

Back to Basics

Number Review #1

It's always good to get back to basics, especially after a summer of diving into the deep end with some of our translation work. One topic that has been suggested for a bit of brushing up is numbers.

I think we mostly understand the main rules around numbers (there are a few obscure ones that take more effort), but the problem is that we don't get enough practice using them and applying those rules.

So a little review and drill is in order.

Counting (abstract) 1-10

We all know how to count from 1-10, but it doesn't hurt to have them in front of us for review and drill:

a haon	a sé
a dó	a seacht**
a trí	a hocht
a ceathair	a naoi
a cúig*	a deich

* many speakers in the West may say this *a chúig*

** many speakers in Ulster will say this *a seart*

These forms are used when counting in the abstract, not when counting things. They cannot be used to answer a "How many?" question. They are used when the number is really part of a name or identifier, as is *bus a seacht*, "the No. 7 bus," and for things like phone numbers. ("Names" of years like 1948 also use these forms, but, of course, with higher numbers and without the "a" in front of them.)

We need to hear and say these forms often enough so we can connect *trí* with 3 immediately, without going through several translation steps to get there. A good way to practice is to listen to the RnaG program *Fógraí an Lae*, essentially classified ads on the radio. There are lots of times, dates, and especially phone numbers, lots of spoken numbers going past your ears.

Counting Things

As you know, there are a few wrinkles when we are saying "three cars" instead of just "number 3":

- Most numbers look the same, but we follow the noun with *amháin* for 1, change *dó* to *dhá* for 2, and change *ceathair* to *ceithre* for 4. No *a* before these numbers, of course.
- These numbers are followed by the singular of the noun, with a few interesting exceptions we'll deal with later.
- The following noun is lenited for numbers 2-6, and eclipsed (including vowels) for the numbers 7-10.

About the Number 1

We use *aon* for the number 1, and when we count, that *a* puts an *h* ahead of it: *a haon*. But note that:

- We don't usually use *aon* with a noun to indicate "one thing." Rather, we say *carr amháin* to mean "one car."
- We *can* say *aon charr* (*aon* lenites), but that means "any car," not "one car."

- We can also say *aon charr amháin*. In this case we are being emphatic about talking about a single, solitary car. *Ní fhaca mé aon charr amháin ar an tsráid*, "I didn't see a single car in the street, the street was completely empty."

Counting People

As you also know, we don't use the above numbers for people, instead using this system.

duine*	seisear
beirt	seachtar**
triúr	ochtar
ceathrar	naonúr
cúigear	deichniúr

* *duine amháin* is often used

** in Munster, *mórsheisear* is often used instead of *seachtar*

Notes:

- These words are technically nouns, which raises some interesting options when they are followed by nouns identifying types of people:
 - Nancy Stenson says to follow these numbers with the noun in the singular: *triúr buachaill*, *seisear cailín*. (But for "women" we use a special form with *beirt*, *beirt bhan*.) The Christian Brothers agree.
 - Several other sources suggest following these nouns with the plural genitive, so that's an option, but the singular is easier!
- *Beirt* is the only feminine noun on this list. It lenites a following noun – *beirt fhear* – and is lenited when used with the definite article – *an bheirt acu*, "the two of them."
- If we're talking about one teacher, *múinteoir amháin* would be used.
- We'll deal with the 'teens later, but this same system applies through 19 due to the peculiar way Irish expresses numbers in the 'teens. With higher numbers, depending on how they are structured, the same numbers can be used for things and people.
- Native speakers are much more casual about using the people version vs the "impersonal" numbers with people, e.g., answering a "things" question with *beirt*. But nobody would use a personal number followed by a thing, e.g. *triúr bád*.

Answering Cé mhéad Questions

The "How many?" question is *Cé mhéad?* It is followed by a singular nominative: *Cé mhéad carr a bhí ann? Cé mhéad duine a bheas ag an rang?*

You *cannot* answer these questions with a simple number, *trí*, etc. You answer either "three ones" of them (for things) or "three people" for people.

Obviously, the personal numbers like *triúr* mean "three people", containing both the number and the concept of a person. That makes a one-word answer sufficient.

For the "thing" numbers, we use a special plural form of *ceann* ("one thing"), *cinn* with numbers 3-10. ("Two things" is *dhá cheann*, we will have more on this later.) For this special form, we do NOT lenite after numbers 3-6. And just for fun, we still eclipse numbers 7-10. So:

Cé mhéad sagart atá ann? Triúr, seisear, etc.

Cé mhéad bád atá ann? Dhá cheann, Trí cinn, Sé cinn, Seacht gcinn