CAN'T FIND IT?

When you first start working with Irish, you're bound to spend a lot of time with your dictionary. But you may sometimes be frustrated when you cannot locate an Irish word in your dictionary. Or, if the meaning doesn't make any sense in the context of your reading, perhaps you have found the wrong word.

At any level, finding words in an Irish-English dictionary can be a little more challenging than it is when you're looking up a word in English (or even in French-English or similar dictionaries). There are several reasons this can be particularly difficult at first, when you haven't quite learned how the language works:

- Irish has the interesting habit of changing the *beginning* of a word – the so-called initial mutations – unlike English, or most of the common languages that you might have studied in school. And, as with everything else in Irish, dialect differences are common, so many words are spelled somewhat differently in different regions.
- Moreover, some words change their form according to rules of grammar that you may not yet have mastered, such as the genitive of nouns. These can make the same noun look like two slightly different words at different points in your reading..

Fortunately, most of these difficulties can be overcome if you follow a few tips for finding words in your dictionary:

First, *the better and more complete the dictionary you are using*, the more likely you are to find the word. Pocket dictionaries are convenient for taking to class, and the best of them may contain some new phrases or vocabulary that you might not find in older versions. But it will not be long before your reading outruns these smaller resources, and you will want something like *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla, Niall Ó Dónaill (ed.), 1977.*

Second, *check your spelling* carefully, especially vowels:

- While many aspects of a word's spelling may be flexible, long or accented vowels are pretty reliable. In other words, *long vowels and short vowels are rarely interchangeable*, so make sure you aren't looking for, say, a short vowel (*mala*) in the dictionary when the word in the book has a long vowel (*mála*).
- It is easy to overlook vowels, especially when several vowels come together (see P. 2). Make sure you aren't mentally looking for *slánte* when the actual word is *sláinte*.

What if you have checked carefully, and you *are* searching for the correct spelling? Then change the spelling and search again:

At the beginning of the word:

- If the second letter is an *h*, remove it.
- If the word starts with two consonants (*ts, mb,* etc.), remove the first one.

- Swap the first letter between eclipsis pairs like *p* and *b*, *b* and *m* (*brásáil* = *prásáil, biodóg = miodóg*). Or swap *p* and *f* (*polcadh = folcadh*).
- The word may start with a prefix. You can recognize prefixes in the dictionary when you find a lot of words that start with the same syllable (e.g. *mí-*) and the second syllable is lenited, if that syllable starts with a consonant. For example, *míshásta* = *mí* + lenition + *sásta*. In that case, find the root word by removing the prefix *and* removing the lenition (the *h*) in the second part of the word. Then look up the word without the prefix, and try to reconstruct the meaning of the word with the prefix included.

In the middle of the word:

- Change the central consonant from slender (with *i* or *e*) to broad (with *a, o,* or *u*), or vice versa.
- Where consonants separate two syllables, remove or add *t, r* (*béalaigh* = *béalraigh*).
- Swap *d* for *t*, with maybe some other spelling adjustments (*sleánadóir* = *sleántóir*).

At the end of the word:

- Switch the final spelling between slender and broad.
- Remove the last part of the word. This may include verb endings (*faidh*, etc.), noun plural endings (*a, anna, í*, etc.), or modifier endings (*úil, ach*).

And if none of these work, one last trick:

- Respell it with similar sounds (*scitheog = sciathóg, labhád = lád*).

We can't guarantee you'll find *every* word you're looking for in the dictionary, even with these tips. But you'll probably find more of them, save time and reduce frustration – and maybe learn a little more about how the language works along the way.