIMEANTAICE	Fiomath
AICME COMHRÉIRE	Nath ainm briathartha

Example B

ID	4631149
BUNFHOIRM	cos ar bolg
CEANNFHOCAL	bolg
CEANNFHOCAL	cos
SAMPLA CORPAIS	<i>Annsan do tháinig ceilt aigne agus éitheach agus marbhughadh daoine, agus goid agus fuadach agus éagcóir, agus éigeán agus lámhláidir agus cos ar bolg.</i>
FOINSE	Don Cíochóte (Cuid II)
LEATHANACH	93
SAMPLA CORPAIS	<i>Dhein na Sasanaigh cos ar bolg ar na daoine bochta, agus i n-inead aon chosaint a dhéanamh ar na daoine is amhlaidh a thóg an dlighe páirt leis an eugcóir agus leis an gcos ar bolg.</i>
FOINSE	Cómhairle ár Leasa
LEATHANACH	155
SAMPLA CORPAIS	<i>Ní béas liom-sa, ar seisean, ná le rígh Sacs an, ná le rígh Breatain, éagcóir agus ansmacht agus cos ar bolg a dhéanaimh ar aon treabhchas daoine, uasal ná íseal, gan gach ní bheadh ar mo chumas do dhéanamh chun cosg do chur le héagcóir, chun láidir do leagadh agus lag do thógáil.</i>
FOINSE	Lughaidh Mac Con
LEATHANACH	46
CUR SÍOS	Ansmacht.
SAMPLA BREISE	<i>Cos-ar-bolg, a trampling of people under foot.</i>
FOINSE	Notes on Irish Words and Usages (Ua Laoghaire 1926)
LEATHANACH	29
SAMPLA BREISE	<i>Is maith é an smacht gan amhras. Ní smacht atá agat-sa d'á dhéanamh ámhthach, ach cos ar bolg. Control is a good thing, certainly; but it is not control you are exercising, but downright oppression.</i>
FOINSE	Mion-chaint: Cuid III (Ua Laoghaire 1902)
LEATHANACH	26
SAMPLA BREISE	<i>1. Cos ar bolg, oppression.</i>
FOINSE	Fodóir Gaeilge-Béarla (Ó Dónaill 1977)
CEANNFHOCAL	cos
SAMPLA BREISE	<i>Déineadh cos ar bolg ar na Gaedhil taréis cath Chionnntsaíle. Déineadh leathtrom ortha. Déineadh géirleanmhaint ortha.</i>
FOINSE	Cortha Cainnte na Gaedhilge (Mac Sithigh 1940)
LEATHANACH	19
SAMPLA BREISE	<i>To tyrannize over someone, cos ar bolg, ansmacht, a imirt ar dhuine.</i>
FOINSE	English-Irish Dictionary (de Bhaldraithe 1959)
CEANNFHOCAL	tyrannize
AICME SÉIMEANTAICE	Fíomath
AICME COMHRÉIRE	Nath ainmfhoclach
CROSTAGAIRT	gabháil de chosa

Example C

ID	4744542
BUNFHOIRM	Conchubhar mór sa chúinne
CEANNFHOCAL	Conchubhar
CEANNFHOCAL	cúinne
CEANNFHOCAL	mór
SAMPLA CORPAIS	<i>Thabharfadh san bliain ghanachúis each do dhaoinibh. Bhéadh "Conchubhar Mór sa chúinne" agá lán. Ní fhanadh puínn d'aon tsaghas eile bídh sa tír. Pé gráinne arbhair a saothruightí do caithtí é dhíol, nó an chuid ba mhó dhé, chun an chíosa dhéanamh.</i>
FOINSE	Mo Sgéal Féin
LEATHANACH	19
CUR SÍOS	Easpa mhór; ganntanas bia.
SAMPLA BREISE	<i>Tá Conchubhar mór Ua Mathúna (Mathghathnna) sa chúinne aige = Tá learaf sa drom aige (gobh) = An diomhaointeas.</i>
FOINSE	Lámhscríbhinn (Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann): M055 Cnuasach Focal ó Mhúscraí (Ó Buachalla)
CEANNFHOCAL	Conchubhar
SAMPLA BREISE	<i>bheadh "Conchubhar Mór sa chúinne" ag a lán: Bheadh easpa mhór ar a lán. Conchubhar Mór = an gorta, an t-ocras.</i>
FOINSE	Fodóir agus nótaí do "Mo Scéal Féin" a scríobh an tAthair Peadar Ó Laoghaire (Ó hAodha 1970)
LEATHANACH	12
SAMPLA BREISE	<i>Tá Conchubhar mór sa chúinne aige. Tá easba gus gádhtar air.</i>
FOINSE	Cortha Cainnte na Gaedhilge (Mac Sithigh 1940)
LEATHANACH	72
SAMPLA BREISE	<i>3. Conchúr mór sa chúinne acu. Gátar agus uireasa bia acu.</i>
FOINSE	Slí an eolais agus eagna an Ghaeil (Ó Cadhlaigh 1925)
LEATHANACH	198
SAMPLA BREISE	<i>Conchubhar Mór sa chúinne: gátar nó ganntanas a bheith ann mar bhí ag daoine bochta aimsir an ghorta.</i>
FOINSE	Lán-chúrsa na Gaeilge (Ó Riain 1952)
LEATHANACH	43
AICME SÉIMEANTAICE	Fíomath
AICME COMHRÉIRE	Nath abairte